

April 1, 2018 (Easter)

TEXT: Mark 16:1–8

TITLE: Running with Good News

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Easter morning began with a long, sad walk. A somber group of women set out just as the first rays of light were chasing away the night sky. They carried jars of spices, which were likely heavy and awkward. But the load they carried on their hearts was likely even heavier. They had no expectation of a resurrection. They were going to care for a dead body. They were walking with bad news.

Sometimes bad news comes upon us without warning—surprising us, like a sudden shove in the chest. A note comes to your classroom that you need to see the principal right now. An e-mail comes to your office that you are to see the boss this afternoon and bring your keys. A doctor’s nurse calls and schedules a follow-up appointment to talk about your recent test results.

When I was growing up, we rode the school bus each day. Sometimes my brother and I would race up our long driveway to see who could get to the house first. One day we were neck-in-neck and reached the screen door at the same time, only to hit it so hard that we shattered the storm window on the lower part of the door. We panicked. We picked up the pieces of glass and got rid of the now-useless frame and said nothing about it to my parents and forgot all about it—until one Saturday in late October when my sister came into the room and announced that Mom and Dad were putting down the storm windows and wondered if I knew anything about the missing glass on the back storm door. I still remember that long walk carrying bad news to my parents.

Some days it feels like all we do is walk with bad news. We open our eyes and before glancing at the morning paper, we say a quick prayer: *Lord, may there not be any fresh craziness in the world today.* In the class I’m teaching now at the seminary, I begin each session by bringing in the paper and praying over the news. I do that because I believe God is active in our world today, so it is right for us to pray to God about any brokenness, violence or pain in the world. So we pray for the #NeverAgain movement and the courage of the young people speaking out for gun control. We pray for the family of Stephon Clark, unjustly shot in Sacramento. We pray that change happens so there won’t be another Parkland, Sandy Hook, or Columbine; another shooting at a Las Vegas music festival, Pulse nightclub, First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs or Emanuel AME church in Charleston. We pray that all in our military are treated with dignity, including transgender enlistees. We pray that any talks with North Korea are done for lasting peace and not to pamper presidential egos on both sides. We pray for Pittsburgh—for victims of domestic violence, for our changing neighborhoods with persistent social and racial inequity. We read the paper, good news and bad news, and then whisper each day, “Lord, hear our prayer.”

For the women of Easter morning, the worst news was already behind them. Friday was done. The sham of a trial, the horrible crucifixion was done. The body of Jesus had

been hurriedly laid to rest, if you can even use that term after what he endured, in a tomb outside the city wall. The bad news was done, but it wasn't over. Out of respect for the deceased, more work remained. The burial anointing rituals weren't complete. On that first Easter morning, a walk with bad news heavy on their hearts still lay ahead for the women disciples of Jesus. But if you take away anything from this morning, remember this: a dark walk with bad news, as hard as it might be, is often the only way you can move into the light of good news.

Leslie was 26 years old when she finally got serious about quitting drinking. She'd woken that morning, just like every other morning, wanting to drink more than anything else. But if she was ever to have a life where alcohol wasn't the sole motivation of the day, she had to quit. She'd been given the address of a 12-Step meeting—a clapboard house with a small gravel parking lot. She sat in her car, wiping her running nose with the back of her wrist, jamming her fists into her eyes to make them stop crying, searching for some story that would take her back home: *Maybe I'll come back tomorrow. Maybe I can do this on my own.* Once she willed herself to step through the doorway, there was just a bunch of strangers seated around a wooden table, near a kitchen with worn linoleum curling at the edges. People smiled as she entered. They shared their stories—how one man had stayed in his apartment for 40 days straight having vodka delivered to his door; how the ritual of one 6 o'clock drink metastasized into day-long benders. The people around that table knew nothing about Leslie except for one part of her—the part that thought about drinking all day, every day. They knew that part of her better than anyone else. Leslie didn't know what to say to the group other than her name—but as it turned out, that was enough.¹

Fill in names other than Leslie in this story, including your own or of those you love. Maybe it's not a story about drinking; maybe it's about abuse or opioids, cutting, bulimia, or depression. In the end, it's always a story about moving from one place to another and discovering you don't have to go there alone. It's about believing in something more than dysfunction, something more than despair—and in the language of Easter, even more than death.

Mary Magdalene and the two other women carried spices to a cemetery tomb early on Easter morning, walking with bad news heavy on their hearts yet going forward because no other direction made sense. Even if Jesus was dead, at least they were walking toward him once more. The dominant mindset for them was adversity—symbolized by a giant tombstone. How often have you too believed that the road ahead of you was blocked by something big you couldn't move? Anyway, on that day the obstacle was gone. The stone was rolled away. And a guide was there to show the women the way to what comes next. Sometimes when you are transitioning from bad news to good news, it is hard to get from point A to point B on your own. We all need someone to show us the way.

Spiritual guides are quite common. When Dante wrote his Divine Comedy and described an imaginary tour of the afterworld, he was led by three different guides. When the apostle John had his series of Revelation visions of the coming kingdom, he

had an angelic guide that showed him the way. The women at the tomb on Easter also benefited from a guide. They had a brief encounter for a very specific purpose. The young man dressed in white changed their bad news into good news. *Don't be alarmed. Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified is not here. He has been raised.* That news alone would take a while to sink in. The spices in their hands weren't needed. The empty stone tomb was irrelevant; the cemetery sadness was inappropriate. Jesus wasn't dead; he was alive! It was all too much to comprehend.

The young guide knew that. So he didn't try to say more since it wouldn't sink in anyway. He only did what he needed to do. He told them where to go next. Basically he said, "No more walking with bad news—it is time to run with good news"... Alright, technically he said three things: *Go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there. It's all just as he told you.* He gave them direction and a purpose: Go and tell the others that Jesus is ahead of you. He gave them hope: You will see him there. Best of all, he gave them reassurance: It's just as he told you.

The women walking to the cemetery on Easter morning only had two thoughts in their minds: Jesus is dead and lying in a tomb, and how are we going to move that heavy stone. Their Easter guide took away the old two thoughts and gave them one new story to tell: Jesus is alive and going ahead of you to Galilee. It's like planning to meet someone and being told, "They just left and went that way, but if you hurry, you can catch them." The good news of Easter is that Jesus is alive and going ahead of us—wherever that might be. Ahead of us as each new day dawns. Ahead of us as each new chapter of our life begins. Wherever we are going, Jesus is there. That good news gives us energy to run today's race toward tomorrow's goal.

Not only that, we've been promised that we will see him again. In the other gospels the Easter morning surprise is followed by numerous resurrection appearances. Not here in Mark's gospel. This story ends with only a promise of seeing Jesus again. But that's precisely the message we need to hear today. Christ is risen and you will see him. Christ is seen in the faces of one another, around a table at a 12-Step meeting, pulling us out of our bubble into a place of healing for one small corner of this precious world. Christ is seen now when we prioritize being part of a church—when we remember our baptisms and learn to see all our meals in terms of this communion meal—when we support church institutions serving questionable coffee but full of sincere spirits instead of crafting for ourselves a privatized spirituality that too easily melts away with the morning dew—when we learn to shape our prayers to include ourselves and the world—and when the language of resurrection hope precedes every call to activist faith, then, yes, we see the risen Christ.

I can only imagine where you've been walking before you entered these church doors, and I can only guess the bad news you might still be carrying. But let me be your guide and point you in a better direction. Go run with the women from the tomb. Run with good news. The stones, the shadows, the brokenness, yes, even the death of this world

have no lasting authority. The one you seek goes ahead of you now and you will see him. For Christ is risen—He is risen indeed.

AMEN

¹ Leslie Jamison, “A Story to Get Sober In”, *New York Times Magazine*, March 18, 2018, p. 47-8.