

April 20, 2014 (Easter)

TEXT: Mark 16:1-8

TITLE: Going Ahead of Us

A church history professor of mine once commented that he was teaching an Introduction to Christianity class for undergraduates that term. He said that if he asked those students, “What is the central message of the Christian faith?” most of them would reply “Do good works.” I’d wager that if that same question was asked of American churchgoers today, the predominant answer would be “Love one another and do good works.” It’s a good answer, but it’s not the right answer.

Yes, there’s an ethical component to Christianity. We are to do good deeds whenever possible. But that message is not the whole message – and besides it is religious advice we are not particularly good at following. It’s like the old story of a mother who was making pancakes, but her two sons, Kevin and Ryan, were fighting over who should get the first one. The mother decided she should use this as a teaching moment, so she said, “Boys, if Jesus was here, he would say, ‘Let my brother have the first pancake. I can wait.’” After a pause, Kevin turned to his younger brother and said, “Ryan, you be Jesus.”

Here are the problems when people believe the central message of Christianity is simply “Do good works.” First, we don’t often do the things we ought to do. Our track record for doing good deeds is far from perfect and this goes way beyond pancake etiquette. Second, if the central message of faith is “Do good works”, why do you need to come to church to hear that? Can’t we learn the same thing from a philosophy textbook? Is it any wonder that church membership is declining, that denominations are seen as interchangeable and irrelevant for today’s world? While Christian faith encourages us to do good deeds, that is not its central message. The central Christian message is about Christ - that God in Jesus Christ loves us with a power that is stronger than death and He will endure even the cross to lead us out of our darkness, out of our violent ways, and out of our tombs into abundant, eternal life. Christianity points to the whole sweep of history – from creation to whatever future eons hold for our planet – and calls us to trust that the One who came and the One who rose from the grave is the One who heals, forgives, and leads us forward into true life.

Our gospel lesson for today captures this message beautifully, although at first glance that may be hard to see. Mark’s description of Easter begins with grieving women making their way slowly to the cemetery in the murky shadows of early morning. Jesus has been crucified and laid in a tomb. It was a rush job done without ritual or social niceties in order to get him in a grave before the sundown of Sabbath. The women’s hearts on Sunday were heavy with disappointment and grief. They were likely wondering about what happens next: More trouble with the Romans? More ostracism from their families? And they wondered who will roll away that heavy gravestone so they can anoint Jesus’ dead body.

Yet also present in the text were the heavy stones weighing down those women's spirits: their dashed hopes, the painful return to injustice and slavery and "dead ends" for their life journey without Jesus. It was a hard walk that Easter morning. How many of us have found ourselves walking beside those grieving women? When has your daily walk been one of grief, disappointment, fear or uncertainty?

The Rev. Meagan Manas is a young Presbyterian minister who, for a while, was under care of our congregation while she studied at Union Theological Seminary. Earlier this week she posted this story on Facebook. She got on a fairly empty subway train when she noticed a woman standing at another train door throwing her fast-food trash down onto the tracks. Another woman across from her, very put together in Meagan's words, made a terrible face about this blatant act of littering. There was a pause – then the put-together woman said, "You really shouldn't do that. That's why they have wastebaskets. You could cause a track fire with your trash." The other woman said sharply, "You're right. I know. I just don't care about anything. I'm dying." There was an awkward silence and then the trash-throwing lady spoke again. "I'm sorry. That was rude. I really shouldn't take it out on everyone else, but I have cancer – leukemia – they give me two years to live." Meagan said that a large man seated across from the lady, seemingly engrossed in reading his newspaper, looked up and said, "I'm sorry to hear that." The others on the train began to nod in agreement. The man continued, "My brother died of cancer three years ago." Meagan ended by saying, "Oh, New York, every day you make me want to weep hopelessly or hug everyone."

On that New York subway train, standing in that open door, a woman didn't care about anything. Hers too was a heavy walk toward a cemetery. Telling her about a tame Christian faith that simply asks us not to litter and to do good deeds would have been little comfort and of little use. She needed help in turning around and walking forward by faith. And a bit of the real message of Christian hope shone like an early Easter sunrise when that woman could name her pain and others could stand beside her with compassion.

You already know the details of the Easter story. The women who walked to the tomb with heavy hearts were confronted by an angelic messenger and told that the one they sought was not dead, but alive. They did not see the resurrection of Jesus. None of the gospels describe the actual resurrection, because what would be gained by that? Would it help us understand it better? No, this was an event of faith, not of measurable science. This was an event of heaven, not of earth. It was not something done on our terms, but something done on God's terms that we are called to take into our hearts – our spirits – our worldview and life philosophy and very souls.

The angel told the women, "The one you are looking for, Jesus of Nazareth, is not here. He has been raised. Go, tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you. There you will see him." In the pause that followed that angelic announcement

now formed the central question of faith: Will you tell this story or not? By words, by transformed lives, by deeds and apologies and social activism and joyful spirits, will you turn around and tell this story or not?

Mark is brutally honest about what happened on that first Easter. He wrote that the women turned and fled from the tomb, seized by terror and amazement. And, according to the gospel's original ending, they said nothing for they were afraid. I'd love to tell you that the Easter good news is an immediate "quick fix." I'd love to preach that faith in the risen Christ is a light switch turning our souls from darkness to light, from pain to ecstasy. But remember: faith may cast out fear, but fear doesn't ever fully leave the room. Faith may bring healing to our body and soul, but our lives remain fragile, and injury and disease remain in the lexicon of life. What is different after Easter is that the One who has gone before us, who has loved us from the dawn of time, is now risen and goes ahead of us no matter what is to come. We are not alone. History has a direction. Death and violence and suffering do not have the final word. Christ is alive and we live to tell that story.

Last point: The women initially took off in fear, struggling to even find words for what had happened to them. But soon enough, they did tell the others. One of the strongest proofs for the resurrection is the fact that the gospel writers all have women as witnesses to the Easter good news, despite the fact that they lived in a patriarchal world that routinely dismissed women's testimony in courts of law. Another of the strongest proofs for the resurrection is that fact that the early Christians began meeting and worshiping on Sunday morning, despite being Jews and long accustomed to having their Sabbath on a different day. Something changed them and prompted them now to gather on Sunday, to share meals and stories, to break the silence and look with renewed hope toward the future.

They didn't gather together to discuss the physics of bodily resurrection. They didn't gather together to lay out agendas for good works and self-improvement. They didn't gather together to figure out how to build a monument over an empty tomb. They gathered together to tell about the One who died and rose again and who goes ahead of us – out in this world, in our lives, in this very place and time. Christ goes ahead of us to hear about subway car confessions, our hospital room prayers, our sidewalk protest shouts, our scientific cries of "eureka." Christ goes ahead of us to move us out of the ditch of prejudice, out of the junkyard of militarism, out of the morgue of apathy and defeatism.

Jesus Christ doesn't rest in peace. He is on the move, on the loose, beside you and before you. We too have heard the angel's message. We too are changed by those words. We too have a story to tell and a Savior to follow. That's the good news of Easter. Now go: trust it and tell it.

AMEN