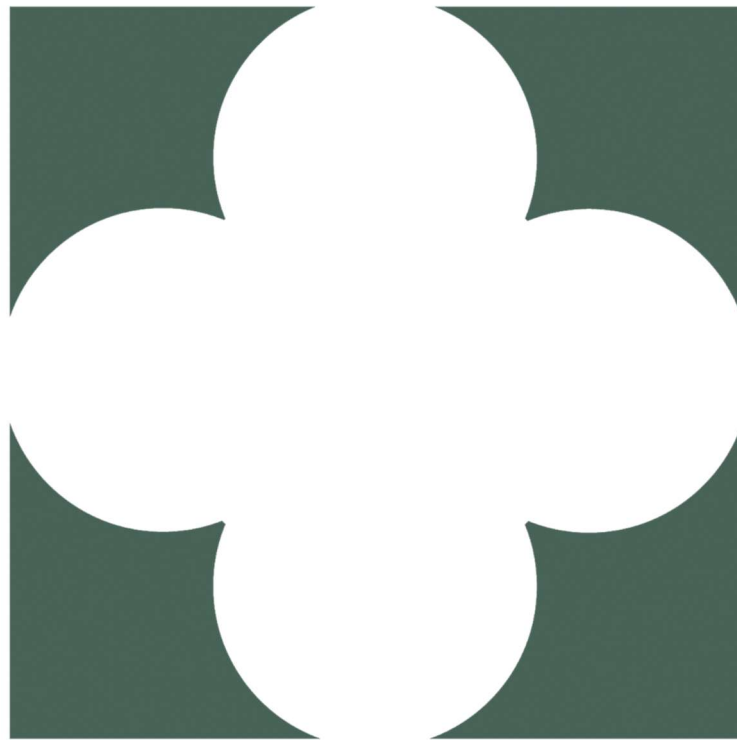


Simple Joys of Grace

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Mark 16:9-15

Mark 16:9-15 (NRSV)

THE LONGER ENDING OF MARK

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."

Well, this is a weird way to begin Lent! Often, we will begin this season leading up to Easter with stories from Jesus' life, like about how he called the disciples to follow him and how he healed people and how he preached about God's coming kin-dom.

Usually, we don't begin at the end. And our Scripture is the end! Well, one ending. This part of the Gospel of Mark is not always included in Bibles, because it doesn't consistently show up in the early manuscripts. That means that someone probably added this on to the gospel later, unsatisfied with how Mark chapter 15 ends with the crucifixion. In the earliest manuscripts we have, there's no resurrection at the end of Mark's gospel! Then, since that didn't sit well with some folks, they tried on a few other endings that offered a neater and tidier conclusion. Pastor Tim, Pastor Patricia and I preached on those other endings of Mark's gospel last year on Easter, and it was so interesting to explore how wrapping up the story a certain way affects how people interpret the story.

But today, we are considering the longest of the additional endings to this gospel. First, we read that after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene! Great! I love that and can always use more post-resurrection appearances to women, especially when the women become the first

preachers and go and spread the good news that Jesus is risen! So that's cool about this ending. But frustratingly, the people Mary Magdalene preaches to don't accept her words, and so then Jesus appears again, this time to two men on the road. They, too, try to tell people about their experiences, but are also disbelieved. Then, finally, Jesus appears to the remaining Eleven disciples, and he seems a little bit peeved at them. He calls them out for their unbelief and dismissal of those who tried to share the gospel, which literally means "good news" with them. As a final word, Jesus calls the Eleven to go into the world and share the gospel with all Creation!

I just hope that the people to whom the Eleven preached received their teachings with more openness than the disciples themselves.

But then, perhaps starting Lent this way is not so weird. During this season, in Godly Play we say that we are "getting ready to come close to the mystery of Easter." We get ready by telling stories. We get ready by attuning ourselves to God's presence in our lives. And that's what this Scripture does, right? These post-resurrection appearances detailed in Mark 16 are examples of Jesus' presence. We are beginning Lent with the reminder that Jesus shows up, that God shows up, meeting us where we are, whether that's in the garden, on the road, or sharing dinner with a mourning community. And when God shows up, we can, too. And when God issues a call to us, we can respond.

In a way, the season of Lent is a time for response, a season when we set aside some of our regular routine in favor of making space to respond to God's presence in our lives, to the story of Jesus' life that we follow throughout these 40 days.

Our Lenten theme this year is Simple Joys of Grace. You might be thinking, "well that's a weird theme for this liturgical season," or "yeah, right, there's plenty of things going on in the world but not a lot of them spark joy." And you're right on both counts. Often Lenten themes will be something about Wilderness and Journey and accompanying Jesus through his last days on this Earth. Usually "joy" or "grace" is left for Easter morning, when Alleluias abound and there's a brass ensemble and the choir sings and there are flowers everywhere.

But this year, after two Lenten seasons in a never-ending pandemic that is marked by deep grief and anxiety and loneliness, Pastor Patricia and Ben and I figured that we needed a theme that would help us have a spacious faith. And by “spacious faith” I mean a faith that responds to God’s presence with honesty -- there’s space for joy, but also for mourning. There’s space for exploration of new concepts and ideas, but also space for comfort. There’s space for quiet contemplation, and also space for proclaiming the Holy’s goodness and blessing.

During Lent, we can make space in many different ways. One way is by giving something up, which is a traditional spiritual practice to observe in this season, inspired by Jesus’ 40 days temptation in the desert. Over time, people emulated this by adopting 40 days of fasting from self-indulgence as a way of symbolizing penitence. Traditionally, Lent was a time for fasting and simpler eating, and so often people will give up sweets, or dairy or meat.

But please allow me to offer a word of caution: Lent is not a diet. Lent is not supposed to be a time when you deny yourself food that you enjoy because of a poor body image or self-loathing with your weight. All bodies are good bodies. Your body is good. You do not need to deny yourself food in order to be worthy or good or loved. And, for people who struggle with disordered eating, the conflation of Lent’s spiritual practices with a diet is harmful. Spiritual preparation for coming close to the mystery of Easter has nothing to do with the numbers on a scale.

Some people like to adopt a spiritual practice of taking something on or trying something new. That could be saying daily affirmations in the mirror, or a creative practice like Janet is leading with some parents and guardians. Adding something could be trying out cooking a new series of recipes or taking a daily walk with a neighbor or setting aside time to read your Bible or another spiritually-meaningful text. Our church Lenten devotional is another tool for you to use in this time of responding to God’s presence with us. This year’s devotional features cards for each week in Lent that prompt you to have conversations with loved ones and take actions to support local organizations and social movements. These are all ways that you can make space for God in your life and be intentional about a practice that invites you to respond to God’s grace.

As we lean into our Lenten theme of “Simple Joys of Grace,” I urge you to seek out simplicity. Not in the sense of looking for easy answers and neglecting the grey areas in life, but in re-centering your life on what you value most. Relationships with loved ones. Creative time. Serving others. Demonstrating for justice. Seek the simplicity of centering your life as a witness to your values. Of showing up and being awake to the world around you, of being aware of God’s ever-constant presence in your life. To help you seek simplicity, ask where is God showing up for you as you read the Biblical stories? Where do you feel God is with you as you read poetry and talk with friends and wonder aloud with children in your life? How does God’s consistent love impact you in your daily journey?

And friends, I invite you to seek joy in this Lenten season as well. We are not in a church with the tradition of “burying the Alleluia,” so I invite you to exclaim “alleluia” when you witness something that brings you joy, a moment of delighted surprise or unexpected wonder, whenever it strikes you. And if there are practices that, as Marie Kondo would say, “spark joy” in you, then do those things! After all it has taken to keep on living in this world over the past two years, especially, you go right ahead. Call your friend you’ve not been in touch with in a while! Feed the birds outside your window! Wear your favorite comfy pants! Go on that sightseeing drive or hike you’ve been wanting to do! Write your memoir! Bake cookies with your grandchildren over Zoom. Joy is a divine gift, and we must embrace it when it happens to us, and not overanalyze it to the point of depriving it of its wonder.

And finally, be tuned in to the grace that flows from the Holy during this season. Adopt a posture of observation of the world around you, noticing what is life-giving going on all around. When you see a flower emerging between cracks on the sidewalk, witness the grace of persistence. When you hear an instrument played passionately, give thanks for the grace of expertise. When you feel the sun’s glow on your face as the sun sets later and later this time of year, immerse yourself in the grace of God’s Creativity. To be a witness to grace only takes a slowing of your busy day-to-day rush, even just a little. It doesn’t matter how big or how small these moments of grace are, I just invite you to be open to them and to do some holy noticing as they come across your path.

Now, living focusing on simple joys of grace doesn't mean you have to go around the world being obnoxiously optimistic or pushing glass-half-full theology at people. Practicing witnessing to moments of grace in the midst of the complexities and heartaches and disasters of life is a testament to faith. Jesus never told us life would be easy, but he did assure us that he would be with us, through whatever comes our way. In a beautiful poem shared recently on Instagram by Australian artist Mari Andrew, she wrote,

I am washing my face before bed while a country is on fire.

It feels dumb to wash my face, and dumb not to.

It has never been this way, and it has always been this way.

Someone has always clinked a cocktail glass in one hemisphere as someone loses a home in another while someone falls in love in the same apartment building where someone grieves. The fact that suffering, mundanity, and beauty coincide is unbearable and remarkable.

This “unbearable and remarkable” truth is part of being human, and no amount of simplicity or joy-seeking or grace observation will change the simple truth that the human experience is marked by the juxtaposition of joy and suffering, loneliness and relationship, celebration and mourning. But what we can do is try to tune into Holy presence and recognize the places where sacred love and compassion shows up in the everydayness of our lives.

Our Scripture for today ends with Mark's version of the Great Commission. Sometimes Christians think about that commission as converting people to Christianity and as proclaiming that Jesus is the only way to get to heaven. But I wonder what would happen if we, as followers of the Way of Jesus, shifted our understanding of the Great Commission to be about witnessing to the grace of God in the world wherever we happen upon it. What if we shared with each other, and with the world, those moments of simplicity and joy that strike us with wonder and give us a moment's pause for rest? What if we lived every day witnessing to the world that it is possible to be attuned to grace in a way that pursues justice and stops wars and sees all people as beloved?

Dear ones, I believe that is possible. It is possible to share the good news with the world that though the powers and principalities try to keep people oppressed, fierce hope stands in the gap and love wins. It is possible to conspire with the God who is on the side of the powerless, who has special care for anyone who is being crucified in the modern day, by showing up and speaking out. It is possible to stop wars by creating a culture of peace and of conflict transformation centered on the mutual flourishing of all people.

Beloveds, we can do this. Today we get to try. And tomorrow, we get to try again. And the next day. So let us be awake to grace, open to joy and prepared to simplify our lives so that we can be witnesses to love wherever we go in this world, during the Lenten season and beyond.

May it be so. Amen.