

Trust Resurrecting

April 5, 2015

Mark 16.1-8

Rev Kimiko Karpoff, diaconal minister

Sabbath is over. Three women are together, Jesus' friend Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of his friend James, and Salome, another of his disciples. They buy perfumed oils. They want to go to the tomb and anoint Jesus, to care for him as was their custom when someone died. It is the third day after Jesus' crucifixion.

Imagine how exhausted these women must have been. Not simply tired, but that deep seated exhaustion that comes with grief, that comes with lack of sleep, that comes as anger and frustration seep away to be replaced by bewilderment. You know that exhaustion that sits in the joints of your bones, too deep even for sleep to get at. And yet, this is important for them. In Galilee they had followed Jesus and cared for his needs. (5.41) They would not neglect him now. So they go and buy oil.

Early on Sunday, just after the sun breaks the horizon at about 6:15 in the morning, the three women carry their precious oils to the tomb. Walking, of course. They're going, even though they don't know how they're going to get in. They know that the mouth of the cave-like tomb will be covered with a huge stone, too heavy for them to move. As they pick their way down the path, they ask each other, "who will roll the stone away?"

It's such a practical question. "Who will roll the stone away?" It's a practical question, but also a difficult one. Because really, do they want to see what's in the tomb? Do they really want to see their beloved friend and teacher wrapped in burial linens? Do they really want to ask for help from the people who put him in the tomb?

As the tomb comes into sight though, they are even more shocked. They expect to see the entrance blocked by the large round stone. But it's not. The stone has been moved and the open doorway stares back at them.

And so, they go in. And there sits a young man dressed in a white robe. Now the scripture does not say who he is. But the description of him as young, the white robe and his words to them "Don't be alarmed," which echo the words often spoken by angels, "Do not be afraid," leads many to believe that he, too, is an angel. Whoever he is, he seems to know a lot.

"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth," he says. "The One who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him." And, of course, when they look there is nothing there. There is no body.

Then he gives the women a message for the disciples and Peter. Tell them "Jesus is going ahead to Galilee, where you will see him just as he told you." Tell the others, he says.

But they don't tell. They are so bewildered, so afraid, that they flee and say nothing to anyone.

You know, Biblical scriptures, as story or written record, are really thin on the details. The scripture doesn't tell us anything about these three women, really. We know that they were among those who followed Jesus and not much more.

But these women had to have a lot of moxie. At a time when women were expected to stay at home and did not get involved in public affairs, they followed Jesus, an itinerant preacher. At a time when women would mostly have interacted only with other women, or men from their own families, they travelled with other disciples and looked after Jesus.

And then, remember, that after Jesus was taken away, other disciples were going out of their way to distance themselves from him. But the women were there at the crucifixion, watching. (15.40) They watched as Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus' linen-wrapped body in the tomb (15.47), something that people would surely have noticed and noted. They went to the public market, looking for someone who would sell them expensive perfumed burial oils. And then, confronted by his inexplicably open tomb, they walked in.

So you know these are women with grit. They faced public scrutiny and possible danger.

They must have been some scared to run away like that.

Now, we have the benefit of looking at the resurrection from the other side, from the side of 2000 years later after the unfolding has happened. Now it has been debated and theologized and retold and picked apart. Each of the four gospels has a different version of the events that we know as the passion and resurrection of Christ and we can even choose the one we like best, if we want to. We are not frightened by this empty tomb and the news that Jesus has gone ahead. For us this is good news. But for Mary and Mary and Salome, deep in their grief, it was unfathomable.

We can imagine how difficult it must have been for his disciples to lose the human, corporeal, here-he-is-having-supper-with-me Jesus. He was right there to answer questions, to teach, to reach out, to heal.

The presence of Jesus brought the sure knowledge of the kingdom of God right there. His absence made it seem like everything was gone. They couldn't yet see the resurrection, they didn't understand what this new reality would mean. They hadn't realized that, to some degree, they had been living in the new reality already. Jesus had already sent them forth.

We are here at this moment again. I think we are at this same place in the western, North American church. We see the fading away of this familiar, nurturing, supportive institution that we call church. And we cannot fathom life without it. But my own experience tells me that the same Holy Spirit that carried Jesus into resurrection is alive and active in the world and resurrection is already happening. Of course it looks different.

Like Mary and Mary and Salome we look into the empty tomb that is our changing church and we are bewildered. When we hear that the one we long for is not dead, but waiting for us--somewhere else, in a new form-- we want to run away. We just want what we had. Like them, we don't have the ability to look into the future and know, really know, that it'll be ok. But unlike them, we have the example of the resurrection to let us know that it will. [Perhaps you can remember moments like this in your own life.]

The world is spiritually hungry. And when I look around, I see that hunger, *and* I see the rise of movements responding to that. Some might look familiar to us as churches. But many don't.

The Simple Way in Philadelphia is an example of a new monastic community where people live simple lives together in intentional, Christian community, AND also immersed in their neighbourhoods. While this is an American example there are communities emerging in Canada such as Chiara House in Winnipeg.

The Heartwood Cafe in Vancouver is a cafe and community space owned by Trinity United Church. They bill themselves as "a queer-friendly neighbourhood cafe that nourishes the spirit of social justice and liberation. (They) are a fully licensed restaurant that serves delicious local and fair trade dishes." They are also a church with services on Sunday afternoons.

Movements like Spirited Social Change reach out to people who are spiritual but not religious. The Charter for Compassion¹ initiated by Karen Armstrong calls on everyone to live with compassion.

1 Karen Armstrong. *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*. [Toronto:Vintage Canada, 2010]
<http://charterforcompassion.org/>

I love the story I read recently about the Broadway United Methodist Church in Indianapolis.² They have experienced a renewal by, as they describe, turning the model of the urban church inside out. They did this by killing off all of their outreach programs. The food pantry, clothing ministry, after-school and summer youth programs, all gone. They've let charity die and instead entered into relationship with people in their neighbourhood. They recognized that they were not called to fix people, but to be good neighbours.

Christ is both alive and needed. The compassion of Christ is needed, we are needed. Yet in the same way that the disciples were used to the presence of the human Jesus we have become used to a model of church that is relevant to fewer and fewer people. The Holy Spirit is calling us out into the world, away from the tomb.

Christ is waiting for us there. Christ is waiting for *us*, his disciples, to continue his ministry in a world that longs for good news, for meaningful relationships, for spiritual sustenance. This is not just good news for the world but also for us. An empty tomb means something new and amazing lies ahead and we need not be afraid.

In the book of Acts, the Acts of the Apostles, we get a glimpse into what happens after the resurrection. We watch the disciples struggle with what it means to continue to live Christ into existence, what it means to move beyond the bounds of the faith in which they were raised. It is the Apostle Peter who has a vision of new inclusive food laws that open the faith to non-Jews. Even Peter was shocked by this, but the visions continued. God wanted change, wanted the people to move beyond their confines.

The continued existence of Judaism shows us that change does not mean that everything will be gone, only that something new will emerge. We are direct beneficiaries of the new thing that happened back then.

We are poised in a new Easter moment. It is our turn to trust resurrecting. Not resurrection, something that has already happened at some distant time and place. This resurrecting is for us to live through. The empty tomb means that Christ is already risen. Jesus has left the building. He's waiting for us on the road. We need not be afraid.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

² <https://www.faithandleadership.com/death-and-resurrection-urban-church>