

What Kind of Easter is This?  
April 5, 2015            Easter Sunday  
Mary R. Brownlow

Sometimes I wonder about our holiday celebrations. Today's worship service is rooted in a story, told many times and in many ways, about the aftermath of an execution. In Mark's version, the dominant emotions are grief and fear, which makes perfect sense. Three women, 2 Marys and a Salome, have come to do the right thing and finish preparing Jesus' body for burial. Of course, they are sad, maybe even traumatized, but they are brave enough to come to this place of grief for this one last task. Probably it would help with "closure" as well (as our modern culture puts it): this last gesture of devotion. Their main concern is about the fact that a big stone is between them and the body.

And guess what? The discovery of that big stone rolled away and the empty tomb is not, apparently, Good News to them. It does **not** bring joy, wonder, relief, praise, or any desire to share this amazing miracle. "He has been raised," says the young man dressed in white. "We are so out of here," the women reply and take to their heels! Three words end our reading, which is believed to be the original ending of Mark's Gospel: "They were afraid."

In our holiday celebrations, though, we hear the same message and think about picking up lilies and cooking dinner, and, did the Easter Egg Hunt go well? and a hundred other things that will make the day work for us. It is as though we have been immunized against the emotion of the story, after hearing it so many times. Mary and Mary and Salome were seized with terror and amazement, and we are seized with – what? Jelly beans? The Easter Bunny? Flower arrangements?

Unless we really look at that first morning after the Sabbath, at sunrise, and see what kind of Easter it really was for Mary and Mary and Salome, how can we worship and celebrate honestly and deeply? Today's reading helps us think about this. There is no closure, no resurrection appearance of Jesus, no heartwarming account of a joyful reunion, no meal, no explicit forgiveness, no announcement to the other disciples. Mark Chapter 16 verse 8 ends suddenly and leaves us in the lurch, wanting more. It ends in that liminal and seminal moment, when the women said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. The in-between time, between shattered assumptions and the possibility of new life.

The young man in the white robe has spoken some words that the women could not quite accept. He says that Jesus had been raised and was not there – just gone. Then he reminds them of what Jesus had said, just a couple of nights before, at their last meal together: "After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." Back to Galilee, their home territory, back to where they and the disciples were first called, named, taught by Jesus, and sent on a mission. Back to the beginning, which will be transformed by the resurrected Jesus to a place of possibility. We leave the women running from the tomb, running from their task of sharing the good news, and running from the promise of meeting Jesus ahead of them. For them, the resurrection hasn't happened yet; but it will in the fullness of time. Their new world will gradually take shape. With hindsight, we know that they found their voices and found their calling.... otherwise, we would not be here today.

But is it difficult to stop running, difficult to start speaking. The pain of the past is hard to overcome. I saw a documentary recently about an organization called PeaceTrees Viet Nam. Forty-five years ago, in 1969, a 21-year-old American helicopter pilot named Dan Cheney was shot down and killed in Viet Nam. As we know, the war dragged on for five more years, and strained relations between the US and Viet Nam continued for many more. But the mother and sister of the dead pilot, traumatized as they were, knew that mothers and sisters of fallen Vietnamese soldiers were their sisters. For years, nothing could be done with this knowledge. Then, after 1995, it was possible to make contact with Vietnamese authorities and go back. First, the PeaceTrees organization persuaded the Vietnamese government to allow them to work on clearing land mines and unexploded ordnance left behind by our armies when we left in 1974. Thousands, if not millions, of pieces of ordnance are still killing and maiming farmers and children there. Then, they planted trees on the cleared land. Then, they started building kindergartens and community centers there, healing the land and befriending its people.

The documentary I saw followed a group of Viet Nam vets on a trip to some of these places. They traveled with younger men who were veterans of the Iraqi War. They played with children in brightly painted kindergartens. They met and shook hands with veterans of the North Vietnamese army. The former enemies planted trees together and lit incense together in honor of their fallen friends. At one kindergarten, a Friendship Wall has a series of plaques with names of fallen American soldiers who has died in the very fields where children now sang songs and giggled with the visitors from the US. The older soldiers wept at the sight of their friends' names and laughed at the antics of the children. They all recognized the healing and new life that was possible because they had stopped running from their fearful past, and followed the possibility of reconciliation. It took years, and courage, and it is beautiful.

The most poignant part of the documentary were the interviews with the younger vets, who said that they could not even envision doing this in Iraq. It was still too fresh. They had horrific pictures in their minds of the carnage they had seen, of the innocents who had been killed on both sides. Finally, after all the tree planting and school-visiting and honoring of the dead on both sides, one of the younger men said, "Well, if the Viet Nam vets can go back and reconcile and feel good, then maybe I can with the Iraqi people. Maybe in the future, a long way off, we can do the same thing." His Easter morning was beginning to dawn.

When bad things happen to us, or when we participate in the illness of an unjust or violent society, we are often temporarily stuck. We might have an immediate plan, at least, for closure. Anoint the body, do the paperwork, gather the family, have a meeting, check the tasks off the list. But God calls us beyond the temporary fix to something more challenging, perhaps even more painful. The Easter message that Mark gives us does not promise a life free from worry, fear, or struggle. Jesus has been raised up: this means he continues to go before us, leading us into new horizons. We learn today that the story of Jesus is not something that is finished and that you can congratulate yourself for knowing and having sorted out and believing. The story is opening up in front of you as Jesus goes on ahead, and we are now a part of it. That's why our Easter greeting is not in the past tense, "Christ rose 2000 years ago", but something more immediate: "Christ is risen!"

It is not the end; it is the beginning; this story isn't over. It's always the beginning, and we have some work to do, once we stop being afraid. There is still so much pain and distress in the world, which is one kind of scary. It's another kind of scary that God is not done with us yet.

So, I ask, where is your tomb and where is your Galilee? What are your assumptions about stones blocking the way and what is your need for “closure?” Once we answer those questions, we can begin to say what kind of Easter this is.

Easter happens when we run in fear, and Christ waiting for us in love.

Easter happens whenever we move from crushing loss to lives of purpose.

Easter happens whenever children laugh and play safely on a former battlefield.

Easter happens whenever enemies break bread together.

Easter happens when the green blade rises at the end of a winter of grief.

Amen.