

**Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV with my translation of parts of verse 8)**

*The Resurrection of Jesus*

*(Mt 28.1—10; Lk 24.1—12; Jn 20.1—10)*

**16** When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup> They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” <sup>4</sup> When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup> But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup> 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.” <sup>8</sup> So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and utter consternation had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

## Shaken Witnesses

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Mark 16:1-8

The game was over. The coach entered a sullen, utterly quiet locker: "I just want you guys to know that I am real proud of the way you played this afternoon," he said. "Real proud. We didn't win, but we did prove to a lot of people what we could do. It was a moral victory."

On the way out that evening, with autumn sky now dark, the second string tackle turned to the quarterback and asked, "What's a moral victory?"

The quarterback said, "It's what a coach tells you when you lose the game."

If you can't fool a seventeen year-old football player about failure, who can you fool? When the scores are read on the 6:30 sportscast, nobody ever talks about "moral victory." They tell you the scores, and the teams with the lower scores are simply the losers. No "moral victories."

There's still many who will be heard to say, "It's not who won or lost, but how well they played the game." And in some situations that may be true. But we live in Vince Lombardi culture. Lombardi was realistic enough to know that, for the most part in our world, winning is the only thing. A coach remains a coach only when the win-loss record is in his favor. Imagine this. The corporate president stands up before a drooping sales graph at the annual meeting. He says to the shareholders, "Well, we lost six million this year but we're calling it a moral victory, a year of character building for our company." A week later, there's a new name on the front door.

Failure. It's that sinking emptiness in the stomach when you look down the list of grades on the exam. There are your initials. At the bottom. It's that physician, returning from the operating room, "Well, we did everything we possibly could." It's packing up and moving from the house to separate apartments, packing last the book of wedding pictures that won't be viewed again because they're too painful. Failure. Defeat.

What to do with defeat? One response is cheap rationalization: It was a moral victory<sup>1</sup>. I remember, as a just ordained pastor, entering the home where a man in his early thirties had just died suddenly and unexpectedly. His brother met me at the door with a fierce look on his face. That look, far better than any words, said, "Preacher, don't tell me how 'he's better off now,' or 'he's in a better place' or any of that other stuff. He's gone!" He knew. He wasn't up for any preacher-talk. Moral victories. His brother was gone.

So. The tomb on Easter morning. The end of the story that Mark gives us. So abrupt and inconclusive. Do we find here that death has been gratuitously papered over by the spin doctors? A moral victory?

The story is open to the charge. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and

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<sup>1</sup>Up to this point the sermon has been largely based on a sermon by William H. Willimon, "Failure," in the March 30, 1997 issue of Pulpit Resource, pages 51-54. Paul Neuchterlein also quotes it in April of 2000.

Salome come to the tomb that morning fully aware that Jesus is dead. They are greeted by an unexpected sight. The stone is rolled away. Jesus' body is missing. A young man dressed in white tells them that Jesus is risen. The only evidence is the missing body. The women leave in fear, presumably to proclaim Easter. Hardly conclusive. Hardly convincing. The missing body could be explained in a hundred ways, a hundred ways easier to swallow than resurrection.

Matthew's Gospel (28:22f) anticipates one of the possible explanations. Pilate orders a guard for the tomb because the Pharisees worry that someone will remove Jesus' body and claim that he was risen just as he had predicted. They said that the last fraud would be worse than the first.

So, have the spin doctors given us the best we can get in the face of defeat? Is what we have a moral victory, which translated means no victory at all?

Let's look at the options, the options for the whole story of Jesus, the options the women and the disciples saw for themselves, and the options maybe we see for ourselves, too.

Option one, highly preferable, was that Jesus wasn't crucified at all. Option one would have been that Jesus put the powers and principalities to their knees. Jesus would have won. His opponents would have lost. James and John would have gotten their seats in the kingdom of heaven. Herod would have gotten his comeuppance. Option one was what most of those who followed Jesus were in it for. With the suddenness of a head-on collision option one evaporated. It was over in the flurry of events of Thursday and Friday – arrest, trial, shouting crowds, crucifixion and burial, all in less than a twenty-four-hour period.

That left them with option two. Option two was something they had all seen before. They knew its contours. Defeat, death. Option two was the disciples who left Jerusalem on the road to Emmaus, mourning because they had hoped for so much from him, but they ended up disappointed instead. Option two was the disciples huddling and hiding behind locked doors, afraid the authorities would find them. Option two was Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome going to the tomb to anoint the body. Option two was to face the known but odious outcome of death and defeat. It's worth noting that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome weren't opting for another option that was really no option at all, let's call it option two-A, the option of moral victory. They were headed to the tomb to perform the duties for the dead. They had accepted option two.

Then it gets complicated. The stone's rolled away. The body's gone. There's a mysterious young man there. All of a sudden all the options are back in play.

If this is real, if the body isn't stolen, maybe option one is back. He isn't dead. They didn't defeat him. He's going to win after all. Look out Rome. Look out Pharisees. Get those seats in heaven dusted off, say James and John. We're coming home. We're back in business. Get the lilies and tulips on the platform. Let alleluia echo across the plain and against the hills. Victory is ours. O how good and pleasant it is to actually win. No death. No second-rate moral victory. Read aloud and with gusto those great Davidic Psalms of victory where our enemies are crushed and we shout for joy.

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and utter consternation had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

I don't get it. Do you? The women were fully prepared for option two, death. Like the others they had always hoped for option one, victory. And now it seemed they didn't have to

settle for death, it seemed like option one had been restored. Why terror and utter consternation? In fact many Bible translators have tried to bend the Greek to soften the effect, to make the women's seem more in line with Easter celebration. Many translators say the women left in trembling and astonishment, as if it was the majesty of the moment that sent them away. But the text actually says that terror and utter consternation had seized them. Terror and utter consternation.

What did the women see, what did they see that sent them away seized by terror and utter consternation? Clearly, neither option one or two would have done it. They had wanted victory, and they had already made peace with defeat. Surely a prettied-up option two, a moral victory, wouldn't have terrorized them, either. But something shook the very foundations of their being.

There is one other place in the Bible where someone fears the way the women at the tomb did. In that wonderful story in Genesis when Abraham is told that to him and Sarah, both well beyond child-bearing years, will be born a son, Isaac. Sarah laughs in the tent. The text also says that Sarah was afraid. Sarah was afraid because all of a sudden she was faced with a future that is, as James Alison says, "totally uncertain and quite different from anything [she] could have imagined." [James Alison, *Raising Abel*, 160] A child in her youth would have been fine, option one. No child past the days of childbearing was a kind of defeat, but something Abraham and Sarah had come to accept, option two. But a child now, breaking all expectations and known possibilities, meant that everything was up for grabs.

The Greek of this text in the Greek version of Old Testament is so unusual and so similar to the Greek of Mark's description of the women at the tomb that it is unlikely to be accidental. Alison summarizes the point nicely,

The stone put aside and the absence of the corpse were not in the first instance a motive for rejoicing, but for terror. Terror because what had happened was quite outside anything that could be expected. ... Terror because now there was no security, no rules, nothing normal could be trusted in. And worse, terror because everything difficult and frightening which Jesus had taught had to begin to come about: he went before them, as he had told them.

Whatever Christian hope is, it begins in terror and utter disorientation in the face of the collapse of all that is familiar and well known. [Alison, 161]

Christian hope is not like the hope that I had that my cold would be over in a week or two, the hope of an ending I could pretty much count on. [see Alison, 166] Christian hope pulls the rug out from under the very things we tend to hope for and count on most, two of the most significant of which are victory and death, options one and two.

What does this different, disorienting, confounding, at first bluish terrorizing hope actually look like? What option was put forth to the women at the tomb on Easter morning?

"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," says the young man in the tomb.

The greater part of Jesus' ministry and teaching took place in the region of Galilee. And now, at the end, those who find the tomb absent of Jesus are told to spread the message to return to the Galilee, for Jesus would go there before them. The women, and through them the disciples and we, are instructed to return to the Galilee. In a sense we are instructed to go immediately to the place where we began. Do not pass go; do not collect \$200; start over again.

But we are to do it with a difference. The first time through we and the disciples did not

hear what he meant. We boxed him into the two possible outcomes, victory or death. But now we return with the world of our possibilities both shattered and enlarged. We are rightly shaken, even terrified, for to hear his teaching without the constraints of our two known options is to hear words that carry us deeply and irrevocably into a wilderness we have never traversed. They ask us to live in a way that in our normal frameworks makes no sense.

Follow me and I will make you fishers of men. And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone. Your sins are forgiven. If any person would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. He who has ears, let him hear. Daughter your faith has made you well. And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Quite clearly, preaching in the Galilee, Jesus did not preach victory. Indeed, he preached something that at first blush looks a lot more like defeat, which as you recall, caused Peter to cry out in objection. It takes a closer look to see it for what it really is. In some sense, we never can fully get it.

The Easter message, the message of Jesus in the Galilee, is that we are to find our hope in living as though there were no death, no defeat, no victory either. When everything tells us that victory and defeat are the currency of the realm, we are to live as though they are false. Suddenly we are freed to live as though it's not about us. That is, we do not live in any hope that we ourselves can construct, but instead we live in a hope that depends on a rupture in the system, a door opened where all seems closed, a door opened where we least expect it, perhaps where we least would want it. By Easter we live in the hope of a break, a fissure, a rupture in the system, a rupture that we know will probably scare the living daylights out of us, and that will be nothing we could have described or foreseen. Unlike the hope I have to get better from a cold, a pretty safe bet, this Easter hope is to hope for something so far from our known reality that to encounter it can only cause us to at first know terror and consternation as it wrests from us all we thought we knew. But believe this, believe this. When you find yourself shaken, like the women at the tomb, when you are seized by terror and utter consternation, believe that it is Easter you are peering into, believe that it is the Galilee you are being invited to journey into, believe that you are glimpsing a promise more real, more magnificent, more true than any of the ones for which you have been inclined to settle. When this happens to you, step toward the Galilee. He has gone before you. There you will see him. Amen.