

“So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8)

Who wouldn't be afraid if faced with such shocking events as the women experienced early on that Easter morning. The first alarming thing for them was to come to the tomb and see that the stone had been rolled away. And then looking inside the tomb they did not see what expected. The body of Jesus should have been lying there wrapped in a burial cloth. Instead, they saw a young man sitting on the stone (an angel?) who tells them to not be alarmed. Alarmed? Of course they're alarmed.

They were panic stricken! What had happened to the body of Jesus? First they experienced the horror of the crucifixion, then the devastation of grief and sorrow. And now this? They did not ask the young man any questions. They did not examine the tomb to see anything more for themselves. They just ran. They fled from the tomb, Mark reports. We would now say that they had a fight or flight response. And they certainly chose flight.

I learned recently about a wise practice in the British navy. It is still used, but now mostly in ceremonial circumstances. It's called the piping of "the still" by the boatswain on a British naval ship. "In cases of sudden disaster aboard ship the call of 'the still' is blown. This is a whistle (a one tone signal) for the crew to come to complete silence. When 'the still' is blown every man aboard knows what it means: 'Prepare to do the right thing.' This moment of calm has helped avoid many a catastrophe that running in circles, screaming and shouting could cause."ⁱ I wonder if there was something that the women might have done to take a breath. I wonder how the story might have been if they took a moment to be still and pray for God to direct their steps.

But the women reacted not as navy sailors, but as regular humans, like you and me. They ran. And Mark, our Gospel writer, records that reality faithfully without trying to make it seem as though they knew what they were doing. It leaves the Gospel ending wide open. We see the empty tomb, but we are given no vision of the risen Christ in Mark's Gospel. Instead, the disciples (and we too) are all invited to go to Galilee. Jesus promises to be there to see us.

But let's not race up to Galilee too quickly. Let's listen to the boatswain blow "the still" and pause for a moment to think about what we have experienced as Christians; from Palm Sunday when we heard the reading of the Passion through Good Friday's Way of the Cross, when we had an opportunity to spiritually walk with Jesus, and die with him.

There is a only a brief time every year when we focus on Our Lord's suffering and death. For the most part, our Protestant faith focuses on Incarnation, Resurrection, and God's inspiration through the Spirit; all life-giving things, and true things about our faith. But today on this Resurrection Sunday, I

would like to linger just a little at the cross before moving immediately to the triumph of life over death.

Death on a cross is shameful. It's ugly. It marks a terrible end to a beautiful life. It's something we'd rather avoid thinking about when we think of our blessed Lord. We'd rather not focus on the sacrifice he made but on the victory over death and sin that was accomplished.

But look at our reading from Acts today. Peter did not ignore the crucifixion as he told Cornelius and the other Gentiles about Jesus. Look at our passage from Corinthians. Paul certainly didn't sidestep the difficult topic. He says in the first chapter of the same letter, "We proclaim Christ crucified."

Why was this? Why focus on the one element of the Jesus story that makes it seem like he was a lost cause, a torch extinguished, a failure of God?

The answer is foundational to our faith. It's because God raised Jesus from the dead and that without the death we could not have new life. The crucifixion and the suffering that he bore breaks us open. The sufferings that we endure break us open. And it is then that we are vulnerable to receive the grace and the blessing God wants us to have.

We hear the story over and over again in the lives of people we know now, and people long passed. What seems to be failure, loss, the end, turns into a life of triumph. Sinners like us (and like Peter, for heaven's sake) come to know that we are forgiven, reconciled to God, and raised to new life.

Tammy Duckworth lost both her legs in the Iraq war. She had been such a promising pilot. It was a devastating blow that almost killed her. And now she is the junior US Senator from the state of Illinois. And there are countless alcoholics and drug addicts who were on the verge of death when they heard God's voice and now live happy, productive lives. The composer of our Postlude today, Georg Friederich Handel, had a physical breakdown when in his fifties, and was paralyzed on the right side of his body...and then went on to compose the Messiah.

This global pandemic has been shattering to many families and so distressing to us and to businesses in the last year. Some might say that this experience has done them in, has broken them completely. And now, who knows what that brokenness will lead to. We have yet to see, but we are on the verge of a resurrection in our country and our world. God has redeemed us and will redeem us again through grace by faith in Jesus who gives us life, salvation and reconciliation.

As Alan Jones, mystic and theologian has said. "If you would live, you must follow the way of death and resurrection, not as a work or a spiritual exercise but as an act of love. We can make this act of love only if we are loved. (And make no mistake. We are beloved of God.) ...We must believe that we are loved and accepted just as we are."ⁱⁱ

Mark's resurrection story leaves us wondering what happens next. But God has shown us what happens next. Love, life and joy happen next for the disciples and for us. In the stillness of Easter morning let us pray for clarity to see the joy that is right ahead of us today.

ⁱ A. Philip Parham, *Letting God*, HarperOne, 1987, April 4 Meditation.

ⁱⁱ Alan W. Jones, *Journey into Christ*, Seabury Press, 1977, pg. 109.