

“It Ain’t Over!”

Our twin grandchildren, Gavin and Lydia spent last weekend with us. They are delightful, ridiculously well behaved kids who sat through the entire Palm Sunday service without making a peep. I doubt that even I could do that! Later that day, however, Gavin’s three-year old inquisitiveness put Sue on the spot. “Grandma, did you know that Lydia and I were in Mommy’s tummy?” “*I did,*” Sue said. “*I remember how big your mommy was, and I could hardly wait to see you.*” “Grandma?” Gavin asked. “How did we get inside Mommy’s tummy?” After a reflective, *pregnant pause*, Sue did what most grandparents in that situation would do. She said, “I don’t know,” Gavin. “Your mommy is a doctor. *Why don’t you ask her?*” Gavin replied, “I did. She said she doesn’t know, either.”

We know what happened to Jesus on Friday. He was scourged, dressed in a purple cloak and crowned with thorns. We know Jesus was paraded through the streets of Jerusalem and then outside the city walls to a hill called, “The Skull.” They peeled the cloak from him like skin off of a grape. They nailed his wrists and feet to a cross and hung him between heaven and earth as an example of what happens to people who mess with Rome. He died sooner than most. His bloodied, broken body was pried off the cross, wrapped in a linen shroud, and laid him in a tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea. This we know.

We don’t know how Jesus came back to life. He died in public. What happened at pre-dawn on Sunday was private. Perhaps thousands witnessed the crucifixion. Not a soul witnessed the resurrection. It was a private, personal encounter between Father and Son behind a closed door. This is all we know.”

“Grandma, how did Jesus get out of the grave?” “That’s a good question. I don’t know, exactly. Why don’t you ask Pastor David?” “I did. He said he doesn’t know, either.”

More people flock to church on Easter than any Sunday. Whether they are conscious of it or not, they come to draw near to mystery. They come with their jaded, cynical outlooks that have been made that way under the suffocating weight of the world. They come with us on Easter, clinging to a shred of hope that maybe this Easter they will hear a faint whisper-- *“It’s not too good to be true.”* We’re are after an answer to an eons-old question, “Is there such a thing as life after death?”

Peter Gomes, the former chaplain at Harvard said, “We might want to be colleagues with Jesus and masters of the knowledge of God, but we are not, and the more we are reminded of that, the better. [In the resurrection] we confront a mystery that confounds the world and our own capacity to understand and contain it...” (Peter Gomes, *Sermons*, page 224)

We live in a day of learning more and more about less and less. The longer I live the more humble I become. What I know is eclipsed by what I don’t know. But I can tell you what I DO KNOW about today and the bearing it has upon life here and hereafter. I know that our redeemer lives! God granted Jesus another life and will do no less for us. The punctuation of Easter is an exclamation mark. No matter how final life’s verdicts seem, Easter sings, “It ain’t over.”

In a scene near the end of Franco Zefferilli’s film, Jesus of Nazareth, the high priest, Caiphas talks with a temple official. Jesus is dead, entombed, and his grave is under Roman guard. The official expresses relief that their ordeal is at last, over. Caiaphas, however, is not relieved. He says, “We have unleashed something powerful. *It isn’t over. I fear it is just beginning.*”

The powers of darkness did not have the last word. But after reading Mark’s version of Easter, we might wonder. We love stories, especially those that begin, “*Once upon a time,*” and

end, ***“And they lived happily ever after.”*** We want the villains to get their due. We want the little guy vindicated. Give us Gene Autry singin’ a song and ridin’ into the sunset. Give us Indian Jones in possession of the lost treasure *and* the pretty lady. Give us neat, clean resolutions. Give us the mystery dissected and decoded.

You won’t find this in Mark’s Easter story. The women ran from the empty tomb, **“in great trembling and astonishment; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.”** The End. Not very satisfying, is it?

Most biblical scholars agree that verse 8 is the original end to the gospel. The earliest manuscripts of Mark do not include verses 9 through 20 that record Jesus’ resurrection appearances. These were added years later by a scribe writing in a style quite different than Mark, and includes strange stuff that Jesus never mentioned like, handling snakes, speaking in tongues and drinking poison. The scribe apparently didn’t like the conclusion. Maybe he thought the “Jesus movement” would be better served with a better ending.

“He is risen. He is not here,” the young man at the tomb told Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salo’me. ***“He is risen!”*** What news could be better? But, they were terrified, and ***“...said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.”*** In Greek, Mark’s last word is ***“gar,”*** which translates in English as ***“for”*** or ***“because.”*** So Mark actually ends, ***“They were afraid because...”*** Because? Because why? Because of what? Did Mark run out of ink? Did someone yank him away in mid-sentence? ***“They were afraid because...”*** Not much here to persuade future converts. What a lame way to run a resurrection!

Mark has something more in mind than giving compelling evidence and face-to-face encounters. In his gospel, faith is not founded in indisputable evidence. Faith is founded upon what Jesus said. Last Sunday I told you that Mark used a method of writing that necessitates re-reading. Why did the women zip their lips? It doesn’t make sense -- until you back track. The man at the tomb said, **“Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going**

before you to Galilee; there you will see him, *as he told you.*"
(Mark 16:7)

The majority of Jesus ministry took place *where?* In Galilee. Mark mentions Galilee several times. In 14:28 Jesus said, "But after I am raised up, I will go before you *to Galilee.*" Each time Jesus predicted his passion, he mentioned his resurrection. Climbing down the mountain where he was transfigured, Jesus told Peter, James and John not to tell a soul what had happened until *after the resurrection.* By itself, Mark's conclusion is not good news. "It's over. Everybody go home and think twice before you follow the next prophet who comes along." But go back and read it again from the beginning. The second time through you'll start to see. The resurrection is a part of a much bigger story that ain't over until God says its over. In the beginning of his Gospel, Mark says, "Jesus came from Galilee pronouncing the good news of God." In the end the women are told, "Tell his disciples they will see him where it all began-- in Galilee."

If it is irrefutable, forensic evidence of Jesus' resurrection you're looking for, you've come to the wrong church. We stress something more important than fact. We call it faith. Jesus didn't leave us with empirical proof. He gave us something better... his word. He told his disciples (that would be us), that he has gone north of Jerusalem, where hungry and hurting people live. That's where you'll see him -- in Galilee, and Gainesville, and Grand Forks, and Gettysburg.

Can you recall a time you heard yourself say, "*It's over.*"? Maybe you said it when you learned you are among the millions who have been told, "You are no longer employed." Maybe your marriage derailed and you had little hope of getting it back on track. Maybe you received a cancer sentence and found yourself caught in a quandary over whether the odds of recovery outweighed enduring the sickness of the treatment. Maybe you said good-bye to a loved one far too soon, and the void that was left was so painful you doubted it would ever end. Did you ever think, "It's all over?"

I remember one of those times. Our daughter was fifteen years old, going 500 miles an hour on a road of self destruction. She was doing all the wrong things with the wrong crowd and was flirting with the law. The cheerful, creative daughter we once knew was gone. She vacillated between giving us the silent treatment and treating us like pond scum. She shut herself in her room for hours. When we held her accountable for her behavior, she flew off into a rage that once was so severe we had to call the police to take her to the hospital. We tried everything we could to help her. We spent hours and hours in counseling, but no one was getting through. If we didn't do some kind of intervention, we feared we would lose her.

After consulting with her therapists, we made a heavy emotional and financial decision to send her to a school in a remote part of Utah that specialized in working with kids like Lisa. We could not tell her she was going. We secretly packed her suitcase and made sure she was home at 4:00 P.M. on a Saturday afternoon. An escort couple flew into South Bend, rented a car to Elkhart, and knocked on our door. They told Lisa who they were and why they had come. She flew into a rage like we had never seen. We were given two minutes to give her the reason for our decision and to say good-bye.

She had no idea that she would spend the next year at the foot of a mountain range that was seventy miles from the nearest town. Our tears flowed like rivers. My heart was shredded. I never felt as helpless as I did when that car pulled away. I died that Saturday afternoon. What do I do? What do I say? Try as hard as I could, I couldn't shake the feeling of despair. I felt like it was all over. I heard myself telling God, word for word, the same thing my father said the moment my sister died. *"She's in your hands now."*

I had to preach to you the next morning. You were the last people I wanted to face, and you were the only people I could face. Church was the last place I wanted to be, yet I knew church was the only place I could be. I blubbered out a few sentences about what happened hours before, and then there was an arm around my shoulder. It was Don Mumaw, holding me up.

The door to the eternal opened a crack in that moment I felt something. I was flooded by the love I had for my daughter. I knew I loved my church. I knew I loved God, not for what God would do for me, but for simply being God and being there. I had no idea how things with Lisa would work out. There were no guarantees -- just Easter -- just the faith that the story of Jesus and his love goes on and on, and that it is enough to get us through whatever life puts on our paths.

Last Sunday, *before* Gavin asked the question that neither his grandmother nor mother could answer, he said to Sue, “*We’re going home and I won’t get to hear the happy story.*” In Sunday school Angi told the kids about Palm Sunday and the “sad story” of Jesus passion. Angi said, “Come back next Sunday I’ll tell you the happy story.” Gavin took it to heart. He couldn’t come back. He didn’t want to be left holding the sad story. He wants to hear the rest -- the part where Jesus is raised from the dead, and the story keeps going -- to Galilee, and to you and me, and those who have yet to hear it. Christ is risen!