

Life Before Death
Mark 16:1-8

It is Easter! And today we celebrate the resurrection.

It's the whole reason we are here.

It's the very center of our faith and who we claim to be as followers of the risen Christ.

It doesn't matter, today, that the actual mechanics of the resurrection event are an enigma;
it doesn't matter, today, that we may not all subscribe to traditional views or interpretations of Easter;
it doesn't matter, today, that the 4 Gospels offer contradictory media coverage

one station to the next:

*Matthew's resurrection story highlights a great earthquake and an angel bright as lightning,

*Luke follows the disciples along the Emmaus road where Jesus breaks bread with them,

*John interviews Thomas as he seeks physical proof of Jesus' wounds,

*and then we have this morning's reading:

Mark's sparse, nothing-but-the-facts-please commentary, which leaves us hanging;

with the final words of *his* Gospel never actually revealing the risen Christ. It's just:

"So they went out and fled from the tomb,

for terror and amazement had seized them;

and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid".

The End. Mark closes in fear.

Sure, we may be skeptical about resurrection.

But today all of this is secondary to the fact that

we are here

– today and any Sunday –

because of the resurrection of Jesus,
the Christ.

But resurrection is really not easy to define.

For Christians it always brings contemplation of life after death.

Questions, like: Did Jesus really return from the grave?

And for us: Where we go? What happens to us when our time on earth is done?

These "next world" implications are important, but it's not my focus, today.

Instead, I want to propose an extension to those questions:

What if resurrection begins before that?

What if eternal life starts here,

growing within us as we live out God's call on earth?

What if that *living* is how Jesus defied death?

If the resurrection was already in him in how he lived?

Glancing through our biblical stories, we remember that the Easter event is not a one-act play;
that, in fact, most of the Gospels are based on things that led up to this pivotal moment in our faith.

Yes, it may be the crux of our tradition, but there is *much* that came before the empty tomb.

There is, for example, everything that we experienced leading up to this week:
 Palm Sunday's humbly triumphal procession into Jerusalem;
 Maundy Thursday's Last Passover Supper, betrayal and abandonment;
 Good Friday's criminal execution on a cross;
 and yesterday's long vigil through the dark night of sorrow.

We've walked through these Holy days together this past week, and the path has led us here – to Easter.

But the story of the resurrection didn't begin last Sunday, either.
 As a community we wandered through the 40 days of Lent, from Ash Wednesday through reminders of why and how Jesus' journey ended up at the feet of religious and political authorities:
 we heard his teachings that aggravated the status quo,
 witnessed his actions that broke respected traditions,
 cringed at his defying of societal expectations,
 knowing it would lead him to dire consequences.

But the story of resurrection didn't begin with our observance of Lent, either.
 It goes still farther back.

Resurrection began as life.
 Life revealed in Jesus long before his Holy Week Passion and death.
 We can see it in each of the stories we know of him: *in the passion for life he so clearly lived.*

The spark of resurrection
 – the possibility for eternal life –
 burned in Jesus *before* Easter.

The spark of resurrection already burned
 as he wandered in the wilderness and overcame temptation for worldly powers;
 the spark of resurrection already burned
 as he called on peasant fishermen and wounded women to come, follow him;
 the spark of resurrection already burned
 as he spiritually and bodily touched the least desirable of humanity –
 lepers and beggars and the seemingly most despicable;
 the spark of resurrection already burned –
 in *life*.

In life long before death.

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These are the stories we read all year –  
 the stories of that spark already in him –  
 the stories of Jesus and God's love for humanity, for all creation!  
 And this is what we try to emulate in *our* living as Christ's disciples –  
 striving to live out the same actions he taught to his followers  
 so many years ago in a different part of the world.  
 Living out justice and peace and love;  
 living out challenge:  
 facing governments and economies and societal expectations –  
 facing, even, the possibility of derision, and death.

I wonder if this is why Mary and Mary and Salome ran so hard from the tomb that day?

If this palpable fear that the Gospel of Mark leaves us with –  
 that “they went out and fled from the tomb,  
 for terror and amazement has seized them;  
 and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” –  
 I wonder if their fear was not fear of *Jesus’* resurrection,  
 but fear of what his resurrection meant for them... and for us?

You see, these disciples – preparing to anoint his broken body – were just coming to terms with the unimagineable death of their teacher; and the *absolute* death of their *dream*.

With Jesus they had had a dream of new life –  
 of a divine realm of justice and love *here on earth* rather than in some next life beyond.

With Jesus they had witnessed that dream starting to come true!

The least being lifted up to equality,

the higher being brought down to reality,

healing and hope and a sharing of all things.

Jesus’ living had revealed to them that spark –

and had shown them how to feed it within themselves.

But with his death, they believed their dream was lost.

That that spark in them had been snuffed out,  
 and that God’s shalom simply could not compete  
 with the kingdom already entrenched on earth.

Their leader was gone – executed by powers seemingly so much greater than he was.

But coming to the tomb, having made some peace with this loss, they find that he is not dead!

The work for justice and love on earth could go on!

...Jesus was not dead...

*but he was not there either!*

If only their rabbi were there to greet them, they would be less fearful;  
 they could have depended on him to continue leading.

But no – the work of tending that spark is now theirs.

And so they fled – terrified.

Twentieth century Lutheran mystic and justice activist Dorothee Soelle wrote:

“whoever lives in love has to reckon with contempt, abuse, discrimination, even with death. In this...way of living, the Resurrection is already visible long before death. Jesus believed above all – and for all – in a life *before* death. The Resurrection...was already in him. And only because of this God-in-him were they unable to kill him. It simply did not function. Even today the powerful do not succeed in extinguishing this love of justice....”

This may, indeed, be the most terrifying part of the Easter Gospel.

For the responsibility of his dream is now on Christ’s followers.

The hope of God’s realm of shalom on earth has not died;

it has been passed on to *us* to live out.

And without Jesus to take the heat,

we’re the ones who have to “reckon with contempt, abuse, discrimination, even death”

*if we truly live our lives as God calls us to.*

This is the reason we so admire individuals like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Teresa and Gandhi.  
Because we can see in them that they truly lived out that call in their lives – each in their own way,  
but fully.

Their dreams could not be killed either.  
They had the spark.

Do we view such people as extremes of faithfulness –  
breaking the barriers of inequality,  
living into justice and love

in ways we never could?

Or is this way of living actually what Christ calls *us* toward too?  
In our own lives?

To step out of our comfort zones and societal expectations of what  
a nice, acceptable, middle class life in the United States looks like,

and truly live?

To think of the spark of resurrection in this way is terrifying.

Terrifying enough to make us want to run away from the empty tomb and what it means for us.

To run away from our responsibility to  
aggravate the status quo  
break the respected traditions  
defy societal expectations ...  
not for its own sake, but in order to  
lift the least to equality,  
bring the high back down to reality,  
and share healing and hope for all.

It's frightening to fight for any of these in our own  
workplaces and schools and communities,  
much less around the world.

Because today, like 2000 years ago,  
it seems that the powers already entrenched on earth  
are greater than the dream of God's shalom.

And if we allow ourselves to live in that fear,  
to step back from the likelihood of  
contempt  
or abuse  
or discrimination;

to shy away from the possibility of  
\*the neighbors no longer inviting us to the barbeque  
because we're radical earth-loving hippies who might strategize about global  
warming over our beer,  
\*or not getting the promotion because we spoke out  
against unethical work policies,  
\*or being accused of being "too serious" because we try to hold a friend accountable  
to her subtly homophobic, racist, or classist joke,  
\*or whatever consequences – whether they seem small or world-changing –

that we fear may come from standing up for God's shalom...  
 If we allow ourselves to live from fear instead of love,  
 then the powers have already crucified Christ's dream within *us*.

*But ...*

in living that path of *love* taught by Jesus,  
 we also receive the spark of resurrection.

*If we move through our fears  
 and deny them the power to stop us from  
 living as if God's shalom already reigns on earth and in our lives,  
 then Christ has won.*

And we find salvation within our reality; in life – not beyond.  
 Because with Christ in us, nothing has the power to diminish us or who we are –  
 we cannot be killed while that spark of resurrection burns in us.

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The stories we share each Sunday as the gathered community of Christ help us to re-encounter
 resurrection each and every day...

so that our own sparks *are* fed, tended,
 until they become that flame for justice and love
 that Jesus' own life revealed;
 until we are able to live the lives of God's shalom
 that we are called to live.

For as Christ's people – people of the resurrection – this is what God calls us to.
 To Live! Live long before death.

Because Christ has shown us the way.
 And Christ *is* risen!
 Alleluia!
 Amen.