

Sermon: Year B, Easter Sunday
Text: Mark 16:1-8

A number of years ago, I received a call from the local funeral director, who asked if I could do a graveside service for an elderly woman. It would be an easy task, he said. At ninety three years old, she had died quietly in her sleep, succumbing to the frailties of old age, which made her death seem like the smoothest of transitions – entirely natural. A son and a daughter were managing the arrangements. They asked only for someone who would offer some prayers for burial. They were sure that the gathering at the cemetery would be very small.

A few days later, I waited there for the family to arrive. It was a balmy Spring day, and a small grave was dug close to a sweep of marsh grasses. Three cars pulled up and about fifteen people stepped out: they composed a span of generations -- children, grandchildren, and a number of great-grandchildren who were themselves young adults. The conversation was amiable: introductions, a couple of comments about the woman's life mixed with observations about the beauty of this burial space. The funeral director handed me a box of ashes. It was all perfunctory – and comfortably so. Simply put, the deceased had had a good life. She had lived long and well. Nothing seemed out of order. Everything was tidy, nicely wrapped up: the sharing of a few memories served as solace enough. The weather was pleasant. The sun was warm. The ground was redolent. And even the prayers seemed to fit the complacent mood – until I placed the ashes in the ground.

Something about that action suddenly broke loose a torrent of emotion. It came from the great-grandchildren who began to sob and stamp their feet. I remember that moment with terrible clarity, for their grief, erupting, ripped away all our presumptions that this was an easy death simply because ninety three years was a damn good run. In that moment, the number of this woman's years didn't matter. They were gone. The ease of her life didn't matter, either. She was gone, she herself, for whom there could be no substitute. With their outburst, the great-grandchildren announced that this loss was, in fact, awful, and all the euphemisms by which we were trying to make this woman's death softer dropped away. To truly remember her meant being inconsolable. Just as coming to terms with her death meant, in essence, forgetting her, and in her place offering only backward glances, recalling this or that – mere fragments. Only politeness prevented her great-grandchildren from interrupting and insisting: "But she is no more."

We have become skilled in meeting death with casual resignation. It's purely the consequence of nature, the inevitable demise that's simply the way of the world. We can't prevent our end, so we redefine our selves. At the critical moment, we reduce life, in all its incomprehensible fullness, to the impersonal grinding away of the implacable laws of our physical world. We are no more than this: we come, we go, and we hope for prosperity within the window of our time. Nature is sovereign, and the limit of what is real is what is provable, tangible, repeatable, and manageable. All else fades away. And that's OK. It is what is – which is a very seductive reduction. We are well practiced in normalizing death. But this being at ease is a deep violation of who we are.

A few months ago, John Updike wrote some late reflections about his own dying. In one set of verses he expressed his thanks to his friends of early childhood for providing him all he needed

to fill his fiction with characters. Remembering them, he recalled the special types that haunt every playground: the beauty, the bully, the hanger-on, the natural, the twin, the fatso. Drawing them so vividly back to mind, he, then too, seemed to experience a sudden outburst that lifted his thoughts beyond merely backward glances: "I've written these before, these modest facts", he noted, "but their meaning has no bottom in my mind." This one line is worth a thousand recitations. These were not just types, they were persons who, when their true measure is taken, even at the distance of memory, even after seventy years gone by, prove beyond summary, even for a master wordsmith like Updike.

As if by necessity, then, his thoughts turned, to the question of heaven, and he wondered out loud whether heaven is revealed to us, not at the end of our time, at death, but already at the very start – though we tend not to notice. It doesn't require our dying to enter some abstract realm beyond imagining. We catch real intimations of it when we perceive our own lives with such depth and breadth of goodness that no amount of time is sufficient for its expression or realization. By rights, we should yearn for eternity, because it's evident all around us. And yet, so often, we diminish ourselves and call it enlightenment. In the quietness of assuming that the path is set, we live toward dying, settling our lives within the limits of years, resigning ourselves to an inevitable ending, hoping at the last that a few memories of us will endure. It's encouraged as closure, where comfort is found by domesticating life and making death just as perfunctory.

Against this presumption, Easter is God's full-throated protest. Mark's account of Jesus' resurrection, read this morning, is the earliest record we have of the event, and his telling of the story is startlingly abrupt. In essence, it's an outburst, too, brazen and emphatic. The grave is empty. The immovable stone that assured the permanence of death has been displaced. And Jesus, crucified, is alive and already ahead of the women who have come to the tomb. Eight verses announce the overturning of all life and history. The women fled, we are told. They were afraid. Nothing here is tidy. For the most fundamental source of our resignation, the strange comfort of our eventually coming to an end, has been disrupted. The sovereignty of nature itself has been toppled, and in its place, God takes precedence. And every casual supposition we make about life and death and time and space has been shaken and dislodged. Mark's text is angular and sharp. It's infinitely unsettling.

This is how the Gospel originally concluded, with this stupendous disturbance, left unresolved, Mark added nothing that would make the event softer. These last words hang suspended, as if to echo endlessly, unfinished. And this is exactly the point. Everything perfunctory is now denied us, so that we can't just settle back into our neatly contained self-understanding. God stands in our way. God refuses to allow us to make less of life by making less of death. For in Jesus' resurrection, what seemed inevitable in nature has been upended by what is ineffable in God, which is love beyond limit.

This means that the whole structure of our world has been radically changed. For every inclination we have toward resignation is now false, and in its place, always, is God's eternal pulse of vibrant hope. In short form, instead of slowly declining into the peace of death, God has opened for us the way to live, always increasing, into the wholly different peace of Christ. The implications of this are enormous, for how we experience each day and life itself. But for today the only true response is unabashed amazement.

Fifty years ago, John Updike wrote seven stanzas for Easter, each of which, ringing two thousand years later, is an undiminished echo of Mark's first announcement. Updike wrote with a boldness that only love can fathom – love returned for love given. His words are worth repeating, endlessly. The last of them are these: "Let us not seek to make [Jesus' resurrection] less monstrous, for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty, lest awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are embarrassed by the miracle, and crushed by remonstrance." We are left no room here for fashionable detachment. May we with matching boldness proclaim: Alleluia! Christ is risen.