

TELL IT LIKE IT IS

Text on Sunday, April 18, 2010

Mark 16: 1-8

So they fled the tomb in terror and amazement and said nothing to anyone.

That is how Mark ended his gospel story. Most of your Bibles will show a few more verses offering a more satisfying ending; some scrunch the additions into a tiny typeface; but virtually all Bibles note that in the oldest gospel manuscripts, the additions are missing. Mark has just this abrupt end. An ancient scribe would never have torn off a happy ending to publish this hollow one, scholars say. Some propose that Mark's original scroll must have been damaged by accident; that he just *couldn't* have intended to let the story end this way. I think their judgment too hasty.

"They fled in terror from the tomb . . . and said nothing to anyone." Nothing? Ever? Really? Tell me then who it is listening to Mark here on that first ancient Sunday after he put down his pen? Remember, this is not *Extra! Extra! Read all about it!* reporting. Forty years have passed since the events. Mostly everyone who was little back then is now dead. Who is listening to Mark's gospel as the ink dries on the scroll?

It is an early version of you: a church with not one member who saw the things so gloriously spoken of, who walked by faith, not by sight. Our very assembly is proof that between that ending—and *they said nothing to anyone*—and this morning, something happened. Somebody got over their fear and started talking. I think ancient Mark knew full well his church didn't need him to fill in the blanks. Already for decades his church had been singing and praying and feeling the presence of the risen Christ in their body. All his story needed to do for Christ's sake was stir the people's imagination. See *yourselves in the mirror*, he might have said. See how your own fears of Roman persecutions are scaring you too into silence, just like the disciples. And feel now again the Holy Spirit moving you from the tombs and catacombs to do again as those first disciples so surely did: Leap through your fear and tell it like it is. He is risen!

In many, many churches all over America, the *last* forty years have worked in just the opposite direction from the first forty that followed the events of Jesus' crucifixion-resurrection. Most congregations of the so-called mainline denominations—Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, UCC—have dwindled astonishingly. Huge, dark, cold church buildings with very little life in them make for silent memorials—tombs you might say. Mark's strange scripture has come true again: people *fled from these tombs saying nothing to anyone, for they were afraid*.

Having served as senior pastor to a gigantic city church whose members in the late 1950s numbered three thousand but forty years later not two hundred, I have had ample opportunity to study what has happened. Not surprisingly, fear grips many members in such situations. They grieve things once gloriously spoken of, when a thousand voices thronged to the hymns. And they cry out impotently at congregational meetings, *We need more members! We need more young families!* If too much fear grips too many members, they devour their leaders. If the people are more spiritually healthy, like my Buffalo church, their numbers grow as small and sweet as an ancient grandparent. But what has been happening to the Christian tradition in America?

Lots of sociological studies tell who left the churches—or better, tell who didn't come in, for ultimately, everyone leaves church and earth behind. But the passing of generations has been going on . . . for generations. What's new is that a whole generation or two did *not* pass their religious patterns to their children. Why? People out there have a lot of different answers. The most strident sounds come from religious conservatives who point proudly to their thousands in mega-churches. Only a literal belief in every word of the Bible can hold the church together, they say. But that's not the whole

answer. It would not help here. Something deeper is going on.

Lots of open-minded liberalish church-goers I have known feel cowed by the enthusiasm of their evangelical sisters and brothers. Some of these devoted Christian neighbors cite the Bible, chapter and verse. They pray easily and often. They explain every good thing that happens to them as a plan of God. They ask you *Are you saved?*—to which query a moment's hesitation proves you are not, and they are asking you to come to church this Sunday. Lots of people come away from these encounters feeling confused about their own faith. To some, their evangelical cousins simply seem to be *better* Christians, for though they feel uncomfortable being pressed on the question of eternity, the evangelicals are clearly not uncomfortable. For them, something has happened since the empty tomb and they are not afraid and they are *not* saying nothing. They're talking! The mainline church is not talking, mostly. Whining sometimes (*We need more young families!*)—but often not saying anything to anyone about their faith.

Whenever someone speaks with animation about something they're involved with, what's going on? If we've bought a new car, say, or shares in a stock; been to a good restaurant or a great vacation spot or a masterful massage—whatever it is, we talk about it pretty freely. We're like evangelicals; no, we *are* evangelicals. From Greek, that word just means people telling “good news.” At bottom, what's the good news about a good new restaurant? It is some kind of change, a shift from the ordinary to the extraordinary. It is change that gives rise to good news speech. And it goes the other way, too: where there is no experience of positive change, there will be no good news speech.

Needless to say, some kinds of change matter more than others. If a person has been living in hell and then comes up inside a hope of heaven through Jesus, you can bet he's going to talk about it. Surely you've heard someone speak of how thus-and-so many years ago, her drug-dragged days ended when she received Jesus as Lord? Ain't that a good news? Of course it is. And it makes sense that a person who remembers her gutter begins to see everyone in the same frame that saved her: unsaved/saved, hell/heaven; bad news/good news. For many evangelicals whose tongues are free with their good news, there's a story they want to tell about a big change that came, a real salvation. And they want you to have that big change experience, too.

But here's the thing many evangelicals miss. Christians cannot always be climbing out of the gutter. What I am about to say certainly does not apply to thousands upon thousands in our society; nevertheless, let's tell it like it is. For many, there is no gutter. If once there was, you've tired of telling about it. I don't mean you have no sorrows, I just mean you have no abusive behavior daily damaging yourself or others; no hell from which to be saved. Instead, children beloved, friends, a good spouse, okay work, enough money and a warm home. Now, a moment ago, we said that where there is no experience of change, there will be no speech. So if “no gutter” describes you, what change are you to undergo as a Christian? Or as a human? When pushy believers shrink you down to the question, *Have you been born again?* you know it's not that simple. And yet, in the words of John Cardinal Newman, “The only evidence of life is growth.” How is growth yet to come? And if no spiritual growth, no speech—at least not from or for the church.

I think this diagnosis is adequate to account for the dwindling of the mainline churches. No gutter, and not much contact with people who are in gutters, and no inner development of oneself and no experience of living water, then there is nothing to say about faith—and therefore no new generation coming in to the church. You see, the church's reproductive organ—it's not young couples with their children—is the tongue. And the tongue does not move unless some glad change is underway.

The other thing evangelicals often miss is that the spiritual energy needed to leave the gutter is not as great as the spiritual energy needed for continued growth in an ordinary life. Those of you acquainted with the concept of the body's seven chakra energies will see the same insight at work: each new level of growth and development requires more spiritual energy, more intention, more love to sustain its

wisdom. No wonder the old church has been fading away. People and pastors alike abandoned discipleship and growth in favor of the idea of church as a comfortable social group gathered to affirm old ways. Of course the children left those places and never went back. Where there is no experience of change, there is no story. Where there is no story, there will be no new generation.

Now, I have delivered sermons on this theme to some severely dwindled churches, not to scare them—God knows they don't need that—but because even two or three people who see themselves in this mirror can begin their discipleship at any age. They start to tell it like it is, and the church will grow. Here at First Church, though, you know you are not in a tomb. Change and growth give evidence of much life. You are not shy to speak about the body of Christ that is raised in First Church. To new generations, you are passing the word. The church's reproductive organ, the tongue, is free.

As I have come to know you, the really big change factor that touches you and inspires you to speak about this Body is the reality of *becoming*—not being, but becoming—“an intentionally multi-cultural church.” So profoundly does this spirit nourish the hunger for unity felt in our society; so authentically do the music and the prayer and the word uphold that intention to love beyond our limit that even though we do not all equally easily say how Jesus is alive for us, we do gladly affirm that this Body of Christ is alive. If that is what it means to say Christ is risen, well, tell it like it is: He is risen indeed.

Now, you know that an extraordinary relationship only stays extraordinary by going deeper. In our case, multi-cultural diversity cannot be thought of as an accomplishment; rather, it is a way of life, a way of becoming. So we know that there are experiences and feelings not yet expressed here because it hasn't yet felt quite safe enough. There are people not here—not yet here—because we still have not seen them and made it safe enough for them to come. Christ's love is this never-ending, always-changing evidence of life that impels you beyond your fears to tell it like it is.

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