

Sermon Title: Shock and Awe  
Text: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8  
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April 16, 2006  
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI  
Easter Sunday

You know that each of the Gospel's tellings is unique, and you've heard me say enough that it's often as we attend to the differences that we discover the deepest meanings for our own life. This is nowhere more true than in the events which form the core not only of our celebration this morning, but really the heart of our faith: these stories of Jesus' resurrection. The point was brought home to me this past week, by circumstance that I can really only categorize as a gift. You know that this has been quite a week for me, and one of the things that meant was four hours of driving to Milwaukee and back on Wednesday afternoon. But as I was leaving the office, something possessed me to grab my recording of J.S. Bach's "St. Matthew's Passion."

This is a formidable piece of music—somewhere around three hours in length, and normally sung in German. But the recording I have is by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic. One of the unique things about their years of collaboration is the way in which they sought to make just these sorts of formidable pieces of music accessible to the listener. So this version was sung in English. The result was that my Wednesday afternoon was sort of like what I remember Good Friday being when I was a child—an extended time of reflection on the story of Jesus' last days, as told by the Gospel of Matthew. Each movement of the story is placed within a glorious context of music, from the gathering of the disciples at the Last Supper to Pilate's commending the body of Jesus to Joseph of Arimathaea, to be placed in the tomb. It was quite an experience to be clipping back Highway 41, having sat, and prayed, and read scripture with my mother, to then listen to Bach's musical setting of the poetic reflection as Jesus' body is carried away, the music corresponding to my own journey, as I drove alongside the setting sun:

*At evening, hour of calm and peace,  
Was Adam's fall made manifest;  
At evening, too, the Lord's redeeming love.  
At evening, homeward turned the dove,  
An olive-leaf the while she bore.  
O beauteous time, O evening hour!  
Our peace with God is evermore assured,  
For Jesu hath His Cross endured.  
His body thou dost crave,  
Thou his disciple, for the grave.  
O let us all regard with thankful wonder  
His precious death, and on its meaning ponder.*

Unlike those childhood Good Fridays, I was actually hungry for the experience, instead of counting the squares on the organ grid of my home church. And perhaps the most moving moments of the entire piece came, at least for my listening this time around, just moments before that quiet soliloquy I just read. Christ cries aloud and then offers up his spirit, and in a scene that is actually only recorded in Matthew's Gospel, the evangelist sings:

*Behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top unto the bottom. And the earth did quake, and the rocks were rent, and the tombs gave up their dead, and many of the saints were raised, that were sleeping; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection, they went into the holy city and appeared to many."*

Bach's churning orchestration makes you all but feel what the chorus then, in great fear and wonder shouts out: "Truly, this was the Son of God."

But it was not *Matthew's* account of Jesus' life that has been occupying the lectionary this Lenten season, and likewise it is not Matthew's resurrection account which we read this morning—it's Mark. And if you lay Matthew's account of these moments of Jesus' death side by side with Mark and it's hard to not conclude that there's a common source between them. Though historians are generally in agreement that it was the other way around—that Matthew relied on Mark's account, and not that Mark relied on Matthew, it's almost as if Mark sort of took out a scissors and cut out this talk of earthquakes and graves opening, leaving us with the *much* terser version of the story. It's difficult to explain it either way: if Mark knew about this story—the graves opening, the dead walking—why didn't he include it? But on the other hand, how could an event like this happen *without* Mark's knowing?

The riddle continues if you keep Matthew and Mark side by side and read on into the words we shared this morning: their respective accounts of that first Easter. The first thing you might notice is that the cast of characters is slightly different: While Mark records three women, Matthew notes only two, leaving out mention of Salome. And whereas in Mark the women wonder aloud as to how the massive stone that had been put in place at the mouth of Jesus' tomb might be moved aside, Matthew leaves no doubt, providing another earthquake. In place of the young man sitting quietly inside the Tomb, Matthew adds an angel of the Lord who descends, pushes the stone aside, and sits upon it in lighting and white raiment, leaving the guards "trembling and become like dead men."

You get the idea, as you allow these two stories to stand together, that for Matthew, these events of the first Easter morning are literally earth-shaking—the entire *cosmos* is set on its edge, and in the words of Paul Tillich's famous sermon, the very foundations of the world are shaken. In Mark, on the other hand, these are more *interior* events. It's not that one is more mysterious or majestic, but that in Mark, that majestic mystery is played out in the hearts of believers, while in Matthew, the heavens and earth literally proclaim the message of resurrection. And insofar as Mark and Matthew have stood together for the better part of two thousand years in the canons of Scripture, I really do think you have to conclude that it's not a matter of one being right and the other wrong, but of each challenging the other, and in so doing *both* challenge us.

You see, I've got a nagging suspicion that the *modern* response to *both* versions of the story is for the most part, "thanks, but no thanks!" Because inside *or* out, we'd simply rather *not* have our worlds shaken up all that much in the first place. If we're perfectly honest about it, don't we have to admit that it's kind of fun to shout out "He is Risen, indeed!" and sing, "Jesus Christ is Risen Today!" and eat jellybeans and chocolate eggs, but at the end of the day wouldn't we prefer that tomorrow look more like yesterday than anything else?

Transformation is wonderful if you think there's something in your world that really needs some shaking up, but what if you pretty much *like* the way things are; if you thrive on the familiarity, and predictability in the world in which you live? Then aren't Matthew's earthquakes and Mark's amazement just a little more than we bargained for on a Sunday in which we really just want to get out our Spring wardrobe, put on a new tie, and be thankful that things are just as they *are*?

And the proof, I'd suggest, rests in how we respond to this amazing story. Again, it's Matthew and Mark, and their different tellings, that can be telling for us.

It's the dark secret of Mark that so far as we can tell the earliest versions of this Gospel end precisely where we ended this morning: Though instructed by the young man clothed in white to tell the disciples and Peter what they'd seen, the *earliest* witness to the resurrection says that the three women "went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were terrified!"

History provided two patch-jobs to try and rectify this embarrassing ending—one a short little tag, that says, "but then they thought better of it and told Peter what they'd seen"; and a longer one that reads like kind of a cliff-notes version of Matthew and Luke, with Jesus appearing to Mary, and to two disciples on the road, commissioning the disciples to carry the Gospel to all lands, and then rising up into heaven. But leave the Gospel in what might be its most primitive form—the women fleeing in terror and amazement, filled with fear, such that they say nothing to anyone—perhaps we can begin to sense the truly earth-shaking significance of what we claim happened on this day. If we weren't so glib, if it were *not* so familiar, then perhaps we would understand that what we insist is true about this day: that Christ is risen from the grave; that he has *conquered* death, and bestowed *life* on those in the tombs, then really, shouldn't we be brought up short—speechless, amazed, even filled with fear?

It's no mistake that Mark's three women were stopped dead in their tracks by what they'd seen. That would be the natural human response. And so it perhaps should be for us this day as well. Not, "Oh, yes, of course, Christ is risen. What else could possibly be the case...would you pass the ham, please?" but stopped dead in our tracks, we might let our doubts lead us into a true faith, that doesn't just suppose that it might, after all, be true, but that so transforms us that we *must* be stopped cold, first, and like Jonah, swallowed by this whale of story, turned completely around and disoriented that we might be reoriented and led *back* into life.

What *would* it mean for our lives and our living if death truly has no dominion? I've thought about that quite a bit this week, and it *is* a staggering possibility. It is just a little too precious to be so freely thrown to the winds. I found it encapsulated in one of the hymns we sang on Maundy Thursday, as we sat together in a closing darkness and heard the story of Jesus' arrest, and conviction: "were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all!" Mark's right. If this story is true, then it really *should* bring us up short, in wonder, and amazement, and yes, even *fear*. Because if God can do even this, then imagine what other possibilities there might be for our lives. It's why, I think, Thomas figures so prominently in one of the other Gospels we didn't read this morning: because the true seedbed of faith is not smug intellectual certainty, but honest doubt, that sees,

and names the incongruities and then places itself in those outstretched hands, and allows the heart to utter what the brain cannot comprehend: “My Lord, and my God!”

To be sure it is Matthew’s women, found woven into the additions to Mark that the centuries added, who will lead us into tomorrow: the fear never left them, I hasten to note, but they ran, so Matthew tells us, in that fear, and in great joy, to tell the disciples what they had seen and heard. That, to be frank, is the work of a lifetime: to find those ways in which the profound truth of this morning—which is to say a truth that is far too great to be sandwiched between any manner of logic or proof—might change the way in which we will live, from today on into eternity. And the path to that true faith, so Mark’s trembling women show us, is not in spite of, or beside our doubts and fears, but precisely *through* them—naming them gently, and then setting them aside to proclaim a truth that, though we will never fully grasp it, can in the end grasp us, and lift us up to life:

Christ is Risen! Christ is risen, indeed.