

Easter 2009  
Mark, Year B  
4/12/2009

I am told by many, especially my Grandmother, that the Easter sermon is a slightly important one. In fact, she said, “This is your chance, your *one* chance this year”. In other words, “Don’t blow it, or they’ll all become heathens and sacrifice goats on the lawn.” As such, I have felt a *little* pressure to be especially loquacious this morning. I have sensed that my Easter diction should drip from my tongue like honey. And I have felt the urge to be Obama-esque, *sans* teleprompter. But I find, in constructing this “meaningful” sermon that my inspiration has not come from the usual places. I am not particularly moved by some account from my youth. I have no parable to offer from my wheat and cow farm in Oklahoma. And Grand-mama has only inspired fear. All of the usual suspects are out!

No. This year has been mostly about the economy. And as such, this Easter morning I take my inspiration from those of us who have lost jobs and security. I take my inspiration from those who are scared, those who have to work harder for less, those who have had to lay people off, and those of us who have lost something real. If you have been affected by this big “R” Recession, I take my Easter inspiration from you. Because Easter, if nothing else, is about the dead not staying dead. It is about refusing to stay in the tomb. Jesus Christ being raised is not an unbelievable miracle from a pre-scientific age, it is about God bringing all of us out of fear and pain into new life, love, and joy.

And let us be honest. There has been much to entomb us. We are, after all, post-Ponzi-schemes. Post-Hummer Executives for Handouts. Post populist Rage. Post mortgage default swaps. Post bank failures. Post pay cuts. Post-any sort of retirement. Post-Financial Stability. Post Lehman Brothers. Post the world as we knew it. And we are ex post facto many job losses, all on top of other trials and tribulations. This year, the “alleluia’s” will lump a little in many of our throats. The stone in front of the tomb will seem unmoveable.

Last Spring, before many of us were aware of our risky recession, executive Paul Friedman and others were told that their company Bear Stearns had been sold. The investment bank whose stock was once valued at 171 dollars a share, was sold to JPMorgan for 2 dollars a share. Friedman and others were suddenly out of employment and life savings. As such, Friedman and his group of demoralized mid-level executives sulkily sat in their offices. They felt powerless, some for the first time in their lives. They sipped scotch, Glenlivet Scotch, to be exact. And over fingers of single-malt hooch, the men commiserated in a slowly, increasingly slurring fashion. They also peered out the window, across the street, where the offices of their enemy, JPMorgan, were located. And the Bear Stearns executives gandered then glowered then glared as Morgan traders entered and exited their lair. The Morgan traders were seemingly unaware of the growing grizzliness across the street. The executives wanted to express their discontent, to demonstrate their pain. And so, they did something. They refused to stay in the tomb. They surreptitiously and ceremoniously ambled up to the windows facing JP Morgan. And these highly polished, professionally trained executives turned around, unbuttoned their pants, and undid their zippers. And they dropped their drawers. They mooned the Morgan traders. They

became the Bear Stearns. It was an act of extreme and desperate protest. Perhaps, it was misguided, and certainly it was distasteful (and a disclaimer to children to leave this only to professionals), but this was their chance to say, "This is not fair. We refuse to stay dead" (William Cohan, "House of Cards").

"When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb." (Mark 16: 1-2). And I want to say that these Mary's going to the tomb of Jesus early in the morning was like those executives mooning the Morgan traders, although, perhaps, a more elegant gesture. But both were acts of extreme and desperate protest. Both were ways of demanding "this is not fair."

And the women had lost everything. Their only hope had been Jesus of Nazareth. They had provided for Jesus while he was in Galilee. They had loved him. And Jesus in return spoke about the power of God's love. He claimed that God's love was more powerful than the Temple, and Rome, and even death. Jesus said that God loves those who have failed and been sold out. Jesus seemed like imminent hope for all, especially to these women. But that was before Jesus was betrayed by his friends, tried by the Temple Priests, and executed by a Roman governor. That was before these women looked on from a distance as Jesus cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." Now, all those past pontifications and the love of Jesus seemed like a glowing 4<sup>th</sup> quarter 2008 economic prediction. It was all useless. Stock in God's love had plummeted. Everything was ruined. This was the Great Depression.

And for some reason, the women protest. They are willing to face the tomb. They get out of bed and go to a vendor. They invest in spices and oils. They prepare to lovingly anoint and care for this man, this Jesus, the Messiah, even though he is dead, even though his plans lie in ruin. The Mary's must have wondered, "What is the point? All is for naught." But then, strangely, curiously, when they arrive, what they anticipate would be closed and a place of death is suddenly wide open and full of new life. "When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back." Jesus' tomb is suddenly more than a repository for the dead. The women are surprised by Resurrection and told that Jesus is alive. The dead have not stayed dead.

We would expect much rejoicing. "Alleluia's" should have been in order. But at least according to Mark, the "alleluia's" lump a little in their throats. In fact, we are told that the women run away, "for terror and amazement had seized them". The women are surprised *and* terrified. Jesus was back! "What would Jesus do?" the women must have wondered. Would he hate, judge, kill, or whisper "peace?" Which brings me to my point. For real resurrection, the first moments and baby steps of new life look different than unbounded joy. For Jesus, for the unemployed, for anyone who has known death or illness, for the Mary's and even for those Bear Stearns executives, joy comes later. In the first steps, resurrection can sometimes look like puzzlement and fear. It can make us want to run away. The old life had set rules and boundaries. God's unending love and Resurrection and forgiveness do not.

Indeed, resurrection is a scary business. It does not guarantee freedom from pain. Resurrection did not erase the wounds of Jesus. And resurrection does not uphold the age old story that the successful are the chosen of God. And yet, what the women will find out and what we trust is that because of Jesus' resurrection, even in our darkest despair, even in the darkness of Good Friday, God is with us. God is here. We trust that we are not alone, and we understand that if we give of ourselves, our love, our successes, our failures, our mistrust, our lack of forgiveness and our forgiveness to the love of God, God will ultimately bring us to new life. And this is why we walk through fear into new life.

Week after week, a small group of people from Croton meet at our church. We call ourselves the "Recessionistos." Many think that it would be a place of fear and terror, a tomb. And walking in the doors for the first time is difficult and fearful and vulnerable. But at meetings, we laugh heartily. We do share the pain of job loss, but we also share joy. We find joy in family, creation, and one another. We eat cookies and remember that we are not alone. And "Recessionistos" is the best case for resurrection that I know. At first glance it can look like absolute failure. It can be scary. But in it are the seeds of new life.

On this holiest of days, I invite us to the best of our abilities, to proclaim "Alleluia." I bid us to remember that our God is the God the afraid and lonely, the God of those who need new life. Our God is the God who can give us new life. And I invite us to hand over to God our death, our pain, our fear, and even my words if they're inspiring you to sacrifice goats on the front lawn. And allow yourself to be made new. "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Isaiah 60:1). God's love is indeed more powerful, redemptive, and secure than any force, any pain, any fear, any terror, any Recession, any hate, and even death. And by coming here today, we stake our lives on Resurrection.