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**“Looking Ahead”
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**Easter Day (Year B)
April 1, 2018**

Mark 16:1-8, Isaiah 25:6-9, I Corinthians 15:1-11

The women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, have had a hard week. One week ago, they were shouting Hosannas to the man they believed to be their Messiah. But during the week, things took a horrible turn. Their Savior did not save himself and now he rested cold in the tomb.

Consumed by sorrow and confusion, they went through the motions of grief. They observed the Sabbath day as they always had. And when the day after the Sabbath dawned, they took their oils and spices and went to find Jesus’ body. They went, probably weak from crying, with that grief-heavy countenance that death so-often brings to those who are mourning. But they went because they still loved him and wanted to be close to him in whatever way they were able.

As they walked along, they wondered out loud what they were going to do when they reached Jesus’ tomb. “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” they asked. But when they arrived, they saw the stone rolled away already and inside was a young man, dressed in a white robe. That was when they began to panic. “They were alarmed,” my translation reads. Surely, they must have been wondering what in the world was going on! But what was going on was out of this world, and the man, who was probably an angel spoke to them, saying, “Do not be alarmed: you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised. So go, tell his

disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

That was when the women, who must have been staring at the man in total amazement and fear, turned to run away. And Mark’s gospel ends not with a confident proclamation from the women, like “He is Risen!” but with a vision of the backs of the women’s heads disappearing in a cloud of dust. Mark writes, “terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

“They were afraid.” What kind of an Easter ending is that? Where are the Alleluias? Where is the Risen Lord? We don’t come to Easter Sunday service to hear a story that ends in fear? Life is already fearful enough!

Apparently, the early Christians felt the same way. About a hundred years after Mark wrote this truncated version of the resurrection story, some Christians tacked on two different options for readers – the “shorter ending” and the “longer ending,” because, well, they needed an ending with more than just three women running away in fear. They needed something more triumphant, more confident, more joyful! After all, *Mark’s* ending leaves us with uncertainty, doubt, and unresolved questions. I wonder, though, if Mark leaves us in a more realistic place, a place that matches how we really feel on Easter morning, when we are not 100% sure if all this hype about Jesus’ resurrection is justified, and when we can’t really say what difference it makes in our own lives, if any. Sometimes we are afraid that the news we have received might be a little too good to be true.

My friend Tom Are tells the story of his mother’s obsession with the Publisher’s Clearing House sweepstakes (which some of us older folks in the room will remember from years past). “Queen of the Sweepstakes” he called her, remembering that she couldn’t send her responses in fast enough. He asked her:

“Momma, why do you do that? You’d be better off drilling for oil in the backyard.”

She’d say, “You just hush. You don’t know. One of these days, someone might knock on that front door with balloons, a TV camera and a check

written on eight-foot poster board. Now tuck your shirt tail in. I don't want you embarrassing me when they ring the bell."

Well [writes Are], she was right. It happened. It wasn't an eight-foot check, but one day the doorbell rang, and there was a guy with "Frank" written on his shirt. "Mrs. Are?" "Yes." There was a big box on a hand truck. "If you'd just sign here." "What is it?" "It's your microwave." "I didn't order a microwave." "2867 Pineygrove Road? Mrs. Are?" "That's right, but I didn't order a microwave." "Sign here you won it in a sweepstakes. Congratulations."

When Frank left, I started to open the box [writes Are]. "Don't you do that. That's not ours. Look on the box. There's going to be a bill in there somewhere. Just keep looking. We are going to return this. I bet in the mail tomorrow there is a bill for \$400." "But Mom, he said it was the sweepstakes."

"Son, people don't just give you something for nothing." For three months, that microwave sat on the dryer, waiting for the bill to arrive.

Some news is just too good to be trusted. It can be risky to base your life on good news that reorients the heart. That's why [the women] were afraid.¹

Mark says they said nothing to anyone, and who can blame them?

Who would believe them, after all, when they stood there with their mouths wide open and said, almost in a whisper, "No really. He was not there. The man in white told us. He has been raised."

One would have thought that all the nay-sayers would have silenced these women, maybe even the disciples themselves would have silenced them. But they didn't, did they? Because if they had, we wouldn't be gathered here today. If they had, Christians all over the world would not be gathered together on this

¹ Tom Are, in his sermon "Speechless," preached on Easter Sunday, 2009, at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas.

day to stand before our crosses, to sing “Alleluias,” to shout together, “HE IS RISEN!” If the women had kept silent, Mark would not have written his gospel at all.

Somewhere along the way, they must have pushed aside their fears that they would not be believed, that the disciples would think they were crazy. They must have told them what the angel said, “He has been raised. He is not here.” Suddenly, the tragic narrative of death that had haunted them all weekend was turned on its head. “He’ll see you in Galilee,” the man had said, and though it scared them to death, they ran to tell the others and to get ready to go to home to see their risen Lord.

Galilee, after all, was the home of the women and the disciples, the place of their daily routines, their comings and goings, their ups and downs, their joys and sorrows. Galilee was also the place of Jesus’ ministry, the location of his teaching, healing, and miracle-making. Not Jerusalem, not the capital, not the place of power, not the seat of empire. Jesus would not be found there. He would meet them in their own places, in their own spaces, in their own lives, in Galilee.

Perhaps Mark’s unfinished ending invites his readers to consider what lies ahead for us all in the Galilees of our own lives, and how and where will we meet the living Christ and find our hearts strangely warmed, strangely reoriented.

My friend Beth asks the question:

Where is our Galilee? In a hospital bed, at the funeral home, in the rehab clinic: that is Galilee, and Jesus has gone before us. Where is our Galilee? In the ICU, in the unemployment line, in a house too quiet and empty? That is Galilee, and Jesus has gone before us.²

Where is our Galilee? In a school closet, in a place of uncertainty and confusion, at a march for our lives? Is our Galilee in a courtroom, or a classroom, or a homeless shelter? These places are our Galilees, and Jesus has gone before

² Beth Merrill Neel, in a paper she wrote in 2006 for our preaching group, *Lectio Jubilare*.

us to meet us there, to bring us peace, and to help us share the light and love of God wherever we are.

And that is the crux of Mark's good news, isn't it? That Jesus, who has defeated death, goes before us and waits to meet us in the Galilees of our own lives, that our hearts might be reoriented toward the transforming, radical, and healing love of God, that our lives might be instruments of peace and love, justice and joy.

Like the women, we will still have fears. Like the disciples, we will still have uncertainties. Like Thomas, we will still have doubts. But what if we come to the Easter story not as a puzzle we have to figure out, and not as an ending we have to have laid out clearly before us, but as an invitation to participate in the mystery of Christ and to look for Jesus in all of our Galilees, in all of our fearful moments, in all of our certain uncertainties.

Jesus, the greatest love the world has ever known, has gone ahead to wait for us and to meet us. Though this news is beyond comprehension and strikes fear in the hearts of those who begin to understand its cosmic impact, it is the good news that transforms our lives. It is the news that will take us beyond death and into life (life in this life today as well as life after death), beyond fear into joy. It is the news that will take us past hate and into love and turn our darkness into light. Mark's gospel teaches us to look for Jesus in the Galilees of our lives, despite our fears and reservations. And Mark's gospel leaves us with the best news of all - that the empty tomb is not the ending. . . it is only the beginning. "He has gone ahead to meet you, like he said."

It is only the beginning. . . .

Alleluia! Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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