

# The Unexpected Jesus: Changing the Rules

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April 5, 2015 Easter Sunday

## Mark 16:1-8

A moment of supreme terror for any preacher, or at least for this preacher, is when someone gets up at a Memorial Service or Wedding or any service to share a reflection or story and begins by saying, “I really haven’t prepared anything, but…” and away they go. The person doesn’t know how to begin and it’s a pretty safe bet that he or she certainly doesn’t know how to stop. Indeed, probably the most consistent critique of my own preaching over the years by my family goes something like this: “Well, the sermon was ok, but why did you feel the need to have three conclusions?” Knowing how to stop; knowing when you are done. It is a great challenge for a speaker or writer. But apparently not for Mark.

It seems he has barely begun to tell the Easter story and he decides he is finished. “And so they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them. And they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.” That’s it? That’s Easter? We got up and came to church for that? A frightened silence? A running away in fear? What a weird way to end a Gospel. What happened to the alleluias and shouts of joy?

It is clear that the early church was not at all fond of this ending. Other endings were added to make Mark’s story sound more like the other Gospel accounts. It’s as if people were trying to fix what they considered to be a broken or incomplete document. But is a “fix” really necessary?

Three women arrive at the tomb, deeply grieved. Their teacher and Lord has been executed. It’s unbelievable but true. The harsh and death-dealing ways of the world have triumphed again. Their great hopes and dreams destroyed. There is nothing to do now but to observe the rituals that are meant both to mark the death of their friend and teacher and to help them begin the painful mourning process. The reality of Jesus’ death weighs on them as they worry about how they can get into the tomb to anoint his body. Who will roll away the stone? Then things get interesting. The stone is already rolled away, the tomb open. But instead of a dead body they find a young man in white who informs them that Jesus is not there. And Mark tells us, “they were alarmed.”

I love the honesty of the gospel. No hallelujahs, no festive music and dancing. The shocking news of Jesus’ resurrection is met with alarm – fear – as the women struggle to regain their composure and decide how to respond to such unbelievable news. They are shaken and afraid. In the words of Martha Spong, a United Church of Christ pastor, “Their fear reminds us that the good news of Christ’s resurrection is not simply reliable news to be taken for granted. It is a truth so shocking that even the first people to hear it, people who hear it on the spot where it happened, cannot imagine how to respond or tell anyone else.”

I have mentioned to you before that it actually makes life a lot easier if we don’t believe all this Easter talk. It is much easier to say, “Hey, let’s all go out to the cemetery and give poor dead Jesus a decent burial. After all, it’s the least we can do. We had trouble following him closely when he was alive, but now that he is dead, well, it’s a bit easier to be his disciple isn’t it. We could never quite keep up with Jesus, never knew what he was up to, where he was headed next, what kind of trouble he might be stirring up, what he might ask us to do next. But now we know where he is, sealed shut behind a big stone – safely out of the way. It is so much easier not to believe. Then there is no claim on our lives, no call for transformation, no talk about loving enemies, going the second mile, caring for the least of these. If Jesus is dead and gone, then once again the world has been made safe for the status quo.

Ah, but what if it’s true – this talk of Easter, resurrection and new life; what if it’s true that all the rules have changed? What if, as Craig Barnes suggests, a risen Savior is on the loose in our world and he knows our names? Perhaps it would have been safer to stay home, reading the paper in your pajamas, than to show up here on Easter. I recall the words of a young man, who after seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time, exclaimed, “You don’t want to mess with whoever made that!” Are we sure we want to mess with Easter?

A pastor was on an airplane, returning home from a conference. He was seated next to an elderly gentleman. They struck up a conversation. Slowly, perhaps because the man learned he was talking to a minister, their conversation became more candid. He told the pastor that he and his wife were the parents of several children, one of whom – a son in his 30’s – was confined to a nursing home. He had been in an automobile accident several years earlier and had suffered serious brain damage. He was now in a permanently vegetative state.

The man then startled the minister when he said, “We had stopped loving our son. We visited him every week. It was our duty as parents. But we had stopped loving him. Love is a reciprocal

relationship, giving and receiving. Our son could not give; he could not receive. Yes, we continued to visit him, but we stopped loving him.”

But the man was not quite finished. “One day we went for our regular visit and were surprised to see that he already had a visitor. We did not know or recognize this person. It turned out he was a Lutheran minister who routinely visited in the nursing home. We waited outside in the hall, watched and listened as this minister talked to our son. I thought myself, ‘As if my son could appreciate a conversation.’ Then the minister took out a Bible and read a psalm – as if my son could appreciate a psalm. Then he offered a prayer. Suddenly it dawned on me. This man knows my son’s condition, but he sees my son, not through clinical eyes, but through the eyes of faith. He treats my son as a precious child of God.”

The women were right to be afraid, they were not fools. Standing before an empty tomb, they knew everything had changed. Don’t come to Easter worship expecting some easy blessing of the status quo – thank goodness that’s over. Now let’s get back to our normal routines. No, resurrection has a way of penetrating down deep into life, all of life, even life in a lost and lonely room in a nursing home. It has a way of changing us and the way we see the world – the way we see each other. “He treats my son – my lost, wounded, unresponsive son – as a precious child of God.” Like it or not, believe it or not, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary, it’s a new world out there.

Back to our text. The women are told Jesus has gone before them into Galilee and it is there they and the others will find him. Galilee – not Jerusalem, not Rome, not some high and holy place, but Galilee. Common, run of the mill, impoverished, dirty, dusty, everyday Galilee. That’s where Easter happens, where the defeat of the powers of death happens – Galilee, Sebastopol, here, now, today. He is going before you to Galilee – Jesus is heading back to where his followers lead their ordinary, workaday lives. This is where they shall meet him; this is where we shall meet him.

On Good Friday, as I was attempting to wrap up this sermon, I read of the murder of 147 mostly Christian students at a university in Kenya by radical militants based in Somalia. Slaughter perpetrated in the name of God. This was just days after I officiated at the memorial service for a young man, father of two, who committed suicide. What could I really say to the grieving family? The pain and brokenness all around us, and within us, can make my Easter words sound far-fetched, unrealistic and naïve, even to me. My God, the power of death still seems so strong. We seem caught in a web of death and decay, suffering and pain. Preacher, don’t give me any of this Easter nonsense. But what if it’s true?

She worked hard in high school, and made good grades. Even though she had come from a difficult home situation, she worked hard because she had high goals. But when it came time for her to go to college, and she applied to a number of schools, she received far too little financial aid to be able to go to any of those schools. So she went to work in a rather dull, modest job. Friends, trying to be helpful, told her, “You just have to face facts. It doesn’t look like college is a possibility for you. You have to be realistic, adjust to the world as it is.” But, you see, she believed in the Easter hope of new life, new beginnings. She saw a different world. So she took a deep breath, enrolled in some night classes at her community college, worked hard, made good grades and eventually was able to obtain the financial help she needed to go to a four year college. Today, she is a renowned teacher of young children. Just as Jesus could not be held by the tomb, so she refused to be held back by the less than ideal circumstances of life. She would not give in to the world as it is. It’s an Easter story.

Remember, Jesus went back to Galilee back into our world with the message that we no longer have to resign ourselves to a world where death and the powers of death have the final word. Dare to believe that truth, goodness, reconciliation, peace, love and life are the final realities. Dare to believe that the teachings of Jesus are true and that working for their realization is holy work – work worth living and dying for.

The fear of the women at the door of the empty tomb rather reminds me of the mother who told her young son just before his first swimming lesson, “Now don’t you dare go near the water until you’ve learned to swim!” Yes, pretty scary stuff, pretty risky, to let go of the familiar old and embrace the new – losing our lives to find them, opening ourselves to the beauties of the world and not being afraid of what is ugly, taking hold of today and trusting God to take hold of tomorrow. But that’s Easter.

A favorite Easter story: Charles Blondin was one of the world’s greatest tight-rope walkers. In 1859, he crossed Niagara Falls on a tightrope. After the crossing it is reported that he asked an excited onlooker, “Do you believe I can carry a man on my shoulders across Niagara? The man, breathless with excitement, said he believed he could. “Then,” said Blondin, “will you be the man?”

The year is not 1859, nor are we anywhere near first century Palestine, but a risen Christ comes to us still and asks, “Will you be the one? Is the life-changing promise of Easter for you? For I can raise anyone from death to life and I can do it right now. Will you be the one?”