

“SEIZED BY AMAZEMENT”

MARK 16: 1- 8

April 12, 2009 – Easter Day  
University Church of Chicago  
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One of my dearest friends in the ministry was the late R. James Reid, one of our city ‘s prophets during the race and peace crises of the 1960’s. Jim was a wonderful, gentle man and a faithful pastor—but a terrible preacher. He often said that he prepared his Sunday sermon while taking his shower on that very Sunday morning—and his preaching showed that kind preparation.

Jim served a Methodist church on Chicago’s West Side during the block busting days of the late 50’s and early 60’s—a congregation that went from totally white to almost totally Black in the course of a few months. Needless to say, his sermons did not inspire most of the African Americans who joined that congregation. But they loved him as a pastor nonetheless.

The Black Church enjoys a custom that supports and encourages the preacher. Evans Crawford wrote a book about it. It’s called “The Hum.” When the preacher needs help or encouragement, the congregation will hummmmmmm softly, then more eagerly, then louder.

One Sunday morning when Jim Reid was preaching a particularly dull sermon, the hum grew more pronounced in his congregation. But he still couldn’t get with it. Until finally, one of the matriarchs of the church, sitting on the back pew, raised her hands in supplication and cried out, “Help him, Jesus! Help him!”

We come to church on Easter Day seeking help. And especially seeking help with our fear of death, of the end of life on earth, our fear of never attaining, never quite making it, always living by works and hardly at all by faith.

Death is the reality we fear most. In many ways it is the basis of all our other fears. We live in a culture that continually tells us—in ways overt, but mostly in ways subtle—that if we make enough money, if we buy enough things and consume continually, if we go enough places, tell enough people about our exploits, have a sharp resume and succeed on the world’s terms, we will live forever.

It is not going to happen. Have you ever seen a Brink’s truck in a funeral procession?

One of my two or three favorite poets, the redoubtable Edna St. Vincent Millay, wrote quite touchingly and fiercely about our fears and griefs:

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.  
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been time out of mind.  
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely, crowned  
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.  
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.  
A fragment of what you left, of what you knew,  
A formula, a phrase remains—but the best is lost.

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love--  
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled  
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom I know. But I do not approve.  
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave  
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;  
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.  
I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.

The Gospel reading for Easter recounts the story of the three women who come to the tomb on that first Easter morning. As St. Mark tells the story, they had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” Now, understand, Mark is not talking about a big rock, but a huge round, cylindrical stone that had been carefully carved and placed in a kind of trough. It was huge and without help, without leverage, it would not be possible to roll it back.

Mary Magdalene is one of those legendary women who has been portrayed in Christian literature, fiction and myth as either a prostitute or a deluded woman who pursued an unattainable man, as a rich woman who helped bankroll Jesus’ enterprise or a devoted woman who would do anything to please him. She comes and goes in the Gospel accounts. She’s first here in the story, but paired with another woman named Mary, the mother of James and a woman named Salome.

Mark writes, “They looked up,” but the Greek word has a double meaning impossible to reproduce in English. It can also be translated, “They recovered their sight.” The light of the first Easter begins to remove the blindness that had prevailed during Jesus’ ministry. That blindness, that misunderstanding on the part of Our Lord’s closest friends, is a constant theme in Mark’s Gospel. They don’t get the message until Easter Day, and then it terrifies them.

“So they 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). A lot of scholarly debate has ensued about that difficult ending to Mark’s Gospel. Each of the four Easter accounts is different, but like the two versions of the Christmas story, we have melded them into one seamless account.

So, different endings have been tacked on to Mark’s account which make it more palatable to us, more triumphant, more in the spirit of what we want Easter to be. But notice that Mark affirms the resurrection but is wary of post-Easter revelations from the risen Lord. He intends to bind the message of the risen Lord to the preceding narrative, the story of the Crucified One.

Freeze the frame right there. Because that’s exactly the point at which many of us have fashioned what Harold Bloom calls “The American Religion.” Dr. Bloom, one of the most prolific authors on the American scene who holds a dual professorship at Yale, believes that The American Religion is a modern version of Gnosticism, the ancient heresy that was frozen out of the early church because the Gnostics didn’t believe that Jesus ever existed as a human being, that he was simply an appearance of God, an emanation. And they used this Easter text in which Jesus refuses to let Mary touch him as one of their proofs.

Christianity is one of the world’s three great religions that is most rooted in history. Along with our Jewish and Muslim cousins we believe that God moves through the movements and moments of history, that God’s will is in some measure discernible and that part of the task of the faithful is to live in accordance with God’s purposes. But alongside that is the temptation, particularly on Easter Day, to say, “Well, it’s a nice story, but you know it really isn’t –well, you know–it isn’t *real*. And one way we negate its reality is with all the emphasis today on nature: spring flowers and bunnies and the emerging season.

But nothing could go more *against* nature than Easter. What could be more contrary to nature than One who conquers death? We all know we’re going to die. The older we get the more aware we become of deteriorating bodies and closing minds and failing memories. But Easter proclaims that death has been conquered, that Jesus Himself not only arose from the grave but is portrayed in the Gospels in some transformed physicality.

I really don’t care whether you believe that or not. You can be a Gnostic if you want. That’s your free choice. But you must also accept the freedom that God has to do what God wants to do and let God accept everyone God has created. Well, we really don’t have any choice, do we? If God wants to do something, if God wants to create a miracle that’s far past our understanding, if God wants to raise the only Son from the dead, if God wants to exceed our rational, Enlightenment understandings of reason and closed scientific circles,

that's exactly what God will do.

The church's task is to proclaim the Good News, to be true to the paradoxical relationship it has with a God who is both fully human and fully divine and live as best it can as God's gracious instrument in the world for which the Son died. True doesn't just mean what's true for me or what's true for you. True means true—everywhere and always. We may argue about truth in different ways, but God's truth is there, proclaimed in Jesus Christ, made real in him.

In her 1997 Lyman Beecher Lectures on Preaching at Yale Divinity School, the inimitable Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest in Georgia and arguably one of the three best preachers in American right now, tells about her sister Kate who—like Barbara—did not grow up in the church but began attending one after her son Will was born. “Trying to downplay my delight but eager to talk to her about it, I asked her one day which service they attended. ‘Neither one,’ she said. ‘We just go to Sunday school and then we go home.’ When I asked her why, she told me: how they *had* gone to church at first, and how she had sat there Sunday after Sunday listening to the preacher vent his spleen at God's enemy of the week—alcohol, the lottery, gay people, Santa Claus—until she felt as if she had been beaten with a stick.

“‘One day,’ she said, ‘I stood up in the middle of the sermon, put my hands over Will's ears, and led him out of the church. Now we just go to Sunday school and we're all a lot happier.’”

Listen: we clergy get hungry too and sometimes we are starving. I don't excuse the preacher Kate tells about, but let me tell you that nourishing words are sometimes hard to find—words with no razor blades in them, words with no chemical additives. Most of the words you hear on Easter have been chewed so many times there are no nutrients left in them, or else they have been left uncovered on some shelf until they are too hard to bite into. A lot of people come to church on Easter wanting something delicious to eat, but they want it in the form of Easter chocolates and sweet little bunnies. What we need in this wilderness we're going through are fresh words from the mouth of God—just enough food to get us through today.

I don't want to contribute more persuasive words to a world already glutted with them. I want you to hear God's word. I don't want us to engage in false advertising by having those words on our sign on Oak Park Avenue, “All people welcome.” No church I know is open to everyone. Whom do we think we are fooling? Perhaps we ought to change the sign to read: “We do the best we can,” or better yet, “Christians meet here. Enter at your own risk.”

It's a complicated and difficult world we live in. And while there are no easy answers to complex questions, we will not be able to find any answers at all unless we trust God, unless we make leaps of faith every day of our lives.

My Dad used to tell about young men in my hometown of DeWitt Arkansas, Billy Gan Spratlin and Sonny Boy Montgomery, who went into the hay-hauling business together. They bought a truck and began buying hay for \$1.50 a bail and selling it for a dollar a bail. After several months of transactions, Billy Gan and Sonny Boy couldn't figure out why they were losing money. They argued and figured, they debated and discussed about how to make money, how to keep from losing any more money. Finally, they arrived at a solution: they bought a bigger truck!

Sounds a lot like the church to me. We Christians generally check our brains at the door of the church. We may be smart and decisive and logical in the world, but when we come inside those doors from Oak Park Avenue or Superior Street, we forget that we are to love God with all our mind as well as with all our heart and soul and strength. It also sounds like the way you and I live: we think we can solve all our problems and bury all our fears if we have a bigger truck, if we just get stronger, if we just work our own way out of whatever hole we have dug for ourselves.

But the Gospel, the Good New of Easter tells a different story. It tells a story of the One who conquers death on our behalf. It forces us to look at our fears but more importantly it breaks us free from them. It exorcises our demons by helping us face them and by helping us live beyond our own needs. "Go and tell the others," Jesus commands. "The demonic," said Kierkegaard is the self-enclosed." Christ commands Mary and commands us, "Get out of yourself by giving yourself."

Several years ago Marilyn and I were in New York City. I had been invited to preach at the City Church, and we went early so that we could see some plays and stroll the avenues and spend way too much money. We were slated to fly out of LaGuardia on a Monday afternoon, and after we checked out of our hotel that morning, we had some time to waste. We wandered down Central Park South into a store run by some Lebanese merchants. They sold everything from souvenirs to expensive home furnishings.

Do you know about the superstition Mid-Eastern merchants have? If they don't sell something to the first customer in the door, the tale goes, the whole day will be a loser. So, if you are the first person to walk into the shop—as Marilyn and I were—they are going to make every effort to sell you something.

“nd you know the difference between the way women shop and the way men shop, don't you? As Rob Becker points out in “Defending the Cave Man,” men from time immemorial

have been “hunters” while women have been “gatherers.” The women gathered fruits and berries and vegetables, while the men went out to hunt for wild things. And that has carried over into the way we go about purchasing. I go into a store, I know what I want, I buy it, and I leave. Marilyn, on the other hand, is a gatherer: she touches, she examines, she looks, she thinks and she may or may not decide.

So, in that store on 59<sup>th</sup> Street, she began to wander and peruse. I was, as you might imagine, a bit bored, so I wandered over to look at oriental rugs—just for their beauty, for their intricacy. The owner of the shop came over and desperately wanted to sell me one of those oriental rugs—which sold for more than a year’s salary for a Methodist pastor.

Wanting to make the first sale of the day, the shopkeeper began to explain why a genuine oriental rug is so expensive. “It’s one of a kind!” he exclaimed. “And you know why it’s one of a kind?” He turned it over to show me. “Because of the mistakes! Every time the weaver of this rug back there in Persia made a mistake, she incorporated it into a new pattern. You can go down the street and buy a rug from Koshgarian—one of those made on a computer-driven loom. Worthless, worthless. This one is beautiful, priceless, because of the mistakes!”

That Lebanese merchant did not know he was dealing with a preacher. I could not afford the rug, but I got a great idea for a sermon. Why are you and I here on this Easter Day? Well, partially because of our mistakes. God has taken the sins, the errors, the stupidities of our lives and each time woven them into a new pattern of what Kierkegaard called Governance, what St. Paul calls Grace and what Augustine called Providence.

And on no other day of the year is that truth more evident than on this day, the Festival of the Resurrection. God takes even death and makes it into life. New life. A new creation.