

Marquand Chapel
April 17, 2006
Easter Monday (Year B)

Beginnings from Endings
The Rev. Kate Bryant

Psalm 16:8-11, Mark 16:1-8

Please pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable to you, O Lord. You are our rock. You are our redeemer. Amen.

It feels more like an ending than a beginning.

Today, Easter Monday, that is. It may be the start of a new liturgical season, the Great Fifty Days of Easter, but somehow Easter Monday feels more like an ending than a beginning. When I describe the Holy Week I experienced, I think you'll understand why.

From the Palm Sunday reading of the Passion narrative; to walking the Way of the Cross on Monday; to chanting Tenebrae on Tuesday; to a Seder dinner, foot washing and stripping of the altar on Thursday; to leading the Good Friday evening service; to assisting with baptisms and preaching yesterday, Easter Sunday...I feel like I competed in the spiritual equivalent of a marathon, crossing the finish line yesterday in a one big rush of adrenaline.

Looking around the chapel this morning, I sense that I'm not alone in feeling that way. Many of us seem to be suffering from a syndrome all too common among church leaders--post-Easter exhaustion. The symptoms are there. Allowing our fatigue to overtake the exhilaration we experienced yesterday at celebrating Christ's mighty resurrection. Giving in to a huge sense of relief that eight straight days of carefully planned and well-executed liturgies are over. It's easy to see why we might succumb to the temptation to consider the day after Easter as more of an ending than a beginning.

But then again, these days many of us seem increasingly preoccupied with endings.

I know I am.

I'm thinking about all the work I have to get done between now and the end of the semester. About spending time away from school to interview at parishes and discern a call. About preparing to welcome my bishop for a visit here during, of all times, reading week. About making time to say goodbyes. The frenzied, stress-filled and anxiety-laden ending of this semester just isn't what I had planned for these few remaining weeks at YDS.

But like the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, many people's stories feature unexpected plot twists and turns, often with unanticipated endings. Endings for which there is no preparation. Endings beyond our control. Endings that provoke reactions of surprise, even shock.

Classmates hoping to be accepted into Ph.D. programs who are unexpectedly rejected. Students whose paths to ordination are abruptly detoured or blocked. People in our community who face unexpected illnesses, or deaths, expected or not.

These are among the regular events of life, but to those who experience and witness them, they are anything but normal. They are frequently surprising and often profoundly painful. Sometimes they are even shocking. And often our first response to endings like these is fear.

In the Gospel reading from Mark, the women at the tomb experience their own unexpected ending. They go to the tomb, planning to anoint the body of the crucified Jesus, perhaps drawn unconsciously by what God will reveal to them. Instead, they receive a message. “He has been raised!” Their normal ways of thinking are torn apart. Shocked by the awe-inspiring message of Jesus’ resurrection, they flee, “for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Fear is a very human response to those times when people are confronted with God’s direct intervention in human history. We’ve seen this response before in Mark’s Gospel, a reaction of terror and awe at the revelation of God’s activity. People are “astonished” at Jesus’ teaching and “amazed” at his power over unclean spirits. And fear is the reaction of the women at the tomb to the great revelation of God in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus.

“Afraid,” the final word in the NRSV translation of Mark’s telling of the resurrection story, often takes readers completely by surprise. It just doesn’t fit with an understanding of Easter morning as a day of alleluias. A day of rejoicing. A day of new beginnings.

But perhaps Mark chooses this ending to suggest that we are meant to experience fear and terror *so that* we can participate in the awe and wonder of resurrection.

Unless we grasp the fearful and terrifying reality of God’s revelation in the resurrection of Jesus, we cannot begin to grasp the awesome, wonderful and transformative effects of that divine intervention.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Mark tells us, Jesus was “distressed” and “agitated.” Yet Jesus realized that he could not turn from the way of the cross. To do so was to stand in the way of God’s activity. Jesus was faithful and obedient, even to the point of death. And through that faithful obedience, reality was transformed. Death no longer triumphs over life, but now holds life within it.

God freely and lovingly offers new life to those who are open to this awesome and wonder-filled truth, and embrace it with faithful obedience. The psalmist today sings of the one who has “set the Lord always before me.” Those who trust in the Lord experience the stability, gladness, joy and hope that death cannot touch (Psalm 16). They experience the transforming force of Christ’s resurrecting love.

But resurrection cannot take place without crucifixion and death, without those moments when our most prized and valued possessions, our sense of purpose, self-worth, our dreams, are shattered. When those relationships which seem to make our lives most worth living are blown apart. When we face our own confusion, disappointment and pain, the choice is less complicated than we might realize. We can choose to live a life of fear and terror, defined by endings and death. Or we can discover within those moments a source of transformation in the power of resurrection, defined by new beginnings and new life.

For centuries, we have celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ because we have witnessed and experienced the transforming truth of God’s gift of new life. But the force of resurrection is not confined to the past. It’s around us and in us now, in those moments when God and new beginnings break into our life stories.

We can't explain it. We can't predict it. We can't control it.

But we can see it. We can embrace it. And we can celebrate it.

The signs of resurrection are all around us if we look. It's in God's shaping new lives for those of us accepting calls to parishes and congregations after long, frustrating and sometimes painful periods of discernment. In God's creating new beginnings for those scholars who, having experienced the disappointment of rejection, have discovered new and unexpected vocations. In God's taking on our pain and our disappointments and giving us a sense that we are not alone, and that, as illogical as it may seem, beginnings can come out of endings.

We may be afflicted with post-Easter exhaustion this morning, but that doesn't mean we are immune from God's promise of transformation. God's force of resurrection is incredibly powerful, taking the pieces of our lives and fashioning them, in surprising, joyous and awe-inspired ways, into something new and completely unexpected, something beyond our imagination.

And on this Easter Monday, no matter how tired we may be, *that* is worth celebration and rejoicing.