

Looking for Jesus

Mark 16:1-8a by Patty Friesen (Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021)

Peter J. Dyck, the iconic storyteller of Mennonite Central Committee tells this Easter story: (Coming Home at Dark). Some years ago, I was on a trip to Poland over Easter. My friends and I went to a large Catholic Church. As we entered, we saw the life-sized papier-mâché Jesus lying in a coffin in the vestibule. Parents lined up their children to see him. We also stopped for a brief moment. My Polish friends crossed themselves and then we made our way into the overcrowded sanctuary.

At last we found standing room in the balcony near the huge organ. We had a good view of the front of the church, where several priests were leading the worship. After about half an hour, my friends wanted to leave. I was reluctant because the service was not over. Whispering, they explained that we would be coming back. Then I was even more sure we should not leave because we would never get back in; the people were standing wall to wall. My friends smiled and asked me to look down into the main sanctuary, where I saw that many people were leaving.

Outside I had more surprises. My friends had no intention of going home. Instead, they took me to the back of the church and asked me to keep looking. They were looking this way and that, around corners of several buildings and behind trees and bushes, even under the cars in the parking lot! I trailed them for about 10 minutes of this strange activity until it dawned on me what we were looking for. I remembered that when we left the church and walked through the vestibule, the coffin was empty. Jesus was gone! We and all the other people milling around out there were looking for the risen Jesus but he was gone.

Back in the church, the mood had changed. The lights were brighter, the priests were jubilant, the organ was louder and the people began to sing the familiar resurrection hymns of the church universal. My friends looked at me and smiled. Then we all shook hands. Moments later, we laughed and embraced. It was an unforgettable Easter celebration!

When, today in Mark's Gospel, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome pay a visit to Jesus' burial site, there's no indication that any of them are thinking resurrection. It may be the last thing on their minds, having just witnessed the tragic event of Jesus' execution. When they poke their heads inside the tomb to try to glimpse the corpse, a young man in a white robe interrupts their grief to say, I know you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. But he's not here. Go now and tell some others what I'm telling you: Jesus has been raised, and he is a good bit ahead of you. He's gone on to Galilee. That's where you can catch up with him.

Mark's Gospel is spare enough with these words in verse 7 but he goes on with verse 8, "so they went out fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." It is a very disturbing ending to Mark 16 which other writers sought to fill in with verses 9-20 about other resurrection appearances and the disbelief of the other disciples. Mark intends with verse 8 to remind future disciples that we all have fear. "Followership is never easy, never perfect and never ending. Mark has chosen to finish with a challenge to all disciples instead of a happy ending. He confronts us with the choice to keep our eyes on Jesus, not on what other disciples are doing or not doing, saying or not saying, believing or not believing. Mark wants each one of us to keep faithfully looking ahead for Jesus and to

catch up with him wherever he is waiting for us.” (Believers Bible Commentary, Mark, p. 399)

We need to keep our eyes on Jesus for hope and direction, particularly these days. One of the saddest things during this time has been the passing of loved ones who we cannot memorialize publically. During the pandemic, families linger at grave sites much longer than usual, not sure what to do when the committal liturgy is over. Because of COVID, the church doesn't serve funeral luncheons. Mourners can't gather comfortably in a restaurant. Nobody in the bunch seems to have a house big enough for a group of 10 to be socially distanced from one another. So they stand there in the cold for the longest time, with the longest faces, saying very little and unsure of where to go next.

I wish someone in a white robe would show up to surprise such mourners with words like these: Folks, I know you're all thinking about what you no longer have. But be mindful of the future. You're probably wondering if there even is a future without your mom. Well, the good news is that there is, and you can step into that future with confident hope. The future happens to be where you'll spend the rest of your life, by the way. And if you want to know a secret, Jesus (whom I think you know something about) is already in that future, just waiting for you to notice him and catch up.

Easter is an ideal day for us to shake off nostalgic notions of faith and get serious about God's confidence in the future. One of our most unfortunate mistakes is to view the Bible mostly as a book about the past. It certainly contains an ancient record, but its direction is forward, not backward. We like to look backward, probably because retrieving or preserving the past feels more manageable than discerning an unknown

future. We're drawn to the rearview mirror, the scrapbooks of faith, the trudge to the cemetery, the warm sentiments of childhood church. Yet the God of scripture is always out ahead of us, leading into the future.

When Moses asks God to self-identify and provide a name, Christian Bibles like to translate God's response as, "I am who I am." But the Hebrew verb is not present tense. It is *future* tense. "I will be what I will be." This God's way of saying, "My name is future tense." Paul gets this forward-looking idea when describing his own life as "forgetting what lies behind and straining *forward* to what lies ahead." Jesus tells his followers to keep a hand to the plow and not look back. The man at the tomb tells the mourning women that Christ is ahead of them, not just stuck in their memories. (Peter Marty, Christian Century, March 9, 2021)

At our sunrise service, we had a powerful experience in the cemetery reading scripture and singing in resurrection as we have done at funerals for so many decades around the graves of our loved ones. Seeing the names and epitaphs on the gravestones, we are flooded with memories of these precious people. But we also believe they are not just stuck in our memory but also go ahead of us in death as in life, showing us the way to what comes next. In this respect, they are still active agents in our faith and in our community as reminders to trust in God for what lies ahead.

And what lies ahead? It's not just about heaven, a safe holding for the saints of God for all eternity. The prophet Isaiah in today's reading speaks of a new heaven and a new earth. Like the present earth only with everything that is true and beautiful kept going and everything that's bad and sad abolished forever. When Jesus was raised, he passed through death so a new community would rise up in his name. He raised up the

new heaven and the new earth where old things have passed away and all things are made new. (Revelation 21:4,5) Through Jesus, God's new creation has begun today. God's home is among us here and now and God dwells with us making *all* things new with us through the Spirit of God.

Today is not the end of the Jesus story. It is the beginning of the Jesus story and like the disciples of Mark's gospel, Jesus has gone before us and is waiting for us to catch up. Let us not be fearful or silent. We've kept the forty days of Lent. We've walked the Holy Week path with Maundy Thursday communion and Good Friday commemoration. What we should do now is party for 50 days until Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes to birth the church. (N.T. Wright, *Christians*, p. 73-79)

We celebrate Easter with joy today - for we are convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Hallelujah! Amen! Let us pray...

God of new beginnings, you raise us from the grave and draw us into your glory. In your love, release us from all that binds us to death, that we may be eternally bound to you through the resurrection of our Saviour Jesus. Amen. (Anabaptist Prayer Book)