

Melanie Rosa
Lakewood UMC

Scared Speechless

April 8, 2007
Mark 16:1-8

For the past six weeks of Lent I have been preaching a sermon series on the temptations Jesus faced and the temptations we all face as we journey through this life, including Pride, Envy, Sloth, Anger, and Despair. Some of you were here every Sunday during Lent, and I want to thank you for hanging in there with me. This particular sermon series reminded me of the retired United Methodist Bishop who gave the opening freshman convocation at Yale University one year. He decided that he would tell those freshman students about all of the temptations awaiting them during their college years, organizing his talk around the letters of the university. So he began by speaking first about the hazards of youthful exuberance for the letter Y, talking for 10 minutes about how dangerous youthful exuberance could be. Then he went on to speak about Avarice, and with that he nearly lost the entire crowd, students were falling asleep and some were leaving. Then he talked for awhile about Lust for L, and that momentarily recaptured their attention, then he finally got to E for Envy. By this time most of the students were either gone or comatose, but the Bishop could not help but notice a young man kneeling in the back of the chapel in an attitude of heartfelt prayer. Afterward he went up to him and said, "Young man I saw that you were in prayer during my sermon, could you tell me what moved you so deeply?" The young man replied, "Yes, sir. I was simply giving thanks to God that I am a student at Yale, and not the Massachusetts Institute of Technology!" My message today will be an explication of the words: Lakewood United Methodist Church.

I do not need to explain Easter to you today. You all know what this day is about, at least I hope you are not here to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. You know what Easter means—hope, new life, new beginnings. Interestingly enough, Easter is the only Christian Holiday that is set by the moon, that's why the date always changes from year to year. Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox. It sounds complicated, but it made perfect sense to our ancestors in faith, who wanted Easter to coincide with the greening of the Earth and the return of new life. Their thinking was that because Christ has risen from the dead, the whole world comes back to life, and there should be signs of hope and promise all around us.

I selected Mark's Gospel for our Easter text today, and it is an odd

one, which is why I have not preached an Easter sermon from Mark in many years. Mark was the earliest Gospel, written around 70 AD and Mark provided the framework for Matthew and Luke. This gospel, therefore, carries much more weight, is considered closer to the actual truth of Jesus life and teachings. Mark's Gospel is crisp, brief, and to the point. The original account of the Easter story in chapter 16 ends at verse 8. So here you have just 8 verses telling that the women went to the tomb early on Sunday to embalm the body, and found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, except for an angel dressed in white. They are taken aback, but the angel tells them, "Do not be afraid, go and tell the disciples that he has risen." And what do they do? The exact opposite of what this angel tells them to do. They ran away, scared to death, and say nothing to anyone. They are scared speechless. The End.

This account is almost embarrassing. In fact, it was so unacceptable to the early church that they had to do something to make it better. Verses 9 through 20 were added much later and some Bibles have 11 extra verses added to the 16th chapter of Mark. Go home and check your Bibles to see if Mark ends at verse 8 or verse 20.

Although the reaction of these women is disappointing, we should not judge them too harshly. Who wouldn't run off when faced with such a situation? While death is natural and all too common, grief is natural and all too common, loss is natural and all too common—resurrection is not. Resurrection is unnatural and frightening. It is just too much.

The women were not the only ones to react this way. None of the disciples believed it when they first heard about it. Luke tells us that upon hearing that Jesus had risen from the dead, the disciples called it an idle tale. When Peter first saw the tomb, he didn't believe it, and of course Thomas wouldn't believe it until he could touch the very wounds of Jesus. The early church struggled with the resurrection also, believing that it stretched the limits of rational understanding. It was frightening.

I would guess that most of us have been in that position--skeptical and scared speechless. You don't live very long upon this earth before circumstances make you mute and afraid. When someone completely breaks your heart, when you keep silent vigil beside a hospital bed, when a police officer shows up at your doorstep and says: "There's been an accident," when you hear the doctor saying things like "incurable" or "malignant" or "inoperable," there are no words for such a time. Life can beat the courage and speech right out of you. And it is precisely during

such times that we should remember even then, perhaps most especially then, God is there. We are closest to God when we are broken, when we are scared speechless. God is at work in the most tragic and hopeless of circumstances.

The resurrection was God's doing; it had nothing to do with human beings at all. So much in this world is God driven, outside of the realm of human comprehension and control. And when we realize just how powerless and helpless we really are, we discover humility, silence, submission. God can do amazing, astonishing, miraculous things if we are willing to get out of the way.

Patrick Henry said something with which I disagree, and it is not, "Give me liberty or give me death." Henry also said: "There is no way of judging the future except by the past." That sounds entirely logical by human standards, but it is dead wrong when it comes to God. Because God can create a future that is such a stark departure from the past, it takes your breath away. God can change us so much that our past becomes nearly irrelevant. You see evidence of this with countless Biblical characters, from David to Moses, Sarah, Mary, Peter and Paul. You see it with people you know— people who have walked away from a terrible past and never looked back. I have seen people overcome unbearable tragedy, serious addiction, life threatening illness, and they would all say they did it with God's help. At the heart of the resurrection is the promise that our God can make all things new---even me, even you.

Lee Strobel was a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, and an angry, profane, hard living, and cynical man. But Strobel found himself on a spiritual journey and he eventually became a deeply committed Christian. He opened himself up to the transforming power of Christ, and asked God to help him change. And change he did, completely. About six months after his transformation, his 5 year old daughter was overheard saying to her mother, "Mom, I wish God to do for me what God has done for Daddy." There are astonishing things that God can do with us and in spite of us.

Some of you may not know this yet, but our church is moving. We will leave you a forwarding address! By next Easter I plan to hold a sunrise service on the land which we plan to purchase this year. This has been a

long process, and after a year of study, prayer, discernment, and two congregational votes, our members have decided to relocate rather than pour several million dollars into this facility. This is a very bold step of faith for us, and sometimes when I think about all that is ahead, I feel scared speechless. I could allow events of the past to shape my attitude toward the future. I have been a part of countless building programs over the years, and I guarantee that there are going to be setbacks and challenges ahead of us. We will all have to work very hard, give generously, pray unceasingly.

But, we must remember that like any resurrection, the resurrection of the Lakewood United Methodist Church is **NOT** up to us. If the resurrection of this church were entirely up to us, we are sunk. We are a part of something that is God driven, and so much bigger than all of us. We will have to trust in God every step of the way. For I believe with all my heart that God has a vision for us, a longing for our future, which is to make disciples and make a difference. With God's help we will be able to reach many more people with the liberating, loving truth of our faith. With God's help we will sponsor 12 Mission Trips every year instead of 6! With God's help we will be able to do so much more for the poor, the lost, the forgotten, the forsaken. With God's help we can change the world. If we continue to give ourselves away, we will flourish. I will never let you forget that the reason we exist is to give ourselves away, pour ourselves out in loving service to a world in need.

Easter reminds us that there is a seed of something magnificent within every one of us that is beyond comprehension. And if we believe that and remember that, then there is nothing we cannot do. We will not be scared speechless for long.

The unique thing about Mark's resurrection story is that it remains unfinished. It just trails off with the words, "...stunned, they said nothing to anyone." John Milton, one of the greatest poets in the English language once set out to write two companion poems on the birth and death of Jesus. The first, his 'Ode to Christ's Nativity,' can be found in most of his collected works. But Milton never finished his 'Ode to the Passion and Resurrection.' In some very early editions of Milton's work, you will find this footnote: "This subject, the author finding to be far above his understanding, left it unfinished." (Easter, 1630)

Perhaps Gospel writer Mark, like Milton, realized that the

resurrection is beyond understanding, and left it unfinished deliberately. I choose to believe that it was left unfinished, because **WE** are the rest of that story. You and I are the conclusion, and the measure of it's impact upon the world. The resurrection happened to Jesus, but it also happens to everyone who dares to be involved with it. We determine how the story ends.

Easter is not just about Jesus, it is about YOU. Jesus already has new life. But what about you? Are you going to run away in fear and not tell a soul? Or are you going to live in hope and joy, allowing God to work in and through you? What are you going to do to finish this story?

Easter gives you a gift, the gift of new life, that can redeem your past, bless your present, and completely transform your future.

Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed. Thanks Be To God.