

Easter Sunday (B) and Baptism

Mark 16:1-8

Happy Easter! Today we're celebrating the resurrection of our Lord in a most appropriate way—with the baptism of Mary Katherine Stribling. However, the liturgy first calls for a sermon to be preached, and you know preachers, we can't ever pass up that kind of opportunity.

It seems a photographer for a national magazine was assigned to shoot a forest fire. He was told a small plane would be waiting to fly him over the fire. Arriving at the small airstrip a little late, he was happy to see the Cessna waiting, with its engine running. After jumping in with his equipment he yelled, "Let's go!" So, the pilot swung the plane into the wind and soon they were airborne.

"Fly over the north side of the fire, and make several low-level passes," shouted the photographer, over the roar of the engine.

"Why?" responded the nervous pilot.

"Because I'm going to take pictures!" retorted the photographer sarcastically: "I'm a photographer, and photographers take pictures."

After a long pause, the pilot replied, "You mean, you're not the instructor pilot?"

Things don't always turn out to be what we were expecting, do they? Both the photographer and the pilot found themselves in that position. Each was expecting something different.

In our gospel story, the three women had come to the tomb of Jesus early on Sunday morning—the day after the Sabbath—to anoint his body properly. It had been buried in haste on Friday because the Jewish laws prohibited such work during the Sabbath, which began at sunset that night. But to their amazement, they didn't find the body of Jesus. Instead, they found a young man who told them the one they were looking for had risen. He also told them to go and tell the other disciples what had happened and that they should go to Galilee where they would see the risen Jesus.

However, the author of Mark tells us the women failed to comply with the directions because they were afraid. They knew what to do with a dead body, and they were prepared to do it; but they had no idea what to do about this unexpected situation.

You see, the death of their master had brought with it the resignation that the evil powers of the world had prevailed over the good—over the love of God for humanity that Jesus had taught. They saw his death as an end. They had no concept of his resurrection. So, it's not surprising they were afraid in this new, unknown and unexpected situation. It was easy for them to look to the Jesus of their past, but it was quite difficult, and even scary, for them to see the Jesus of their present and their future.

In a similar way, we too have a tendency to *embalm* (so to speak) the God we have always known—the one with whom we are comfortable. Too often we fail to make room for a God who is always doing the unexpected. The resurrection of Jesus was just that—the completely unexpected—something totally new. And neither the women at the tomb that morning, nor the other disciples when they found out, understood what had happened. They didn't understand what the event meant for them, and what it meant for the world.

In time, however, and with the help of the Holy Spirit, they came to understand that the resurrection was not a simple resuscitation of a corpse (like the raising of Lazarus), nor was it a mere projection of their vivid memory of Jesus. Rather, it was nothing less than the reign of God breaking into the world to transform our concept of sin and death. It was a life-changing event. It was a life-transforming experience. But it was not static. It may have happened first on that Easter morning so long ago, but it's an event that continues to occur every single day.

What changed the disciples most was not the remembrance of Jesus' past ministry, but his continued ministry in their present lives. It wasn't just a memory, but a new physical presence they had never experienced before.

On the surface, Mark's gospel seems to conclude on a less than hopeful note, with the women keeping silent. But, we must remember the Gospel's opening words—it's title: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The entire book is the beginning of the good news—the gospel. So, the end of the book is really the end of just the beginning portion, not the end of the story. Part two continues. The resurrection of Christ is the transition point.

The concept of resurrection wasn't new to the Jews, they already believed in a life after death at the end of the world. But through the resurrection of Christ, God provided for them, and for us, a means of a "new life" before death.

Beginning with, and because of, the event we celebrate today, humanity can now experience the love of God in our own lives through the transforming power shown to us in the resurrection of the Christ. But, as always, given the freedom with which God created the world, we have a say in whether or not we'll accept that love. The fate of the risen Christ in our lives is up to us.

Once there were two town bullies who decided they could embarrass the wise old man of the village and prove he wasn't so smart. Their plan was to catch a small bird and have one boy hold it tightly in his hand. Then he would ask, "Wise old man, what do I have in my hands?"

They assumed the old geezer would probably be smart enough to figure out the answer. But the second question would be the trap. "Old man, tell me, is the bird dead or alive?" Now, if he answered "dead" the boy could simply open his hands and let the bird fly away. But if he answered "alive," well then just a small, quick squeeze would kill the creature, so when his hands were opened the dead bird would be revealed.

They proceeded with their scheme and caught the bird. Indeed, the wise old man figured out the contents within the boy's hands. But the rest of the plan didn't work so well. To the second

question, the old sage responded, “Well, my son, whether the bird is alive or dead is up to you. The bird’s fate is in your hands.”

In the same way, the fate of Easter is in our hands. Whether Jesus’ message of love and hope for humanity lives or dies is up to us.

In rolling away the tombstone and resurrecting Christ, God acted in an uncontrollable, unpredictable and, certainly, unexpected way. And today, in a similar manner, God continues to roll away the stones of our being and empty out the dead places of our lives.

Just as God sent Jesus ahead of his disciples, God has sent Jesus ahead of us into the Galilees of our everyday lives. But, as with the Gospel of Mark, God has left the story unfinished—counting on us to complete the Good News. is counting on us to spread the news of God’s love for humanity in the world, and to welcome everyone into God’s loving household.

And that is exactly what we will do next, as we welcome Mary Katherine into the loving household of God.