

April 5, 2015 / Easter Sunday / David L. Edwards

## Practicing Resurrection

Mark 16:1-8 *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

The presence and power and love which we call God is not, finally, an idea, or a doctrine, but a reality we can touch and put into practice, toward ourselves, others, and the world. To me, that is the meaning of faith, not believing things that are hard to believe, not being attached to religious doctrines. Faith is trustfully living the life for which we were created, the life Jesus taught, embodied, and awakens in us. That is what I mean by the word “practice”, and this is what our community is about, and has been from its beginning. Our beliefs, ideas, understandings will be diverse, and, I hope, always changing and growing. What we agree on and commit ourselves to as members of this community is the practice, the living out, of our faith in the inward and outward journeys of prayer and service.

Today as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, I would like for us to consider “practicing resurrection.” Not the resurrection as some supernatural event, but as God's power of new life that we experience as we endeavor in the life of faith. Practicing resurrection would mean that we live in such a way as to open ourselves to this power of new life.

Mark's resurrection story is simple and unadorned. Let us look at it in terms of what it might say to us about practicing resurrection. In all four gospels, women are the first witnesses to the resurrection. This is very radical. In those days, that culture, women did not have the legal or social status to serve as witnesses to anything. We see continuing today efforts to discount the status of women and their testimony to life. Women were very close to Jesus and were among his first followers. Mark knows that the inner circle of men never really got what Jesus was about, what he was trying to teach and show. At the end, all of them fled for their lives. Only the women continued to follow, even being present at Jesus' crucifixion (Lk. 23:49; Jn. 19:25). Perhaps Mark is reminding us of Jesus' words, that the meaning of his teachings would be hidden from those who pride themselves on their intelligence or position, but revealed to the least and lowliest (Matt 11:25, for example). It is our devotion, open hearts, and trusting spirits that enable us to touch the mystery of resurrection, not our social or religious status.

The women rise early in the morning to take spices to anoint Jesus' body, an expression of their love for the one who was their friend and teacher. On the way, it dawns on them that they won't be able to push back the heavy stone that seals the grave. Yet, they keep going. Why keep walking when the journey might be for nothing? So many times I have slowed my pace on this journey of faith when I thought of some stone up ahead that seemed too big for me to roll away. I see some inward or outward obstacle to the thing I feel called to do, blocking the way of my desire to be loving, or forgiving, or serving. At times I expend my energy imagining stones up ahead that aren't really there! That's called worry and anxiousness. I go on ahead, carrying my load of dread, or fear, or sense of futility. Sometimes, sure enough, there is that stone, the thing I feared, big as a mountain. Sometimes it isn't removed, but even that has something to teach me. Sometimes it is rolled back, or not as immovable as I feared it would be. And sometimes, quite often, in fact, the stone I feared would be there simply didn't exist in the first place!

These women walking the road, with no idea how they will accomplish their deepest desire...this is what it is like to live our lives as a journey of faith. We feel called to do something out of our love for God and desire to follow Jesus, and we just keep moving on, step by step, not knowing how it will be accomplished. Or we become aware of something in ourselves that feels like an immovable stone blocking the way to living more fully, freely, lovingly. If we are going to practice resurrection, it means that we keep on the journey, even when we do not have the answers or know exactly how we will do what we feel called to do. We keep going, trusting that a way will open somehow and in some form we cannot know beforehand. We remain open when the way seems closed.

The women find the stone rolled away. Inside the tomb they see a young man, robed in white. The women are "alarmed" at what they see--the stone rolled back, the empty grave, this odd young man. This word (*thambeo*) is very strong. It means a profound amazement, to the point of being overwhelmed and disoriented. It is more than merely being surprised; it is a feeling of deep disturbance because of something you did not expect, something that has to do with the scared depths of life suddenly opening up, something that rocks your world.

The young man tells the women not to be alarmed. These words are spoken often throughout scripture. Do not be afraid. Peace be with you. The opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. I wonder if fear is not the basis of most of our struggles? If we work with acknowledging, not condemning, our fears, and understanding them, they lose their hold on us. We become open more and more to the deeper peace God speaks to our hearts. We grow in our capacity to live trustfully. We become more ready to experience resurrection, new life.

We all have fears. Practicing resurrection includes practicing peacefulness and calmness as we work with our fears.

The young man tells them that Jesus is not in the tomb because he has been raised up. He is going on to Galilee, as he had promised, to meet up with his followers. The women are instructed to go and tell Jesus' disciples all of this, especially Peter. Another strong affirmation of the status of women--they are the ones to teach the men what is going on!

Why is Peter singled out? Because Peter needed special attention. Peter, the most precocious of the disciples, ended up flatly denying his association with Jesus when it threatened his safety (14:66ff). Here is God's special concern for the one who seemed to have been the greatest failure, the greatest disappointment. God is not interested in blame or punishment, or our ideas of success and failure. God does not want us to sink into our sense of failure, of falling short. That always bothered me as I grew up in the church. It made no sense to sit around feeling bad about our sins, the things we had done wrong. Those are real enough, and we need to be aware of them. However, what I heard in the Jesus story was the pouring of forgiveness and love into us so that we could get up and follow, so that we, too, could rise up from our deadness and really live the way God made us to live. What a difference it would make if we devoted our spiritual energy to letting go of shame, guilt, our sense of failure or deficiency, instead of constantly rehearsing our sins and shortcomings! What a difference it would make if we paid more attention to letting go of self-preoccupation and allowed ourselves to move on to where Jesus wants to meet us and continue the journey! This, too, is part of practicing resurrection--being willing to move on, to leave our tombs of fear, guilt, self-preoccupation.

The women flee the tomb "seized by terror and amazement". And they don't say anything to anyone. The word terror in the Greek is *tromos*, which means "trembling". I think it is the word from which we derive the English word "trauma". A traumatic experience leaves us trembling in shock. The word for "amazement" is *ekstasis*, from which we get our English word ecstasy. Here it means the kind of amazement resulting from an experience that we cannot explain and that deeply stirs us. So the women are trembling in fear and filled with "spiritual amazement", awareness of a presence and power that is beyond them. This is a very good description of our basic spiritual disposition as people of faith.

This is where Mark's gospel originally ended. In our Bibles we have other endings that were added much later, probably to soften what seemed to be too abrupt an ending, or to add something more edifying. I like where Mark ended it. He doesn't wrap everything up for us. He doesn't try to dazzle us with glorious pictures of the risen Christ. Mark's ending leaves

things unfinished and open. I think Mark knew that there is more to the life of faith than lofty endings that leave you warm and fuzzy, having all the answers and no more struggles.

He is not here. He goes before you, to meet you in Galilee. There is this always-going-on nature to the life of faith. It is not a once and for all matter of finding “the answer” and then settling in for the rest of our lives. It is like the women walking the road, not knowing how they will be able to express their love for Jesus with a huge stone in their way. It is like finding that stone removed, but then stumbling onto the mystery of death becoming life, suffering turning into joy, endings unfolding into beginnings ... the mystery of the sacred dimension of life. And our journey of faith is always moving on toward where Jesus will meet us, where we will find the living Christ. In the places where we feel he is calling us to be and to serve. The ministries and missions to which we have been or will be called. He will meet us here in our midst as we work with our commitments to be with one another in a community of his love and service. He will meet us in the persons to whom he is leading us or who are led to us, those we are to help and who will help us. He has gone on ahead to meet us in the persons we are and are becoming through the work of our inward journey, as we become aware of and sometimes struggle with the birth, or re-birth, of our true selves.

So, in the end, I think Mark’s story of the resurrection is about living the resurrection, never knowing when or where we are going to find new life just when we expected there would be only death or dead ends. I think it is about doing our best to live the life Jesus taught and lived, even when it seems to make no sense or seems hopeless, and finding from time to time, in our experience, that it truly is the way of life. I wonder if living the resurrection is not about recovering or re-discovering the kingdom of God, life the way God created it to be lived, a life so contrary to so much in the culture in which we live. For me, that is what the crucifixion and resurrection story is about these days: going through the struggles, the challenges, the deaths that open us and lead us to life as God created it to be lived, for us and for the world. When we are on that journey, we will always experience along the way resurrection, God’s power of new life.

I like the way the Kentucky poet and farmer Wendell Berry put it a poem entitled “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front”. I will share just a few lines:

*So, friends, every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord.  
Love the world. Work for nothing./Take all that you have and be poor.  
Love someone who does not deserve it.../Be joyful  
though you have considered all the facts....  
Practice resurrection.*