

April 4, 2021
Easter Day (B)
United, Oak Park

Moving Beyond Fears

There are plenty of reasons why we might be afraid today. We could be afraid of the recent uptick in coronavirus cases in our area just as many people have also been vaccinated. We could be afraid of facing significant losses to our communal life as businesses and activities we used to enjoy do not fully recover after the pandemic. But Easter, of all days, is certainly not a day to be thinking about out our fears.

Well we might not think so, but then fear is where our gospel reading for the day actually ends, and just a moment ago you might have thought that it was a rather abrupt conclusion. You would also have a lot of company, because that's what many readers of the second gospel have thought down through the centuries. And if you opened nearly any Bible right now, you would see various possibilities for the ending of this shortest of gospel books, since it seems that early Bible editors weren't satisfied to let terror and amazement be the end of the story.

But rather than the alternative endings, I have come to appreciate Mark's conclusion to the Easter story with the word *afraid* because it seems to be a fitting end for this gospel book where Jesus was constantly telling his followers not to tell anyone about him. So Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome left the final scene of the book frightened and in a dither.

The story that these women coming to the tomb fled in terror and amazement also seems to be a fitting response to what had happened that day. It's quite honest. What would any of us do if a body we had laid to rest two days before was missing because the corpse had just gotten up and left? Very likely we would be scrambling to any number of various directions ourselves, and I doubt that we would be able to say anything coherent to anyone else for some time. Mark's abrupt conclusion to the story is entirely believable to me, because I've been struck speechless myself at times.

When we're afraid, it's hard to keep from running away out of a sense of panic. One of the most familiar images from 9/11 is that of a group of men fleeing away from the collapse of one of the World Trade Center buildings in sheer terror. We might also recall scenes of people

fleeing the expected landfall of a hurricane or a tsunami. When we are dealing with anything traumatic we're often struck speechless and we head for the hills.

Obviously the story of Jesus' resurrection did not just end with the two Marys retreating in fear. Someone had to have said something about the resurrection because followers of Jesus did come together, the church was born, and we have a whole collection of stories that give witness to the resurrection in what we know as the New Testament. Certainly the Easter story went beyond fear because we are here today talking about it.

The enduring story of the resurrection is that Jesus' followers continued after him, even despite many of their fears. And though there is a lot in our world that may make us fearful, the thing that truly makes a difference in our lives is that Christ has gone beyond all of it.

Did you notice in today's gospel reading that a young man sitting at the tomb announced to the women that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was going ahead of them to Galilee?

Where exactly was Jesus on that first Easter day? Indeed he was *not* where his followers had come to find him in the tomb. No, that was in the past. Jesus had been raised from the dead and he was going ahead to Galilee. So the dawn of a new day in a new week brought *this news* to followers of Jesus: they needed to go ahead to see him in Galilee—beyond the confines of the city of Jerusalem that had been the location of his death.

If you think about many of the stories of Jesus, it's not terribly surprising that he would have been moving beyond where his followers might have been expecting to see him on Easter day. He was always enlarging the circle and going beyond the tidy boundaries that had previously been known to many of his people.

One of the main reasons why Christians observe Sunday as our weekly holy day is that Christ's resurrection on that day burst through the limitations of the old traditions and laws of Israel. Christ's resurrection on the first day of a new week emphasized that this was the start of something new. The old week—that is, the old era with all

of its Sabbath restrictions—could not contain what Jesus was about.

The resurrection on Sunday brought the hope of a new day to the start of a brand new week. Are *you* ready to go ahead with Jesus into the start of a new day for your life as well?

He's already gone *ahead of us*. He won't stay where we think he should be. We can't hold him back. He is enlarging our circle too; always ministering to people outside of the margins. The tomb could not contain him, and neither can the limitations of our minds or the tightly constructed places in which we might *expect* to see him. Jesus is bigger than all of the things that are limited by human or worldly constraints.

Most significantly, Jesus leads us beyond death. He leads us beyond our grief and our fears to the new possibilities that are emerging right in front of us now. Today we have come to celebrate new life in Jesus whose resurrection did not mean a return to an old way of being but rather a new movement forward. Where could his followers see him? By *going ahead* to Galilee; where Jesus had *already* healed people and given new life and hope during his years of ministry.

Where are the Galilees in our world today where people are finding hope because of Jesus' presence? How are people following him because of the new life that he brings them now?

We need not attempt to look for Jesus in places where there is only fear or hatred of others who are not like us. Jesus of the resurrection dawn, on the first day of a new week, moves beyond what any number of people might try to claim is the *only* Christian way to believe or act. We are an Easter people. We don't just sit around lingering in what was, but we move ahead.

To the timid among us, we might listen to the advice of the young man at the tomb on the first Easter: "Do not be alarmed...you are looking for Jesus...he is going *ahead of you* to Galilee."

Like the women coming to attend to Jesus' body on that first Easter Day, we don't have to remain in the tomb of our fears forever. Fear may immobilize us for a while, but *faith* makes it possible for us to do the things we know we can't afford *not* to do today. We have plenty of life yet to live *now* and Jesus has already gone ahead to show us how to find it.