

April 1, 2018  
Mark 16:1-10  
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## **“Victim to Victor”**

**Good morning! Christ is risen! (Christ is risen indeed!) Thank you -- I just like to hear you say it. I don't think we can say it too often today. As I was preparing this sermon, I found myself going back to the same resources where I have gone for the past two years to look for Easter inspiration: not to the library or to online commentaries -- which would undoubtedly be helpful -- but to Google images. I know that there's a lot that can be said about Easter, and I'm not going to try to say it all this morning, but for me, resurrection is not so much an intellectual, rational set of doctrines as it is an experience which goes beyond words. I cannot explain the physical, biological mechanics of how the resurrection happened -- and even if I could, it still might not convince you. Resurrection is in the realm of faith, and part of faith is living in the light of what we cannot fully explain or fully understand.**

**So year after year, I find myself drawn to search images of the resurrection in order to find one which speaks to me. It probably won't surprise you to know that there are many more historical and contemporary images of the crucifixion than of the resurrection, and crucifixion images tend to be much more specific and graphic. This makes sense -- we know what death looks like; we know that people die, sometimes in violent ways. We know what death looks like; we see it all the time, whether we want to or not. But only one person has been resurrected, and that happened out of sight of his followers: only angels or young men dressed in dazzling white robes were witnesses to the resurrection event. The rest of us have to take their word for it.**

**Looking at images of the resurrection is a delightful way to prepare for Easter -- I would recommend it to anyone. There's a great variety**

**of styles and different artists focus on different aspects of the story. I want to show you a couple of my favorites, and end with the one which best illustrates my message today. If you forget my words and remember only these images, it will be enough.**

**I'll give you my personal criteria for a great resurrection image: it should be colorful and dynamic -- there should be motion or something happening. That means a lot of the images from inside an empty tomb don't do much for me: they're too static. I also think a good image leaves something to our imagination.**

**[Slide 1 Stained glass] I like all of the color in this stained glass, but I also like that it tells a story -- not just any story, but THE story. From creation on the far left to communion and the triumph of the Lamb at the right, the story has the cross at the center. There's not a specific image of the resurrection or empty tomb, but that is part of this story. There's a lot going on, even though none of it is actually in motion.**

**[Slide 2 Wayne Pascall] This is my favorite Easter image to date. This is a very different medium: an oil painting by Wayne Pascall. Although the view is from inside the tomb, there is still a lot of color, and the figure of Jesus seems to be running out into the world. I love the impressionist style of this image, which suggests what the scene may have felt like, rather than giving us a literal, photographic image.**

**[Slide 3 Crowns] This image, for me, shows the transformation from the crucifixion to the resurrection, from victim to victor, which is where I want to focus this morning. And I need to say, in all honesty, that neither victim nor victor are terms which I am entirely comfortable with: this is a growing edge for me in my understanding of Jesus Christ.**

**I chose to use the resurrection text from the gospel of Mark, partly because we have been using Mark's gospel through Lent, but also because it is the resurrection story in its simplest form. In fact, the original text of Mark 16 ended at verse 9, with the disciples being afraid. I think that's a legitimate response, given the political climate with the Romans, the religious climate with the Sadducees, and what they had just seen on Friday. The crucifixion -- not only what it meant to Jesus, but also what it meant for the hopes and dreams and**

physical safety of the disciples -- would have been very much on their minds.

Nobody wants to be a victim -- not then, not now. Some people are pushed into that role, and some people slide into it to get sympathy or to manipulate others, but I don't think any of us would encourage a child to say, "I want to be a victim when I grow up!" To be a victim is to be hurt or even killed by forces beyond your control. Things like automobiles, floods, or political regimes. Victims may be innocent or they may not be innocent, what makes a victim is that they lack power or lack ability or lack agency. Nobody wants to be a victim, and maybe victims deserve our pity, but sometimes they get our scorn. "What was he doing there, anyway?" "What did she think would happen if she was dressed like that?" Even when we are part of the problem -- especially when we are part of a system which victimizes others -- it's easier to blame the victim than examine our own responsibility. This is *exactly* what happened to Jesus when he was beaten and mocked and spit on by Roman soldiers. It's so much easier to pick on someone weaker than you than it is to be honest about beating and spitting on a defenseless man.

Here's what's hard for me: If I feel like someone is picking on me, my first instinct is to stand up and fight back. Especially if I think I'm right -- and I usually think I'm right-- it takes a huge effort not to come back swinging. What to do with that impulse to strike out, take revenge, hold on to the injustice of how other have wronged me. This crown of thorns is a reminder that Jesus chose not to fight back; He was innocent -- not only innocent, but entirely blameless -- something I've certainly never been. Jesus was innocent, and he had power. He had the power of forgiveness, strong enough to conquer that impulse to fight back and lash out and curse those who hurt him. He actually forgave soldiers and religious leaders while they were unjustly executing him. He the whole host of heaven-- power beyond even the mighty Roman Empire and its legions of soldiers. But he didn't use that power -- at least not on Friday. Why would Jesus allow himself to be a killed? To be a victim? Why would God allow that to happen?

I think the answer lies in the other half of this picture. If the victim is the crown of thorns, the victor is the crown of the king. That is the Easter Sunday half of the picture. I said earlier that I'm uncomfortable

with being a victor as well as with being a victim. I'm sure this is the legacy of growing up in faith tradition which teaches non-violence. I like to win, but I worry that me being a victor will make someone else a victim: if I win, someone else will have to lose -- I get stuck in thinking this is a zero-sum game: my victory will mean suffering for someone else.

I'm here to tell you that the kingdom of God is not a zero-sum game; Jesus Christ changed that equation. I realized this partly through my study of Celtic Christianity and the Celtic view of Christ. The Celtic lands where St. Patrick brought the message of Christianity were not very civilized -- certainly not by Greek or Roman standards. There were lots of separate clans led by local chiefs or warlords who were fighting with one another for localized control. They had never had any kind of centralized administration and couldn't agree to be ruled by a single king. The thing which ultimately united all of these factions, without bloodshed, was Christianity. How? Unlike countries in Europe, no one forced the Celts to accept Christianity by putting a sword to their throats. They didn't have to choose Christ or become victims. The Celts converted to Christianity because they recognized that Christ was the king of kings. And in their experience being a king was the same thing being a warrior--being a successful warrior -- the warrior who won. The Celts valued military strength, skill and courage in battle, and they recognized that Jesus was the only human being who was strong enough to accept the challenge of the cross and to confront evil and death and win that battle. Military imagery was built into the Celtic view of Christ: think of the verse of the hymn Be Thou My Vision which begins "Be Thou my buckler, my sword for the fight." Christ is the warrior who fights with us in our battles, and Christ is victorious.

The image of Christ as a warrior, as the Victor is one that I am still learning to understand and to accept. I do not believe other people have to be victims in order for Christ to be victorious. The sword of Christ was wielded against evil and death, not against unbelievers, sinners, Pharisees, or even those puny Roman soldiers. By allowing himself to be a victim-- even though he was innocent and powerful and could have taken control -- by allowing himself to be a victim, Jesus surrendered his need to fight back. He conquered the evil which needs to meet violence with greater violence. Christ broke the

power of the zero-sum game which demands an eye for an eye, or that makes it OK to take revenge because someone has hurt us. Christ's victory means *anyone* who believes can have victory over death: the disciples who deserted him, the Roman centurion who realized at the foot of the cross that Jesus was God's Son, the apostle Paul who persecuted Christians until he became a believer himself. Saints and sinners like you and me. The grace of Jesus Christ can transform anyone who recognizes that they need it.

Here is the crux of Easter for me: we are both victims and victors. We rise with Christ who has conquered death and evil -- that's what we celebrate today and that promise is ours every day. But we can't rise until we have been crucified with Christ; until we have broken the chains of believing we can save ourselves: because saving ourselves is a death sentence. We cannot win the battle until we have experienced powerlessness and accepted that all of our own gain counts as loss, and the most precious thing we have is something we cannot earn and do not deserve -- the grace of Jesus Christ. Only then can we understand and experience what it means to be victors with Christ.

This, friends, is good news. It is the best news that there has ever been, and it's why we are here today. It's worth traveling the path to the empty tomb to see that Jesus is not there -- Jesus has won. Forever. It's even more important to turn around and walk away from the tomb, through this chancel and out those doors. There's a world of people out there who need to hear that news that Jesus is alive and Jesus is victorious. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Halleluia.