

## April 1 – Easter

### Beyond the Silence

#### Mark 16:1-8

I want you to think about times when you have encountered silence. You said to someone, “I’m sorry,” You hoped to hear, “I forgive you” but instead all that greets you is silence. Another emotion connected with silence: You are hiding in silent anticipation waiting for someone to open the door so you can yell “surprise!” Both involve silence but with very different feelings. Here is another. You lie awake in the middle of the night, worried, and the silence presses down on you like a heavy blanket. Silence in all its many forms is a part of life. Even in the Bible we encounter moments of silence. The prophet Elijah was running for his life. He was hiding in a cave on a mountain. He feels the power of God all around him. There was an earthquake, but God was not in the earthquake. There was wind and fire, but God was not in them and then God comes to Elijah. We used to hear it translated as “God came in a still small voice.” Recently we learn a better translation is: “after the fire there was sheer silence.” It was in that moment of total and complete silence Elijah encountered God.

Today we heard another moment of silence. We have gathered to proclaim the good news that Christ is Risen! The most often used text for this glorious day is found in the Gospel of John. There, Mary Magdalene encounters the risen Christ. After a bit of confusion, with her thinking Jesus was the gardener, she hears her name spoken as only Jesus could and she knew. She then ran to tell the disciples I have seen the Lord! That is how we like the story of this amazing morning to be played out. Faith moving to proclamation. In Mark we have Mary Magdalene, with another Mary and Salome going to the tomb. They are planning to anoint Jesus’ body, something they did not have time to do before his hasty burial. They worried about how they would roll back the very large stone that sealed the tomb. In fear, they find the tomb open and upon entering they encounter a man in white who shares that Jesus is risen and is going before them to Galilee. They are told to share this news with the disciples. What do the women do? They run out of the tomb in terror and say nothing! That is how this, the earliest of the Gospels, ends the story of that first Easter. It ends in silence! Because of this, we rarely

read Mark's account. No one likes this ending. The early church was so bothered by it that they added endings. The longer version was found in manuscripts dating from the late first century. We find the shorter version in copies that are 200 years after this.

I chose not to read one of those endings because even with its seeming incompleteness, I find this to be an incredibly hopeful story. It is an account where I can place myself, with all of my failings, and hear good news. For we know this was not the end of the story. Something happened beyond the silence. At some point the women did share their encounter with the angel. We assume that the disciples did journey to Galilee to meet the Lord and ultimately the message of Christ's victory over death was proclaimed.

In Mark's account there are no heroes among Jesus' followers. The disciples had run away when Jesus was arrested. Judas had betrayed him. Peter had denied him. None of the men were at the cross when he was crucified. Some of the women were at his crucifixion but even they are silent and filled with fear when they hear the message of the resurrection. In the face of Jesus' arrest, trial, suffering and death, and initially his resurrection, all that remains is silence and fear. If Jesus had been the CEO of a modern company he would have fired them all and would have chosen a new team in some grand lottery for better disciples. After all, who wants a bunch of sniveling cowards? Nevertheless, God brings faith out of just such weakness and failure.

Why is this good news? I don't know about you but I am not always a hero when it comes to my faith. I might, like Peter, proclaim how I would be faithful until death and then find myself in situations being silent instead. I justify it by saying I didn't want to hurt someone's feelings, or it wasn't the right time, or I didn't want to appear "holier than thou." Sometimes, I know I am like the disciples who skipped the crucifixion in not showing up in places or at events that would make me uncomfortable and those around me uneasy. I haven't really denied or rejected Jesus, I am just not there. I am silent through my actions. And yes, there have been a few times where fear silenced me. It might have been fear of retaliation, or fear of destroying a relationship that is dear to me, or something else. Hearing that there are no heroes in Mark's story comforts me. It reminds me that God does work in and through me in spite of my failings. There is

something beyond my times of silence. I am glad I don't have to be heroic for God's work to be done. Yet we all know that God hopes that we will faithfully and bravely live our faith.

This idea leads me to acknowledge that the fear and silence that the women shared are a reality in all of our lives. However imperfect our faith and however many times we remain silent when we should testify to the Gospel, God's will and work will be accomplished. From the infertile soil of fear and silence God did a new thing. This means that God is at work in our times of silence. God is pointing us beyond those moments to new opportunities. Would God wish that we were always brave? Of course. Does God reject us if we let fear silence us? Never. Easter is about new life, new beginnings, the opportunity to begin again.

I don't know about you but I am so glad that it isn't all up to me, this telling the good news. I am glad to be reminded on a day such as this that God is on the move. God's purpose will happen even if I mess things up. Yes, I am to do my best, to be as brave and courageous as I know God wants me to be. The fact is, it doesn't always happen. Seeing the women running away in silence and fear and yet knowing that this is not the end of the story is reassuring. It reminds me that God forgives and is greater than our weakness.

God continues to challenge us and love us until we respond. Our silence is real, our failure is real, but God stands beyond it beckoning us and the world to new life, to have hope. Beyond the silence God is at work. New life is ours.

When you talk about fear and doubt, it leads to the question that some have. "Do I believe in life eternal?" Is there something beyond the silence we call death? It is usually asked by someone whose beloved is either about to die or has just walked through that door. They want proof. They want reassurance. They want hope.

What I always say is this, "Though I cannot scientifically prove to you that there is life after death, my experiences with people who are dying leave me with no doubt. I have seen, what is for me, proof that there is something beyond the silence." Let me give you one account. A young woman teacher was dying with cancer. Her mother was

a member of my congregation. As her daughter moved closer and closer to the end of her life her mother kept sharing, with all confidence, that she would not die until Easter, some ten days away. The doctors told mom there was no way she would last that long. Bertha said, "Easter Sunrise was always her daughter's favorite time, even more so than Christmas. She loved to get up in the dark and go to the park for church and sing 'Christ the Lord has Risen Today' as the sun came up. Only then would she go home to hunt for Easter Eggs. I know she will go then." No one could persuade her otherwise. And slowly unexpectedly the days rolled by and her daughter was still alive. Her family was taking shifts so she was never alone. Bertha demanded to have the Easter morning time. Her daughter's room looked east towards the sunrise. Bertha opened the curtains and waited. Her daughter had been in a coma for days, unresponsive. As the sun came over the mountain, Bertha turned to her daughter and said, "Dear, it is time to go join the heavenly choir and sing Christ is Risen!" Just moments later her daughter took a deep sigh and was gone. I know about that moment because Bertha shared it with me and wanted me to tell others. So you see, for me Easter is more than just faith. I do not believe in the doctrine of Eternal life because I am supposed to. I believe because I have experienced people joining the church triumphant in wonderful and inexplicable ways.

So we have a story to tell. We may not always do it well, but if God could use such as the disciples with their failures, God can use us. God doesn't give up on us and ultimately if we stay connected to God we can change the world.

God was with the women in their moment of fear and silence. They might not have known it at the time. But God was as fully with them as God was with Elijah in the sheer silence on the mountain. God is with us in those moments of silence that are caused by fear and doubt. God is with us as we face the silence of death. God is beckoning us forward. God is on the move. New beginnings are present. New life is ours. There is hope, promise and possibility beyond the silence.

Do I believe in the resurrection? Do I believe there is life beyond the silence of death? Absolutely. I am betting my eternal life on it.