

Great Vigil Sermon, 2021.

Mark's exceptionally strange Easter story may be exactly what we need to hear on this exceptionally strange Easter. We have read it after moving through the whole history of salvation, from creation and Abraham's mad almost-sacrifice of Isaac, and then the deliverance of God's people from slavery and pursuit, the universalism of God's saving work, the resuscitation of what has become dry and dead, and the gathering of God's renewed people in the last day. We've come a long way in a short period of time, seeing God's constancy through our naivety, madness, oppression, divisions, and death. And then we come to Easter, which we have greeted with noise and music and great cheer. But what Mark actually gives us ends not in pleasure and joy, but in terror, amazement, and silence.

This is not the Easter of pastel-colored dresses and seersucker suits. Nor is it the raucous joyous party that I usually prefer. The resurrection is still the greatest possible cause for joy, but terror, amazement, and confusion are prominent, too. It's irresistible to think about this moment in our lives, when the hope of the vaccination campaign is vying with the fear of rising infection numbers. I, for one, sometimes wonder if I'm becoming hopeful about the trajectory of the pandemic mostly because I've run out of despair. We are in a moment where joy and terror, hope and confusion, are bombarding us simultaneously. We are in, perhaps, exactly the right place to hear Mark's gospel without the Peeps brand headphones that so often muzzle our experience of Easter.

The women who were Jesus' most faithful followers come to the tomb not to celebrate, but to grieve. And in Mark's gospel they do not encounter the risen Lord, but an empty tomb. They encounter a gap, a hole, an absence where they expected to find their grief. They find a young man who gives them good news they cannot yet hear, and sends them, along with the less committed men and even Peter the denier, back to Galilee. A gap where we expected to put our grief, good news that we can't yet hear, a mission where we expected to mourn: these things might indeed end up coming out as terror and amazement. These things might send us away afraid and silent.

What do we do with this strange Easter story in this strange year? I think that first: we take the reaction of Jesus' most faithful followers as permission to feel what we are feeling. Maybe all we can feel right now is exhaustion, even as spring and new life are bursting forth all around us. Maybe we're angry at we don't even know who for the fact that we are still where we are. Maybe we are fully on board the hope train and no amount of scientifically based doom and gloom can shake our expectations for what life is about to be like. The way we treat each other, I hope, is not that dependent on how we currently feel. And so if the people who knew Jesus the best, who trusted him the most, responded to news of his resurrection with fear and confusion, maybe we can just let ourselves feel how we feel. We don't need to add to our long list of obligations having the emotions that someone else thinks we ought to have.

But also, grief and hope won't look the way we expect. The God of life is full of surprises, and we simply cannot map out in advance our sorrows or our joys. God is always bringing life out of death, making the old new, raising up what was cast down. But we don't automatically know what that looks like. Salvation can surprise us so much that we are harrowed with fear and wonder. Being terrified doesn't for a moment mean that we are not being saved.

And finally, the risen Jesus is always out ahead of us, further down the road than us, waiting in the place of mission for us. While we walk slowly towards our past, carrying our grief, he is waiting for us in the place of need, ready to comfort and commission us. The faithful women don't just receive good news. They are sent. And so are we. We may be terrified and

amazed, alarmed and afraid, exhausted and sad. But we are also sent with the words of hope to a world that has not known the love that makes alive again. God's love burst open Jesus' tomb and will burst open ours as well. This is the love and hope that we proclaim. Amen.