

Isaiah 25: 6-9
Mark 16: 1-8
April 8, 2012
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday

In the evocative line in the 23rd Psalm, David writes, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death thou art with me.” While the word “death” certainly stands out from the verse, the truly important word is “shadow.” For David the shadow is what happens when the anticipation of death clouds the light and casts a pall over life. .

I risk beginning this way not because I wish to be the Grinch who stole Easter. Like it or not the shadow of death is a part of our every day life. Like MJ’s and my cat who shrinks from us every night when we come to put medicine in her ear, we shrink from any situation that subconsciously gives us the experience of the shadow. We feel a dampening of our spirits. A low pressure system settles into our heads and pushes our eyebrows together. In the old days before psychoanalysis there was a wonderful word which captured this experience: melancholy. Melancholy was that canopy under which we could all claim the experience of the absence of the joy of life.

It is this absence that I suggest the courageous women disciples confront on Easter morning. It is early morning. The sun is just now cresting the ridge of the Mount of Olives. Yet the way to the tomb is shrouded in shadow. The shifting darkness matches the shadow which covers the light within their broken hearts. There is comfort that, at least they will now be able to complete the anointing of their beloved and so begin their journey of grief.

They unprepared for what they find. They are completely disoriented by the empty tomb. Just like the women disciples we accept death as the final reality. Yes on a day like this we

may sing songs and hear words that proclaim “He is risen!” But if we are honest, when the reality of death happens, we do what the women do. We attend to the rituals of death. It is very difficult to doubt death is the last word.

Friends I believe that too often religion does us a disservice by conspiring with us to sugarcoat this most profound fact of life. We all too quickly pass over the fact of death and the shadow that it casts over life to get to the reassurance that there is life on the other side of death. But unless we face the fact square on our lives are diminished by the silent shadow cast over even the most ordinary act of daily life.

That is why the women are so inspiring! Shocked to the core and numb with grief and terror, they yet dare to approach the tomb. And you my courageous friends follow. Dare to peek over the shoulders of the women! See what they see! Hear what they hear. Let the electric message that comes from the tomb pass through them to you.

Do not be alarmed!

You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified!

He has been raised!

He is not here!

Look! Here is the place where they laid him!

I don't know about you but telling the women not to be alarmed is a bit silly. How can they *not* be alarmed? It's like being in a circus tent that has caught fire and being told, “Don't be alarmed! It's all part of the show!” Yet the words hearken back to the same words uttered by the angel to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. “Do not be afraid!” The intent of the message is to promote stability in the face of terror. It is not a denial of the horror of the moment or of the complete scrambling of normal reality as they once knew it. It is a plea to

stand their ground. It is an urging to remain in the moment. It is a call to withstand the shock waves of the passing of the old reality and the emerging of a new reality.

For me this is the critical moment. When faced with the empty tomb and the loss of all that is familiar and ordinary, can we remain to find that there is new ground upon which to stand? Can we resist the powerful impulse to flee blindly, traumatized and lost? Can we remain to hear the message that contradicts the evidence of our eyes and our emotions long enough to hear good news?

The women remain long enough to hear, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified.” These words are important. They are not meant to state the obvious. They are intended to restore a sense of perspective and to bring the women back into the world of their experience. They are not imagining things. They have indeed come to find Jesus.

And so it is that when we face traumatic and disorienting events we need someone to affirm our reality base and to ground us so that we can begin to locate our selves in the upsetting confusion.

Now the next two statements are extremely challenging: He has been raised! He is not here! In Matthew and Luke the order is reversed. “He is not here! He has been raised! This order is comforting. It affirms the evidence of the women’s eyes. They see that tomb is empty. The announcement that Jesus has been raised gives an explanation. There is a familiar logic to it that gives a geographical path to follow. It says, leave this place and go find him!

Yet in Mark’s version the order is reversed. He has been raised! He is not here! This, I suggest compounds the confusion. It creates an atmosphere of crisis. Yet at a very deep level the order addresses the women’s real experience. They hear the words, “He has been raised.” What they see and what they experience is, “He is not here.”

Friends, on this wonderful day of proclamation I ask you to stand with the women as they hear these challenging words. For I believe that the voice from the tomb does no less than confirm our reality today and every Easter day. We hear the announcement that Jesus is risen from the dead. We accept this to be true. Yet so often our experience is, “he is not here.” How we wish that the power of life which lifted Jesus from the grave would do the same for us! How we wish that the sun of resurrection would disperse the shadow that diminishes our days! Maybe today, you think, God will get through to me! Maybe today this amazing event will call me out of my own tomb, the tomb of my sadness, worry and apprehension!

In response to this I suggest three things.

First, painful as it is, we must become aware of the shadow cast by our fearful anticipation of death. We cannot confront what we do not see or admit is real. Like the people in Plato’s Cave Allegory we often mistake the shadows of the cave for real life. We speak of the “real world” of struggle and suffering. We resign ourselves to far less than what God wants us to have and has sent Jesus to show us the way to fullness of life. All too quickly we say, “It is what it is” in a stoical submission to forces beyond our control. We don’t even try to challenge the quiet desperation that is often our daily experience. In order to be raised from the dead we must recognize the power of death and its life draining grip on our lives. We must become righteously dissatisfied enough to demand for ourselves something better.

Second. We must claim the truth of this Easter proclamation. Jesus *has been raised* from the dead! It is really true. It really happened. In his resurrection the beautiful promise we heard from Isaiah has been fulfilled.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over the peoples,

the sheet that is cast over the nations;
he will swallow up death forever.

The shroud is the burial cloth of death. When we are afraid; when we dread; when we believe that nothing good can happen in this life we are wrapped in that shroud. But when he was raised from the dead Jesus *left the shroud behind!* He who is now outside of the tomb, calls to us “Come out! Leave the burial cloth behind!” You are free! Your past no longer defines who you are! Your future is assured! In the present there is utter freedom! Believe this proclamation! Give your heart to Jesus and link your lives to this crazy truth! Recognize that the shadow of death exists only because there is a powerful light of life behind it shining through the cross.

And finally, join the journey. As I said, the shadow is still real and exerts power. The shadow wants you to believe that what I am saying is nice but in the end is a lot of hooey. The shadow wants you to believe the sadness, not the joy, the despair, not the hope. No one makes this journey of faith successfully alone. Find a community of faith that, however imperfectly, *believes this stuff* and seeks to live it out. You will grow. The reach of the shadow will shorten. You will begin to experience life in the *really real world*.

And when you have something to share—an experience that confirms for you this truth—go and share this good news with someone who needs to hear it. Amen.