

April 26, 2020

“Jesus Is On the Move”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Mark 16:1-8

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Today, I thought I'd share with you a little running joke my husband, John and I have had over my years in ministry. Typically, it happens at 4:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings in the summertime because I have to be prepared for the 7:30 a.m. beach service. During the rest of the year, it happens at 5:30 a.m. on Sunday mornings because we start our worship services an hour later. The alarm clock goes off, but there's no movement on John's side of the bed. I wait a moment and then whisper, “Honey, it's time to get up.” There's no response, just silence. After another moment I repeat, “John, it's time to get up.” Then there's a groan and I'll get this response, “I think I'll sleep in this morning.” Then I say, “You know, Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. Jesus is going ahead of you to John Wesley.” And with that, without any further delay, John pops out of bed. And we both laugh.

Now why would that be? Why would that phrase, “Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee” provide John or, any one of us for that matter, the necessary impetus we might need to get up and get the day going and do the Lord's work? Well, I think because it implies that Jesus is on the move, and he expects us to follow. Not to sleep in, but to follow him. “He's going ahead of you, just as he told you.” Everything Jesus did, he did with a purpose. He knew he would come back from the grave and would return to Galilee. And you see, this is really the Easter message. As Bishop Will Willimon states, “the most relevant message of the resurrection for us today is not, ‘though we die, we shall one day live.’ No, it is, ‘though we were dead in our sins, Jesus has returned to us.’ Jesus has come back to us. We thought perhaps, with all the betrayal and blood of Good Friday, it was the end. We thought it was over between us and God. We had finally gone too far, by torturing to death God's own son. But then on Easter, he came back.”¹ He came back to us, and he's on the move, on his way to Galilee, waiting for us to follow.

So let's look closer at today's Scripture and see what it has to say to us. Well, the most obvious thing is: Jesus is, indeed, going to Galilee. Now he could have stayed in Jerusalem, you know, and had a “come to Jesus moment” with both Pilate and Caiaphas. Most of us would probably like to see that. I know I would. He could have gone on to Rome or Washington DC and explained to Caesar the way things were going to work from now on. He could have done that, but he didn't. Instead he's going to Galilee,

¹ To Galilee, W.H. Willimon

that seemingly nothing of the backwater region of fishermen and farmers and small business owners. Why? Because Galilee is home for Jesus and his disciples. And so, Galilee is a metaphor for where we are living right now, home, in Falmouth. Galilee is where COVID 19 is affecting our lives and our way of living. It's where our children and grandchildren are asking, "Is the virus over yet? I want to play with my friends." Galilee is where people are without work and can't pay their bills. It's where everyone is anxious about the future. It's where some of our older people are alone and afraid. And so Galilee is where we must go to confront our day to day realities. But here's the thing. The joy-filled, hope-filled message of Easter is the promise made to us that not only has Christ returned, but he has gone ahead of us, so that we might have loving arms in which to fall when we arrive.² The comfort of this passage is that Jesus is with us in Falmouth.

But there's more to this scripture that's important. Mark tells us that the angel attending the tomb told three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, the good news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. In fact, all four Gospels record that women were the first to receive the news that Jesus was alive, and they were instructed to tell others. Now to comprehend the significance of that, you have to understand that women of that period were considered to be unreliable messengers. They couldn't even testify in court because their word wasn't good enough. Women had very few rights, and were subservient. There's even a blessing Jewish men would recite saying, "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, ruler of the universe, who has not created me a woman." So you see, women were marginalized. Yet all the Gospel writers, all of them men by the way, report that it was the women who were given the honor of passing on the best news ever told. The very best news ever told, that "Jesus was alive." So God obviously gave women a high standing, affirming that they are worthy. And I think that's a good lesson for us today. To consider all those marginalized by this crisis. Because they too are worthy. Small business owners with no customers, those who are out of work, grocery clerks, warehouse workers, delivery people required to do difficult jobs, those battling mental illness and addiction during these times, and immigrants and their families who do so many of our menial jobs that don't exist anymore. You see, this is an opportunity for us to share the good news with them. To lift their spirits, to show support. By doing things like saying "thank you for being here" to the clerk in the store, or sending a hand written note to someone, or making a phone call, or running an errand. Order take out and leave a little extra tip. And for those of you who find the stimulus check a windfall,

² Brian Purfield, Thinking Faith, Jesuits in Britain

perhaps give away some or all of that money to help someone else – I know many of you have done that already. So think hard and pray about what you can do for those marginalized by this crisis.

And there's even something more to today's scripture. Some of you might be thinking, it's just easier and more convenient to do nothing during this pandemic. And safer too! After all, that's the message we hear through the media. Separation and isolation. But the danger is that once we get into that frame of mind, we can become overly anxious and afraid. And that kind of thinking can go too far, believing the Lord's work can be put on hold. But consider what is described here. The angel told the women, "Go and tell his disciples, and Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee." And Peter! You see, it's significant that Peter was singled out by name. Because despite the fact that Peter was one of Jesus' most trusted disciples, look at what Peter had done during a major crisis that happened just a few days earlier. He was afraid, and because of that he effectively, did nothing! Nothing... and even worse. Because, again, all four Gospels describe how Peter denied Jesus during that terrible time. In fact, Peter's denials progressed from one spoken to a maid, then to a maid plus a bystander, then to an entire crowd. His denials progressed from just a plea of ignorance, to a denial plus an oath, and then to cursing and swearing and a total denial that he ever knew Jesus. It was only when the rooster crowed did Peter realize that Jesus had predicted those three denials. And the Bible says, "Peter wept bitterly." All this from a disciple with whom Jesus had a personal relationship. And here again is another wonderful lesson. Because once Peter heeded the call and went to Galilee, what happened? There, Jesus asked him three times, "Do you love me... do you love me... do you love me? Then tend my sheep. Tend my sheep." Peter, who had publicly denied knowing Jesus and being his disciple, is now forgiven. And not only forgiven, but entrusted to now be the rock on which Jesus Christ's church is built. And that meaning is meant for us as well. We are to "tend the sheep" and build the church. Even in the midst of a pandemic. This is a time when people are questioning their lives, their priorities, their purpose, their life choices. So maybe this is a time to reach out to your unchurched friends. To be bold, and maybe invite them to our livestream service. Forward one of my "thoughts for the day" that you find particularly meaningful. Offer to pray for them – specific prayers, and then do it. Talk about your struggles and frustrations, and how your faith is getting you through this. Yes, Jesus is on the move – and this is a new way for you to build his church right now. You see, being a disciple is both life-giving and it is challenging. To be a disciple does not mean we have to be exceptional, it means we have to be faithful and bold and smart, in these difficult times, during this difficult crises. We cannot do "nothing."

A favorite theological question that has been asked over the ages is, “Describe the Bible in just one sentence.” My favorite has always been, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.” It still is, but now as we go through this pandemic, I have a second favorite. “In the Bible it gets dark, and then it gets very, very dark, and then Jesus shows up and goes ahead of me to Galilee.” Amen.