

April 12, 2009, Easter
The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
Mark 16:1-8
The Gift of Easter

It's Easter – the day of resurrection! We expect to hear scripture about how the risen Lord appeared to his disciples in all his resurrection glory. That what happens in Matthew, Luke and John. But the original text of Mark ends at verse 8, with the women running off in fear and no risen Christ in sight. It's not what we expect.

When the famous preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick was just a young pastor, he was a last-minute substitute for a very well-known preacher who'd become ill. The man who introduced Fosdick went on and on about the preacher originally scheduled to be there. Then, almost as an afterthought, he said, "But we are fortunate to have young Harry Fosdick here today in his place!" Fosdick stepped into the pulpit and said, "I am reminded of the time I was traveling and saw a banner spread across the Main Street of a small town. It read "Annual Strawberry Festival." Beneath it was a smaller banner: "Due to the drought, prunes will be served."

We expect something bigger and grander from the end of Mark's gospel. The women discover an empty tomb, but that only increased their anxiety as they assumed it meant someone had disturbed the grave of their Lord. The women encounter an angelic messenger who offers words of comfort, but they do not see Jesus. Out of terror and confusion, they simply run away. As readers of Mark's gospel, you and I are left with the question: What happens next in this story? Or more importantly, we're left with the question: If the gospel characters are silent about the good news of Jesus' resurrection, what are we going to do with the information told by the heavenly messenger that first Easter morning?

To answer these questions, I want to talk about a related topic with help from a book by Lewis Hyde called The Gift. Gifts are wonderful things. They can be an expression of love, a way to bring happiness to others, and a chance to show heartfelt gratitude. Almost all cultures have rituals associated with gift-giving; but not every culture has gift-giving as a fundamental value. Let me give an example.

Gifts are things whose true value lies in their use, in being given. The spirit of a gift is kept alive when one person receives a gift and then passes on a gift to someone else. But the spirit of a gift is destroyed once the chain is broken, once a gift becomes a possession that is hoarded away. Imagine this scene from back in the days when the Puritans landed in Massachusetts. An Englishman enters an Indian lodge and his hosts, wishing to make him feel welcome, present him with a beautifully-carved pipe. According to their custom, the gift of the pipe was a peace offering, which was intended to be passed around as a gift when tribal leaders visited different tribes. But in this case, the Englishman loves the gift pipe! He thinks it would be nice to display it in the British Museum, or better yet, to have it mounted over his own mantelpiece at home.

Time passes. The Englishman is eventually visited by leaders from a neighboring tribe, who upon entering his home look for a welcoming gift. The translator suggests that they should be offered a smoke and then given the gift of the carved pipe hanging over the mantelpiece. The Englishman is horrified. He invents a phrase to describe this flawed sense of private property, calling his visitors “Indian givers” because it seems they only give things out of the expectation of getting something comparable in return. But from the Indians’ perspective, we are called “White Man Keepers” (or better yet capitalists), because our instinct is to remove things from circulation – to put them in a museum or a bank vault or mount them over our mantelpiece as our private possession.¹

The gift must always move. Even if a particular present is kept, something of similar value should move on and be given to someone else. In that way, the spirit of the original gift continues to spread out in an ever-widening circle of generosity. In this way the social value far exceeds the practical value of the gift. For nothing disturbs the true spirit of gift-giving as quickly as trying to hoard what has been freely given, or worse yet, to control the process by calculating the precise value of what is given and received.

The story is told about a woman who said to her husband one morning, “I’ve had the strangest dream the last two nights in a row. I dreamt you gave me a string of beautiful pearls for our anniversary.” The husband smiled and said, “Tomorrow you’ll understand your dream.” The next day he handed her a box and said, “Happy Anniversary.” The woman opened it and pulled out a small book titled “The Meaning of Dreams.”

The gospel of Jesus Christ, especially the Easter story, is a gift – a gift in the truest sense of the word and a gift we are meant to keep passing on. First, the Easter resurrection was a totally unexpected gift. Despite Jesus’ predictions about rising from the dead, his disciples did not treat that as a serious option. And the women heading to the tomb early Sunday morning asked one another, “Who’s going to roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb?, clearly anticipating to find Jesus’ corpse in the same spot they’d left it on Friday. The empty tomb was a total surprise, a gift that overwhelmed them as soon as it was given.

Second, this gift was never meant to be possessed like a commodity. It was meant to be told and shared, not hidden away. That is what is so striking about the ending of Mark’s gospel. The angel says to the women, “Jesus is not here; he has been raised.” In effect the angel hands them the Easter gift and says “Go and pass this gift on to others.” But the women clutch the package to their chest and flee into the early morning light, keeping the greatest news in the history of the world as their own personal possession out of fear and confusion.

The worst thing for any church is to treat the gospel as her own private possession. We were never meant to horde the gospel gift. We were never meant to control who can receive this gift, to define who can hear these words of promise and who cannot. Yet how many times in our history have we done just that? How many times have we built churches and then quickly established the seating charts, the pecking orders, and the arbitrary rules of church etiquette. “OK, it’s Easter Sunday: The wealthy get the pews in

the front, the poor get the seats in the back; immigrants wait until you speak fluent English, blacks sit in the balcony, gay and lesbians stay out on the sidewalk, Episcopalians stop kneeling, Catholics stop genuflecting, Pentecostals keep your hands to yourselves.” To a commodity culture, that makes sense. But it is not scriptural and it is certainly not in keeping with the spirit of the gift of Easter.

The resurrection gift is meant to be received gratefully and then passed on joyfully and uncritically, with hilarity and spendthrift generosity. The Easter gift is symbolized by the communion table, to which all of you are invited – all of you without exception, not because we do not have any standards but because it is in the non-judgmental sharing of this meal we discover the real standards of the gospel. The Easter gift is wrapped up in preaching for justice and social action, not because we are afraid to talk about personal sin but because the gospel is more about relationships and grace than it is about trying to gain high marks on self-graded examinations of personal piety.

Lastly, do you remember where the angel said the women would see Jesus? They were told, “Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee and there you will see him.” Galilee, north of the city of Jerusalem, was a region known for its cultural and religious diversity. Galilee was where Peter and Andrew worked as fishermen; the region containing the city of Nazareth where Jesus grew up, Magdala, where Mary Magdalene was from, and Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine. Galilee was Jesus’ home turf, the place of his disciples’ daily routines.² We’re glad you’re here this Easter morning, but don’t think Jesus is confined within these walls. If a stone-covered tomb couldn’t hold him, how do you think a church could contain him? The angel said we will see Jesus in Galilee and the angel was right. Jesus goes ahead of us to our home turf, our place of daily routine, gift-exchanges, good deeds and moments of grace. We see him as we share with others the gospel that is so precious and life-changing that we could never think of locking it away inside a sanctuary or inside our hearts just for ourselves.

That’s why the end of Mark’s gospel is so unexpected. The male disciples have all fled. The women disciples see the empty tomb and flee clutching the gift to their bosom. It appears that no one is willing to carry on the Easter message – unless of course we are willing to take on this role. That’s how Mark’s gospel ends. That’s how this sermon will end. Jesus is alive, going ahead of you. He is alive! What will you do with this Easter gift? What will you do?

AMEN

¹ Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*, 1979, 2007, pp. 3-4.

² Mark, *Interpretation Bible Commentary*, p. 285.