

“Teetering on the Edge of Joy”

Mark 16:1-8; I Corinthians 15:1-11 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – March 31, 2024 – Easter

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might let go of our fears and fall over the edge of joy into your arms of grace and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

This is the 23rd Easter I've preached, and – though I didn't do the research to be sure – I think this may be the very first Easter I've chosen to use Mark's gospel and the writings of Paul as the texts. The corners of social media where I hang out have been very insistent in recent years on pointing out that the very first preachers in Christianity, the ones who first carried the message of Christ rising from the dead, were the women who had faithfully followed him – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. The latest meme I've seen is the one suggesting that if you want your Easter sunrise service to be especially biblically accurate, only women should be allowed to attend. The jokes made in the service of smashing the patriarchy are some of the best jokes out there.

And yet here I am, offering you a story of women who were too afraid to share their story and the writings of a man whose track record on supporting women is spotty at best. Like I said, I've been preaching Easter for 23 years. I've never given a fig for the people who try to say I can't, because clearly, they're wrong. In case you hadn't noticed, every scheduled voice you'll hear in this service today is the voice of a woman. I think we can afford to take a look at the words of Paul.

It was this passage from First Corinthians that put the word “teetering” into the title of this sermon. Paul has so much going on in these 11 verses! It’s just bursting out of him. He’s confident and exhorting; he’s proud, but he’s also humble. Mostly, he’s just really excited. He has to tell the siblings in Corinthians the thing of “first importance,” but he doesn’t stop there. It’s “And then, and then, and then,” until finally the story gets to him, and he comes back to where he started, which is that he really, really, really wants the Corinthians to live as though they have received the gospel.

Given that all of this excitement is in the 15th chapter of 16 in this letter, Paul has been warming up to his main point for a while. As I read it, I can’t help but picture him on his tiptoes, leaning forward with such enthusiasm that he’s about to tip over. And yet also, he teeters back and forth between claiming credit for bringing the gospel to Corinth, and acknowledging that it was God who was working through him and so many others bringing to church to life in those early days.

This barely contained zeal is something of a contrast with what we read from Mark. A young man in a white robe – obviously a messenger from God – gave Mary and Mary and Salome a very clear message: Jesus is risen and has gone on to Galilee. But they flee in terror and amazement, and according to Mark, don’t say nothing to nobody, because they were too scared. It’s obvious from the alternate endings included and the extensive notes offered that Christians have found this ending unsatisfactory for centuries, and started trying to fix it almost as soon as Mark entered

the canon. We may find their attempts questionable, but we cannot deny what they knew to be true: it simply wasn't the case that the women never told anyone what happened at the tomb that morning. How would we be here now if they had kept their secret? I don't think Mark even intends for us to believe that their silence was the end of the story. The very fact that he wrote about it makes clear it was not. But the way he wrote about it leaves us hanging, teetering, if you will. What we might have seen as an abrupt, sad ending could be seen instead as just the kind of open-endedness required to invite us into the story ourselves.

Because we are teetering, at times, aren't we? Teetering on the edge of something, teetering back and forth between things, overwhelmed by a fragile, broken world, longing to believe in something solid, struggling to attend to all the things demanding the compassion of our hearts, desperately seeking hope that can ground us and help us withstand it all. We want to embrace Joy with all the fullness of our souls, but like those women in those first dim Easter moments, we're afraid. Afraid that it might not hold, afraid that it won't be enough, afraid that we'll go home and still feel emptied out and uncertain. We have fleeting experiences of Paul's assurance and enthusiasm, but then in the next we worry that we're believing in vain.

So what is this faith that is supposed to help us withstand the powers of death? What is this story that has invited us in and dared us to follow Jesus in ways the world can't help but hear? Can we find our footing there in such a way that it will steady us and allow us to stop teetering on the edge of joy and just jump in?

If we listen to the story of the women, if we hold it lightly and gently, we can hear God whispering: Don't look for me in tombs, among the dead; the One who was dead has been raised; Jesus has gone on before you, follow him. But also, we can hear the Spirit telling us that it's okay to be afraid. That even though the angels command us to "FEAR NOT!" they only say it that way because they're angels and not humans like Jesus was, and they don't get it. They don't get that we can be afraid and take a moment and catch our breath and steel our souls and then go follow Jesus, just as faithfully as if we were never scared to begin with.

But also, once we're catching our breath, we can start to wonder what it could mean that death doesn't get the last word. What could it mean to live our lives having rejected the logic of violence, the law of "might makes right," the false piety of redemptive suffering? Paul says that "Christ died for our sins," and that phrase gained ground like a snowball and smashed through all sorts of other truths that Jesus taught us. If we are teetering on the edge of joy, and joy is the deep pool of clear water at the bottom of the cliff's edge, then atonement theology is the large, jagged rock that we might land on instead. Paul wrote "Christ died for our sins," and somehow such an idea grew so big and yet so narrow that it has messed us up on deep and serious levels. Some have made atonement theology the end-all-be-all of the Christian faith, telling us that we are such miserable creatures that we made God so mad as to demand blood sacrifice. If you hadn't stolen that candy from your sister, if you hadn't lied to your grandma, if you hadn't been so covetous or proud, then maybe

Jesus wouldn't have had to die. Boy, was God mad! But because He loves you, he just killed Jesus instead, so you'd better be grateful.

And suddenly, somehow, we're left with a faith that doesn't provide us with any kind of mooring that could help us navigate rough waters, but instead with a system of belief that hangs a hammer over our heads. Suddenly, the central location of our faith isn't a sanctuary that is really mostly a dining room, but a courthouse where we are on trial. How did we get here? No wonder we're left teetering on the edge of joy, when jumping over the edge feels like it might be giving into a threat.

We don't have to live our lives or our faith in a courtroom. When we read that Christ died for our sins, we can understand that sin exists, that it exists within ourselves, but more importantly, that it exists in our world. We don't have to believe that it was God who was demanding a blood sacrifice, because we've seen how human beings can be overcome with desire for vengeance and destruction. We know that we live in a world where a person who was the Embodiment of Divine Compassion could be put to death. Innocent people are killed every day. There is nothing surprising about that, though we may still struggle to understand why that's the way things are. To insist that God set it up that way is to pass the blame on in ways that are not life-giving or hopeful.

No, the good news of Easter is not that God found a way around God's own contract, a loophole so that we wouldn't all have to burn. The good news is that where sin brings death, God's love brings life. The good news is that where the world

meets radical love with extreme violence, God is eternally willing to wait us out, to let our aimless rage burn itself out and then arise from the ashes. The good news is that Jesus didn't suffer in order to redeem us, but alongside us to accompany us.

We may not understand what the Resurrection was or how it worked or whether it makes sense, but we don't have to in order to embrace the joy and liberation it offers us. We want a faith that grounds us in shaky times, but the Resurrection invites us to leap over the edge of joy, to stop teetering and go all in. This may require some silent contemplation. But it may also involve proclaiming hope, with our words and our lives. It may involve following Jesus to places we've already been, ground we thought had been covered, but it may also mean following him into a future we've never even imagined.

We may feel like we're teetering, like our faith is as fragile as the times, but Jesus has got us. He's gone on ahead, but he also has our backs. He's always waiting for the last one to catch up, even wandering off the path to come find us when we're lost. He is the light of hope; he is the bread of compassion; he is the ground of mercy, here, now, among us, around us and beneath us, and forevermore. Christ has risen indeed. Hallelujah and Amen!