

“Missing Easter”
Text: Mark 16:1-8
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“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Mark 16:7

Several months ago, I received an invitation in the mail that unsettled me. It seems that, whether or not I want to admit it, *five years* have passed since my college graduation. That’s right, the time has come for my five-year reunion. The prospect of returning for the event has produced in me a complex set of feelings: excitement and anxiety, self-confidence and self-consciousness, curiosity and the subtle though perceptible onset of adolescent angst. Going back to a place that was home during such a formative time in your life, this is an exercise fraught with emotional danger. Perhaps Thomas Wolfe’s pithy title is right: *You Can’t Go Home Again*. Too much has changed. Going back is difficult, demanding, tiresome work. And yet, we do go back. We have reunions, homecomings, family trips to the places that hold our roots. There is, it seems, a need within us to return, to remember who we are and where we have been. I go back not only to recapture the good old days, when the Duke basketball teams were on top of the sports world, but also to retrieve a part of myself there.

Each year during Holy Week, my mind returns to the Rare Book Room at Duke’s Perkins Library, where each year Professor Reynolds Price would read his English translation of the Gospel of Mark. It always takes place on the Wednesday before Easter; the night before the beginning of Passover, perhaps the last night of undisturbed rest for Jesus and his disciples. It takes almost three hours for Professor Price to read the entire story in a translation that remains true to the rough, common Greek of Mark, but the time is well spent. Mark’s story is mesmerizing to hear aloud in one sitting. The narrative moves swiftly from the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, through his ministry of healing and teaching in Galilee, and then slows as he approaches Jerusalem and the dramatic week leading to his crucifixion. The stories of the Last Supper, the prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, the arrest, trial, and crucifixion are difficult to hear, ending with a crucified Jesus laid in a borrowed tomb. The next paragraph begins with promise: “Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb as the sun was rising.” *Easter at last!* But those expecting pure joy are destined to frustration. The translation ends with these words: “Going out they fled the tomb—they were shuddering and wild—and they told no one nothing for they were afraid.”¹ At this point, Professor Price would close his book and, with a knowing glance, nod to signal that it was time to go. Silence filled the room as, slowly, the stunned audience exited onto the dark campus.

They said nothing to anyone, and Mark’s Gospel ends. As early as the second century editors would add to the discomfiting ending, as you will see in your Bibles. But not Mark, his abrupt ending is intentional. Because Mark knew that the final stroke of his

pen was only the beginning of the gospel story. In fact, that is the title Mark gives his book in the first verse—the beginning of the good news. You and I are here to worship the Risen Christ. Almost two thousand years after that silent Sunday morning, we have come to make a joyful noise to the Lord, to clear our throats, raise our voices, and boldly proclaim the resurrection in word and song. Churches all over the globe are filled with the sounds of celebration on this Holy day. The resurrection message, the promise of new life in Christ, has made the journey from the empty tomb to our filled sanctuary; it is a path that goes directly through Galilee.

When the women arrive at the tomb early on Easter morning, they find the stone rolled away and a mysterious young man dressed in a white robe. Yes, the man announces that Jesus has been raised. But he does not linger on this point; immediately, he urges the women to go and tell his disciples that Jesus has gone ahead of them...to Galilee. Though the gospel account closes in silence and fear, we who have come to worship this morning know that the story did not end there. Something happened to the disciples, and it happened in Galilee. Galilee, where the ministry of Jesus began with his baptism. Where Jesus taught and healed and called his first disciples. Those same disciples are commanded to return to Galilee, to go back home. There they will see the risen Christ. There the story will continue.

The message of the unidentified young man in the empty tomb is Mark's message to us. If you stay too long in the tomb, you will be missing Easter. If you remain in the place of death, you will miss the new life that has already gone ahead of you. Tell his disciples (Peter, James, John, Mary, Salome, Martha...all of us) that he has gone ahead of you to Galilee. There in Galilee, in their hometown, the disciples find the strength to proclaim the resurrection. It begins at home, this world-changing mission. It happens in the ordinary, dusty town sixty-five miles north of Jerusalem where a young carpenter named Jesus had lived. It happens where we live—on the streets of our city, in our offices and homes, in hospital rooms and government halls, in gardens and on subways.

The good news of this Easter morning is that Jesus Christ is always going ahead of us; always ready to meet us in the places where we are. This means that the great challenge of Easter is to go back to Galilee and begin the work of new life— because the ordinary, common, routine world has been transformed.

In the church where I grew up, Easter began early. My father, a pastor, would come into my room in what seemed the middle of the night and ask if I still wanted to go. Even though what had seemed like a wonderful idea only six hours ago now had very little appeal, I would always get up. The sunrise service (and the breakfast that followed it) happened once a year and I wouldn't spend the next eleven months regretting that I had missed it. When we arrived at the church, my father and I would begin moving chairs out onto the church lawn. The busy intersection of Vandalia and South Elm-Eugene was always deserted as we began our work by the glow of streetlights. Before long, members of the church began to arrive, many carrying blankets for the cold seats. The service began with a hymn. Almost no one sings well at 6:00 in the morning and yet we sang with gusto. Jesus Christ is Risen Today. For my father's sake, I would love to say I

remember every word of the sermon. But my attention was on the lawn, which was transformed by the rising sun. Soon, we could see the outline of trees surrounding us. Later, we could see one another's faces. As the sun crept over the tree line, all that surrounded us was illuminated, including the wooden cross on the lawn, bare for six weeks, now covered with fresh cut flowers from our homes and yards. The symbol of death now covered with signs. Transformed as the sun rose before us. We sat in the same seats on the same churchyard, the same stoplight changing from red to green, and yet the space had been transformed. To this day, I cannot wake up on Easter morning without thinking of that sunrise service, that transformation early in the morning.

Somewhere along the way, the earliest Christians, our ancestors in faith, made the decision to worship not on the Jewish Sabbath, though many were Jews, but on Sunday, the day of resurrection. In the ancient world, Sunday was the first day of the workweek. And yet, the early Christians insisted on worshipping that day, each Sunday a mini-Easter, each Sunday a reminder that routines had been upended and lives transformed by the power of God that brought Jesus back from the grave and all the way to Galilee. An ordinary, workday morning transformed into a celebration of new life and possibility and hope. The church finally determined that silence was not an option; the time has come for us to renew their pledge. Amid crumbling markets and anxious times, in the midst of uncertainty and despair, we must choose proclamation over silence yet again.

Here is what we might we say: Because of Easter, true joy and lasting peace are everywhere. Because of Easter, the good news of resurrection extends to every part of our human lives. Because of Easter, the power of God is loose in the world and can find its way into the every crevice of our lives. Because of Easter, we know the healing love of Jesus Christ cannot be contained by the powers of sin and death but has broken free and now saturates all of creation. Because of Easter, even the Galilees where you and I live and work have been transformed. In the glow of resurrection light, you can hardly recognize the places and people you thought knew.

Once, there was a man who had a dream of a heavenly city where everything was perfect. Weary of his own life, he decided to go in search of his heavenly city of his dreams. Gathering what few belongings he had, he set out on his journey. All day long he walked. And as he walked, he had but one thought: the heavenly city of his dreams - how perfect it would be when he arrived. All day long he walked with this one thought until evening came and he had not yet arrived at the heavenly city of his dreams. He decided to make camp right where he was. Taking out his crust of bread, he gave thanks to God and ate his crust of bread. And then just before he went to sleep, he took off his shoes and he put them in the path facing them in the direction that he would continue his journey the next day. And, then, the man went to sleep.

Little did he know that in the middle of the night, a trickster came along, picked up his shoes and turned them around, facing them back in the direction from which he had come. Early the next morning, the poor man awoke. Taking out his crust of bread, he

gave thanks God, ate his crust of bread, and then he walked to the path, and found his shoes. The man began to walk in the direction that his shoes were facing. All day long he walked, and as he walked, he had but one thought: the heavenly city of his dreams and how perfect it was going to be when he arrived. He walked until it was almost evening.

He looked off in the distance and he saw it! The heavenly city of his dreams! It wasn't as large as he thought it was going to be, and it looked strangely familiar. The man walked until he found a strangely familiar street, and he turned down the strangely familiar street, and he walked until he found a strangely familiar house. And he knocked on the door, and when the door was opened, he was greeted by a strangely familiar family. The man went inside and lived happily ever after in the heavenly city of his dreams.ⁱⁱ

A transformation. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. The risen Son of God goes ahead of us, to Galilee. To the places where we live. If you don't want to miss Easter, the secret is to go home and go on. The most difficult part of discipleship will never be coming to church (though we are certainly glad you have come). If you stay too long in the sanctuary, you will miss Easter, which is already in front of you. The summons of Easter is to go home, to go back to Galilee and to see it for what it truly is. Illuminated by resurrection power, overflowing with possibility. To return to your everyday life, with all its disappointments and frustrations and sorrows and see it for what it truly is. A gift freely given by God, an opportunity to find meaning and purpose. The challenge of Easter is to accept the most startling and sturdy truth that we can know: that in Jesus Christ we too have been resurrected and given a new chance. It happens right here and right now.

Don't be surprised if everything looks different when you walk out of the sanctuary this morning. Don't be surprised if you feel yourself renewed and revived. Don't be surprised if you sense restoration and resurrection. Don't be surprised if everything ordinary has suddenly become extraordinary. Don't be surprised by the glow. Jesus Christ, our Lord, is risen. He has come to us. He goes ahead of us. Rise up, summon your strength, he is going ahead of us to Galilee. Let us run to meet him there. Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Reynolds Price, *Three Gospels*, New York: Scribner Press, 1996. p. 124.

ⁱⁱ A version of this story appears in William R. White, *Stories for Telling: A Treasury for Christian Storytellers*, Minneapolis, Augsburg Fortress Press, 1986. pp.92-96.