

## The Powerful Poetry of Resurrection

Mark 16:1 – 8 and John 20:1 -18

(Easter sermon, April 4, 2021, Rev. Rodney Kennedy)

"I believe in Jesus Christ, crucified, dead, descended into hell, on the third day raised from the dead." That's the Easter story and it is my joy to proclaim that story. Flat, reduced prose has no business showing up for Easter. Poetry rules on Easter, metaphor, analogy, powerful words "that please me, goad me into action, make me want to sing a song" (Pat Conroy, *My Reading Life*).

The lectionary offers two Gospel readings for Easter: Mark 16:1-8 and John 20:1-18. "Let's do Mark." "No, let's do John." I'm going with both texts. These texts contain gigantic Christian symbols with deep theological meanings. There are levels of meaning and I intend to gather them up like **precious bits and pieces**. When it comes to the resurrection, there's no such thing as too much. Gerard Manley Hopkins makes as good an Easter guide as any: "Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cressed east" ("The Wreck of the Deutschland").

Easter happens to us as action, as speech act. I want you to be saying this prayer as my sermon unfolds: "easter in me." In street talk that's "I gotta get me some of that."

Easter, like creation (Genesis 1:2), begins in **darkness**. John's Gospel sets up Easter in his overture: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). The light shows that Easter has scars that can't be covered, pains that can't be denied, darkness that is unyielding except to the power of God. Hold the orchestra! Mute the trumpet for now! Lute and harp do not quiver or move. Hand over the tambourine and the drum. Violins stringless now. Tell the flutes not to "flute." No crashing cymbals. Just the silence on the great stage and empty chairs and a dark, empty hall. Tell the choir to refrain from bursting forth the "Alleluias." Silence the sopranos. Bottle up the

basses. Temper the tenors to nothing. Alert the altos with a finger to the mouth. Not yet. Now, there are questions. Confusion. Not knowing. Start with the darkness – “the darkest valley” (Psalm 23:4).

And this darkness fills all the spaces with theology – the theology that we are all sinners and we all die. Secular or Christian, pagan or not, we all face the darkness. Easter or not, we are a people who walk in darkness and we are not at all sure what to do. Some are scared; others swear they have no fear. Some are in the darkness without God and without hope. Others approach the finish line with visions of brightness, light, and eternal glory, but the darkness speaks of death. And, in particular, one dead man, one dead-as-a-door-nail (William Shakespeare) (no matter the spiritualizing Gnostics) Jesus.

“Tell us, preacher, what makes this Easter so different?” I’m really glad you asked. Hear the good news! Christ has been raised from the dead. God has acted once more as God did in creation. Easter is God’s second “Big Bang!” Easter answers the darkness and becomes **“a dayspring to the dimness of us.”** I confess that every Sunday I feel the need to say, “This is about God.” “God is whoever raised Jesus from the dead, having before raised Israel from Egypt” (Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*).

**Now see Mary, leading lady in John’s drama,** at the tomb. Feel her broken heart. See her tear-stained face. Look closely because Mary represents us –every disappointed defeated, down-to-the-last-hope person in the world. Feel her rapid heartbeat; notice her white-knuckled grip on the vial of anointing oil. See her hesitant but determined.

**There’s even a conspiracy theory.** Listen, our Mary’s first words at Easter are not the Alleluia chorus, but the repeating of a conspiracy theory: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Mary can’t seem to help herself, repeating slogan-like words like Americans: “They

have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him," she says to the two angels. To the supposed gardener: "If you have carried him away, tell me where he is" (George Lakoff, *The Political Mind*).

Pilate gave an executive order, "You have a guard of soldiers; **make it as secure as you can.**" Here a stroke of brilliance by Mark: On the lips of the cipher of imperial, impervious power, Mark places words of insecurity and limits: "Make the tomb as secure as you can." Well, good luck making a tomb secure from the power that created the heavens and the earth. Good luck stopping the one who "laid the foundation of the earth . . . who laid its cornerstone when the morning stars sang together all the heavenly beings shouted for joy" (Job 38:4 – 7). Good luck holding back the one who created the seas and the oceans as they burst out from the womb. So, go ahead, send a whole legion of Roman troops, and make that tomb as secure as you can.

Mark tells us that Mary and her group came to the tomb worrying about **the stone**: "Who will roll away the stone for us?" We are worried about all the stones that block out life and all the problems we can't seem to solve. Matthew tells us that an angel rolled back the stone and sat on it. As much effort as the conspirators put into placing the stone against the tomb, it was no big deal for the angel to move the stone and sit on it. There might be a slight smile on the angel's face.

The gospel transforms the meaning of stones. Jesus gave Simon the nickname "Rock." Jesus says, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). All of creation is a gift of God and even rocks and stones have a place in salvation's story. After all, Jesus says, that if we were silent of the mighty works of God, "I tell you, the stones would shout out" (Luke 19:40).

Use your imagination for a moment and realize that the stone meant for obstruction, the stone rejected by the builders, the stone rolled against the tomb of Jesus has become a different kind of stone – like Samuel taking a stone and naming it Ebenezer – “the Lord has helped us;” now God takes a stone and declares that Jesus is the cornerstone. The prophet Isaiah cries: “See, I am laying in Zion a foundation stone, a tested stone, a precious **cornerstone**, a sure foundation” (28:16). God built on the stone that is Jesus – the rock of our salvation, the rock of ages, the rock that withstands the rains and the winds that beat against the house (Matthew 7:24 – 27).

Let the metaphorical imagination of the psalmist carry you to the third heaven for a moment. “The Lord is my **rock**, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my **rock** in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Psalm 18:2). The Lord lives! Blessed be my **rock**, and exalted be the God of my salvation” (Psalm 18:46). “He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a **rock**, making my steps secure” (Psalm 40:2). God even transforms stones: “I would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the **rock** I would satisfy you” (Psalm 81:16). Ah the blessed sacrament.

Whenever God shows up, there’s always **an angel** or two. Mark tells us a “young man, dressed in a white robe was sitting on the right side of the tomb. And when the young man speaks, he speaks resurrection: ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.’” At the garden of Gethsemane, there was a “young man wearing nothing but a linen cloth. When the guards caught hold of him, he left the linen cloth and ran off naked” (Mark 14:51 – 52). The young man is stripped naked by the arrest and death of Jesus, but after resurrection, he is robed in the white garment of new life, preaching faith in resurrection. I believe this young man was John Mark, the writer of the Gospel of Mark.

Easter is the eyes of Mary meeting the eyes of the now-fully alive Jesus and becoming for her that "crimson-cresseted east" that gave her hope and life for a new day. The aspect blindness of grief resolved in "I was blind but now I see." Death fled to the corners of his dismal darkness in utter defeat and disgrace.

In Mark, the women fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them and they were afraid. In John, Mary moves from not knowing where the dead Jesus was to experiencing Jesus alive, not as gardener, but as Lord and she went and announced, "I have seen the Lord." May God "easter" in us both fear and amazement at the incredulous news that death is dead and Jesus is alive. May God make God's church faithful witnesses to the resurrection. It's Easter and all the bits and pieces – darkness succumbs, Mary preaches, even rocks submit, angels roll away stones, all of creation bears witness that Jesus has been raised from the dead! Allow God "to easter in you, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east" for you. "Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!" Amen.