

GOD'S ANSWER IS ALWAYS JUSTICE

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Text: Mark 16:1–8

I feel it necessary to acknowledge that resurrection remains a point of ongoing tension and disagreement for many people, often becoming a theological football lobbed between Christian apologists and religious deconstructionists. Consequently, there are exaggerated claims about what we can know about the resurrection historically or scientifically and less attention on its meaning. So, in full disclosure, nothing about what I say today will be a historical or scientific exploration of what happened at the resurrection. And beware of any preacher or theologian who has more answers than questions. Whatever happened at the resurrection is undiscoverable with our historical and scientific tools. But our spiritual forbears testify that resurrection is God's answer to the question that haunts us to this day: "What can be done about death?"

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We have so much to celebrate on Easter. There is great joy in knowing that the Jesus we love and follow lives and that death didn't have the last word. The familiar springtime metaphors of new life, new creation, and rebirth and renewal inspire hope and celebration. Those are the great, life-affirming images that church tradition has bequeathed us. But the evangelist who wrote Mark does not offer us those images, at least not in this short passage we read today. While we celebrate victory over death, the Gospel of Mark doesn't provide us with any sense of victory. We are left standing in the grave, confused and afraid with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Even though we have imbibed a story of resurrection that harmonizes all of the Gospel accounts of that morning, with Jesus appearing to the women and the disciples, displays of joyful tears and relieved embraces of the resurrected Anointed One, and final instructions from Jesus before his ascension, the resurrection account in the first Gospel does not inspire faith or celebration or courage. Ever since that concluding phrase in Mark's manuscript, "they said nothing to anyone," Christians and the church have been trying to fill the silence left by Mark's Gospel.

I want to pause the celebration for a short moment and spend some time with the two Marys and Salome in the graveyard where they had seen Jesus buried. As marginalized women in occupied territory, their experience warrants their caution and incredulity. They know the experience of death, violence, and oppression, and even if they anticipate justice, it's not common experience. The death-wielding power of the empire had just executed their innocent, beloved rabbi who proclaimed the good news of God and announced that the kingdom of God had come near. They understand death because it had been wielded effectively and routinely against vulnerable people by those with religious, political, and economic power. Death is inevitable, and it endures, and they have always lived with that reality. It's not fair. It's not right. It's just is. Jesus' death was just the latest confirmation of how oppression, domination, and exploitation systems work; how they wield death consistently and routinely. That's why they went to the tomb that morning to anoint Jesus' body with spices. It's what you did for those who came to visit the deceased. You

masked the odor of a decomposing body with good-smelling spices. So, we should not be surprised at the less than relieved or celebratory response of the women.

If we think about it, we understand something about how these women feel. How often have we thought that the death of someone was so unfair, especially those close to us? How often have we lamented the death of someone who didn't get the justice they deserved? We are witnesses ourselves to the relentlessness of death. Our hearts cry out about the injustice of so many dead in Ukraine, the killing of unarmed people in our communities, and all those who succumbed to Covid before we had a chance to fight it. We live in a society so offended by the injustice of death that our answer to it is more death. I can't tell how many times I have had to entertain the justifications for the death penalty as the answer to injustice. We don't expect miracles in the face of death, and part of our response is figuring out ways to cope with it. So, the divine message that "he has been raised; he is not here" doesn't penetrate. The two Marys and Salome are beholding God do a new thing. Unbeknownst to them, they are witnessing God manifesting and operationalizing God's reign in real time. God is bringing justice to the whole order. They do not complete the call and response so familiar in our Easter liturgy with "He is risen indeed." The power of death made them impervious to words of divine consolation, revelation, and command.

In that graveyard, with the announcement that Jesus had been raised, God reveals what God thinks about not only what happened to Jesus but also about death. There is something about God's character and God's vision of justice. God sees, hears, and knows about suffering. God promised that God would do something about injustice, about oppression, and about death. On the night before he was executed, Jesus celebrated the Passover with his friends and recalled how God answered Israel's cries for liberation with freedom, life, and justice. And God's answer to the oppressive, dominating, destructive force of death is justice. Resurrection is God's act of justice against the powers. Resurrection is not God's word about immortality; it's about justice. Resurrection is not about God's approach to metaphysics; this is about God's righteousness. Resurrection is not about God giving us life after death; this is God's confrontation with, resistance to, and vindication of death. Focusing on the history or the science of resurrection won't add or subtract from our confession that God's answer is always justice. God refuses to call it quits. There is no "the end." There is no end to Jesus' purpose and mission. This is not a time to go home and assume that the powers will always win.

So, every Easter, every encounter with the empty tomb, and every celebration of the resurrection is our acceptance of God's answer to death. After we get past our fear, shock, and silence, we come face-to-face with the new creation God promised. Our future is wide open, and death can't stop it. When God reveals God's answer to death, what is left for us to do? The divine messenger commands the women, "go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." It is up to us to follow that command. The ongoing purpose and mission of Jesus, who goes ahead of us, is our purpose and mission, too. Our life of discipleship is not to pursue immortality, life after death, or a faraway heaven for life everlasting, but to bear witness to God's reign, God's resistance and confrontation with death, God's refusal to let death be the last word, God's determination to do justice.

So yes, we celebrate the resurrection, but we also embrace the work that comes with being Easter people. We resist and confront death and the world's death dealers with the confidence that justice is God's answer. We go and look for Jesus in Galilee, for his purpose and mission require our witness, our followership, and our willingness to go where God leads. History and science can only take us far when the true revelation of resurrection is a word against the menacing inevitability of death. The Latin American theologian Jon Sobrino best described the injustice of death when he concluded that we live in "a world of crosses." Death remains a weapon wielded against God's beloved creation, but we need not fear it because God has answered. God's answer is always justice.

Because the world is captivated more by the normalcy of civilization than by the radicality of God's grace; because empire's greed, violence, and oppression are unrelenting; because the world has been too quick

to accommodate war, slavery, and genocide often in the name of God; because the world is unable to embrace the love and light incarnated in time and history, Jesus did not get justice on Good Friday. God's beloved who were born and died in slavery and poverty did not get justice. The casualties of every war of aggression for land and abundance did not get justice. All of those African souls who died on the Middle Passage to these shores to satisfy the desire for free, enslaved labor did not get justice. Every soul who was lynched, disappeared, or massacred for doctrines of Discovery and Manifest Destiny and Christian hegemony did not get justice. The children in Columbine, Sandy Hook, Parkland, and countless other schools and neighborhoods taken from us because of gun violence did not get justice. All of our trans siblings murdered because of who they are did not get justice. All those unarmed people killed by those called to protect and serve did not get justice. But very early on the first day of the week, when the sun has risen, God answered their deaths, not with immortality, not with life after death. No, God responded with justice, that vindication of the lives of Jesus and anybody else ground down in the death-dealing, broken world. I don't know when we will see them again, but their tombs will be empty because God vindicates them. When God intervenes, and God will intervene, it will not be to rapture anybody, not populate some mythical heaven, not confer upon faithful people the heavenly equivalent of a lottery payout, but to bring them justice.

We shouldn't judge Mary, Mary, and Salome for their fear, amazement, and silence. We don't have to worry that their fear, shock, and silence interfered with the spread of the good news. Death is an inevitable, menacing reality that broke their hearts, but it couldn't stop God's justice work. It didn't stop Jesus' purpose and mission. Because God's answer to death is justice, a purpose and mission thought to be over continues. A gathered community thought to be dissolved and disintegrated will be reconstituted.

And we are the inheritors, bearers, and disciples called to resist and confront death and follow Jesus as he makes the reign of God known. That's why we leave the tomb and go to Galilee. That's why we follow Jesus. After we leave the graveyard, it's up to us to finish the story. That means we have to go where God can be seen. We have to go to the places where death is wielded with reckless and merciless abandon against the vulnerable. We have to go where death will insist on its prerogative at the expense of justice.

Awake and celebrate that God's answer to death is always justice. Awake and celebrate that Jesus goes ahead of us to witness God's reign. Awake and celebrate that the designers of death, separation, and alienation have been revealed incapable of thwarting Jesus' purpose and mission. The cross and the grave couldn't do it. We need not fear that there is no hope.