

WITNESSING A RESURRECTION

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Lead Minister

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Text: Mark 16:1–8

“You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. . . . But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him”

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After many seasons of Easter, singing the familiar hymns and hearing proclamations about the empty tomb, year after year of sunrise services and theological reflections on the season, we may be tempted to assume we’ve heard all there is to say about resurrection. One of the hazards of our familiarity with the traditions and experience of Easter is that there is a risk of taking for granted the power and mystery of resurrection. As the experts in our own spiritual journeys, we may find other spiritual pursuits more urgent than seeking out new insights about how to embody what resurrection means. Given the idols, anxieties, and preoccupations with which we have to contend, it can be challenging to witness or experience a resurrection as more than a doctrinal formulation or a liturgical observance or an exegetical enterprise.

However, it’s worth pointing out that, on that first day of the week, when the sun had risen, with the wounds and trauma of Good Friday still fresh, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, who came to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus, did not witness the resurrection either. In Mark’s Gospel, the women do not even see Jesus. Unlike the other Gospels, which really do bring some completeness to the resurrection story, with Jesus actually appearing to the women and reuniting with the disciples, here the two Marys and Salome find the stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, and they find the tomb empty. They do not ever see Jesus. They do not witness a resurrection. They see a young man dressed in a white robe who tells them that Jesus has been raised and he is not here. This is where some readers become dissatisfied with Mark’s story. Some readers want closure. Some want a tidy ending. Ah, but if the two Marys and Salome want to see Jesus, if they want to witness a resurrection, whoever that man was, he tells them everything they need to know: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him”

Jesus is not going to be found where there is death, and cemeteries are of little use for resurrected bodies. Jesus goes before them to Galilee. If they want to see Jesus, if they want to witness resurrection, go to Galilee. Go back to that backwater region, where the poor are discounted and degraded; oppressed, dominated, and exploited; and there is where they will see Jesus. There is where they will perhaps witness resurrection. Go back to that place of poverty and deprivation, where year after year, with no end in sight, economic, military, and political pressures land on bodies. Go back to where Jesus began his own ministry, loving, healing, and forgiving—recklessly and indiscriminately—daring to make the dispossessed and disinherited feel included and blessed. Go back to where Jesus lived among the outcast and threatened the hold of empire by sharing the good news that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God had come near. That’s where the women may perhaps see Jesus and possibly witness a resurrection.

It is truly unsatisfying that Mark ends this account of resurrection with the two Marys and Salome fleeing in terror, immobilized by fear and silence. I can't be sure if the two Marys and Salome ever got over their silence and fear. I don't know if they ever delivered the message they were given. But I believe that message is a clue to how we can possibly get a glimpse of Jesus, how we may just witness a resurrection. The message to go to Galilee is an open-ended invitation and commission to discipleship, beckoning the women and us to go where Jesus has gone and will go. We are not invited to an event in time, perceived only through memory or liturgy. The Franciscan priest Father Richard Rohr describes resurrection as more than just "a one-time miracle in the life of Jesus that asks for assent and belief," rather, it is more like "a pattern of creation that has always been true."¹ If we want resurrection to be more than just a doctrinal formulation, more than just a liturgical observance, more than just an exegetical enterprise, we may need to go to Galilee. Perhaps there is where we may get a glimpse of Jesus, where we may witness a resurrection.

It took a long time for me to imagine what resurrection could be like outside of the image of an empty tomb or outside of the places we've designated as sacred; it was only when I heard about and met Julia Esquivel, the Guatemalan poet, theologian, and human rights activist. Her Galilee was Guatemala. It was there that she witnessed and wrote about resurrection. She lived through the genocide of the indigenous Mayan people in Guatemala. She witnessed first-hand the pain, suffering, and death the brutal ruling regime inflicted on the subjugated—the orphan children of murdered and disappeared parents; girls and women raped and tortured as part and parcel of warfare. Through it all, she witnessed resurrection. She bore witness to it:

What keeps us from sleeping is that they have threatened us with Resurrection!
Because every evening though weary of killings, an endless inventory since 1954,
Yet we go on loving life and do not accept their death!

They have threatened us with Resurrection because we have felt their inert bodies,
And their souls penetrated ours doubly fortified,
Because in this marathon of Hope, there are always others to relieve us
Who carry the strength to reach the finish line which lies beyond death.

Resurrection is what lies beyond death. So, perhaps the invitation and commission placed before us is all about going to the Galilees of our own time and place, to see what lies beyond death. Go to the homeless encampments because Jesus has gone there ahead of us and we might catch a glimpse of resurrection there. Go to where George Floyd, Breanna Taylor, Michael Brown, and Tamir Rice were killed because Jesus has gone there ahead of us and we might see a resurrection. Go to any prison or ICE detention center because Jesus has gone there ahead of us and we might possibly witness a resurrection. And I must caution us to be prepared . . . fear and silence will grip us and immobilize us. But I hope we go anyway.

Accept the invitation to go to Galilee. The tomb is empty. Jesus is not in there. He's gone on ahead. For those who ever doubted that justice could be done; for those who doubted that those who died for the sake of justice would be vindicated; for those who fear that death, hell, and the grave are the end of the story for us; resurrection testifies over and over again that God meant it when God uttered of the creation, "It is good." Nothing good ever dies. Resurrection is the beginning of a new story. It is not the wrapping up of the plot. It is not the folding up the tent, packing up the belongings, and leaving because all is lost. There will be no closing credits after resurrection or "The End" written in big letters indicating that it is time to go home. No, in resurrection, the real journey of life is every beginning—a new life and new hope unfold before us.

¹Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope For, and Believe* (New York: Convergent Books, 2019), 169.

That empty tomb reminds us that what resurrection means for us: It is lived out every day by not giving up; not standing down; getting up again and again; living hard and hopefully; embracing our risings as our identity and our calling; confronting the deaths imposed because we are assumed to be weak, co-opted, or compromised; bearing witness as embodied witnesses to a getting up and a resisting all that opposes abundant life.

“How can I do it, Preacher?” “Go to Galilee.” If resurrection has become some sort of doctrinal formulation that we hear only in this season, get up and go to Galilee. Jesus has gone there ahead of us, and, just perhaps, if we do, if we go to that place that others consider to be a nowhere, with nobodies, with nothing to offer, Jesus is there, and we may catch a glimpse of him. We might just witness a resurrection. I pray that it will be so.