

“This Is the Dawning”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler, Pastor
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Stopped. Speechless. Scared. Silent.

The women who, as Mark’s gospel tells it, had rushed to the tomb for daybreak, end the story not with Trumpets. Not with angels singing. Not with Alleluia. They are stopped. They are speechless. They are scared. They are silent.

IF this is the dawn of Easter, let’s get on to the Easter Egg hunt, so we can have a bit of joy here! Even our religious forebears thought the ending of Mark lacked joy and resolution, so they tacked on another 12 verses, an epilogue if you will, to summarize what happened from the resurrection, through the ascension.

But our lectionary text closes with the more historically accurate ending. It does not lead us to Alleluia. It’s like Mark takes us to the horizon’s edge, just before daybreak, and drops us off there: before the sun splashes color onto the sky, rises, and dazzles us with its shimmering light.

Why would Mark just go and dangle something incomplete like that, in front of all us reliant followers looking for something hopeful and real enough for us to sink our teeth into it? In Matthew, in Luke, in John, there is a greeting by Jesus, an encounter on the road to Emmaus, a saying of Mary’s name, *something* that makes Jesus’ follower adjust to a new reality and accept the wonder that resurrection has happened. But Mark doesn’t lead us to that point. We are kind of on our own to get there.

In the original Greek, the last three words of this passage are “They feared *for...*” And then it ends— for you grammar nerds cringing out there, with a dangling preposition. How’s *that* for suspense?

It’s like when someone in my family of multi-taskers is telling a story, while doing something else. I hang on every word. “You know, at school today something happened...” That always gets this parent’s attention. I stop what I am doing to hear what comes next. But my child has *not* stopped what she is doing, which is doing homework on her computer, or watching TV, or watching a butterfly outside our window. “What happened at school today, honey?” I prompt. Depending on how distracted she is, I may or may not get the rest of the story. Sometimes, my child talks just to chatter, to hear her own voice; maybe it’s to make up for the lack of a sibling, or more likely, to

keep that line of social connection going between us. And sometimes, she wants to tell me something *really* important. Those moments of waiting, when I am trying to figure out which kind of speech she utters, can be very suspenseful for me as a mom.

What Mark tells us in these last words IS really important, even though the story does not wrap into a tidy ending.

Perhaps Mark knew how Jesus' followers would not go on to have neat, happily-ever-after storylines. Sometimes, the Christian journey can be messy. Sometimes, we find ourselves at the break of dawn, and we are still broken.

The season of Easter lasts for 50 days: one seventh of the liturgical year. It is like a sabbath for the church, a gift to us for our rest and our renewal. In Jewish tradition going back to the Torah, God commanded the people to observe the sabbath on the seventh day, because God created the world in six days, and rested on the seventh. And after seven times seven years, there would be a Jubilee year, when all debts would be forgiven, the land would lay fallow so it could renew itself, and everyone would be allowed to return to their ancestral homes if they had been displaced.

Because Jesus rose on a Sunday, most Christians think of that day as our Sabbath. I wish I could say that in the season of Easter, in that time of rest and renewal when we talk about Jesus' resurrection, that the poor could be forgiven their debts. I wish that the earth we have depleted could be returned to its natural state. I wish that people displaced by war and famine and occupation could return to their homes. I say these things knowing that if these changes were made, my life would probably be completely different. Regardless, I am sorry to say that Easter will not bring about this kind of renewal. We are still at the dawn, and night casts its shadows upon us, and it is tricky to see our path moving forward.

More specifically, there are those among us who have not yet heard good news from their medical tests. There are those whose loved ones are in prison or jail. There are those who know inside their identity, their gender, or who they love, but do not feel safe to share that with the world. There are those whose state of mental health casts shadows no one but them can see. There are those who are hungry, even suffering famine. There are those who know death, and its sting has not yet lifted.

The messenger in Mark tells the women, "Do not be alarmed," and "Go and tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee." But the women do the opposite of the two things they were told. They were fearful, and they told no one.

This may be true. But I do not want to dismiss how brave these women were. Mary Magdalene, and Mary, mother of James (who may have been Jesus' mom, since Jesus had a brother named James), and Salome, who went to Jesus' tomb to care for his body. I remember after my mother had died, or in the moment of her death— it is not clear to me the moment when her death actually happened— I asked to go into the hospital arena where they had been trying to restart her heart. And I cared for her body, touching her and kissing her, thanking her for being my mom and for all the ways she loved us and tried her best for us. I told her not to be afraid, and I assured her that God had a place for her. I told her these things and I blessed her. But I was also terrified as I said them, because I still needed my mom.

Because I know that fear, I can imagine how terrified, yet bravely loving, these women were. And I have empathy for them for not knowing what to do next; for being stopped, speechless, scared, silent.

Sometimes, that is the most appropriate response we can have for a miracle. If you find yourself feeling doubtful about the Easter story of resurrection, you are not alone. “Easter faith is often a mix of trust and doubt, belief and disbelief. For after all, there are at least two ways to miss a miracle: first, to dismiss it, to reject it too readily, as if astonishing things never happen; and second, to domesticate it, to accept it too readily, as if it isn't astonishing at all.”¹ Miracles happen in that realm of reality that is somewhere between night and day.

So let me ask you again to adjust your vision to the shadows of dawn. In that space between night and day, there is more than meets the eye. Peeking under the shadows, there is great reason for joy. To find it, we must trust in the messenger's words: “He is going ahead of you.”

While we were still sleeping in the night, dawn broke through much of the world. My mother-in-law spent the night last night. She was watching, on her tablet, the Easter mass in The Philippines before I fell asleep last night. Wherever there is night, somewhere else, it is already day. Just as the sun rises in the east, and those further east of us have already experienced the dawn, Jesus goes ahead of us. He experiences death before we can. He experiences resurrection before we can. He sees the beautiful picture of what God's beloved community looks like, before we can.

But he does not simply go ahead of us and leave us behind. He expects us to go to the places he has been, too. And he prepares that way for us.

¹ “Dawn: Salt's Commentary for Easter Sunday” on www.saltproject.org, March 25, 2024.

April 4 will be the 96th birthday of American poet and writer Maya Angelou. In 1965, working as a journalist in Ghana, she met with Malcolm X, and decided to return to the United States to help him establish his Organization of African-American Unity — but only a few days after she arrived, he was assassinated. A few years later, she agreed to work with Martin Luther King Jr. — but then, on her 40th birthday, he, too, was killed. Angelou fell into a depression.

Some friends recommended her to an editor at Random House, saying she should write an autobiography — but Angelou repeatedly refused. Then her friend, the writer James Baldwin, suggested a novel strategy to the editor: call her one more time, Baldwin said, and say you're calling to tell her that you'll stop bothering her, and that it's probably just as well that she's refused, because it's terribly difficult to write an autobiography that's also good literature. The plan worked like a charm: Angelou immediately agreed to take on the challenge. That first autobiography became *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969). Angelou was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2010.² Hearing how James Baldwin nudged Angelou to leave that space of death, and through her writing find some resurrection, makes me think that Mark's drop-off point is a nudge for us, too.

Perhaps Mark purposefully leaves us at dawn, and turns the story to us, trusting that we will carry the good news into the full light of day. Another poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay begins one of her poems with this line: "I shall die, but that is all I shall do for death."³

Jesus died. But he did not let death have the last word. In his resurrection, Jesus subverts the powers that deal in domination and violence and even death, and he says, you don't get to tell the ending to this story.

We, the followers of Jesus, are left to tell the ending. In the life and teachings of Jesus, we have already been given the themes we have to work with. They are stories of healing and forgiveness. They are stories of justice and peace. They are stories of compassion and listening. They are stories of feeding those who hunger, both physically, and spiritually.

The world is spinning, leaving the dawn behind and sending us into a brighter and brighter day. Followers of Christ, how will *you* continue this resurrection story?

² "Theologian's Almanac for Week of March 31, 2024" on saltproject.org

³ Edna St. Vincent Millay, "Conscientious Objector"