

The First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
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Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012

**Through the Trees**  
Mark 16:1-8

“There he is! See him? Look! Over there. Right there! Do you see him?”

I did not. And it was frustrating. A friend and I were looking for deer. I had a new camera and we were on a piece of land we leased together. He was trying to point out a deer at the edge of an oat field.

“No, all I see are trees.”

"Look *through* the trees, Roland! You have to look *through* the trees. Watch for either a sudden movement out of the corner of your eye, or if it's windy and branches are moving, look for a shadow that does not move. Something out of place. Look *through* the trees!"

My friend was teaching me something important about deer spotting. I was learning something important about life!

**I.**

As Mary and the other women walk toward the burial place of Jesus, they worry about the stone, about details which help blunt death's harsh edge. And standing finally in the early morning brightness, they see only the empty tomb. The empty tomb confirms their worst fears: someone has taken away the body of their Lord, robbed them of their final act of affection. The tomb is barren. So are their hopes and lives. Barren. All they see is the empty tomb.

What else is there to see? What else can we, any of us, expect to see as at some point we too stare into death's gaping emptiness? In John's gospel it says, "But Mary stood at the grave weeping." Chances are better than good that we will stand weeping too – one day. Here in Mark's gospel, Mary and the other women face only the need to adjust to Death. They come, in the darkness with which Easter begins, burdened with spices and perfume literally to out-smell the smell and stench of death and, in any event, to learn to live with it.

To learn to live with it; to learn to live with death. Perhaps that is the problem. We have grown accustomed to Death - not just to dying as a normal and necessary part of living, but we have grown accustomed to Death as the all-pervasive fact of our existence. Death has become the context of our living, Death the kingdom in which we exist. We live with it, eat it, cook with it, breathe it, smell it, even love and embrace it. And most of all, we allow ourselves to remember it constantly.

We walk right up to the tomb, the grave or the memory and stare into the pain and think, this is all there really is, this is what it all comes to. After all is said and done, the last word about us is, simply, **we die!** Those we love die. And so will we.

“Now that she's gone...” An older man is talking about his wife.

There's not much to come home to

Now that she's gone.  
I keep forgetting,  
Sort of expecting her to be there  
Like always.  
So when I open the door  
The silence hits me  
Like a fist,  
Knocks the wind out of me.  
I'm glad there's nobody there to see.  
They'd send me up like a kook.  
But  
The air inside the house is hard and cold  
And it used to be warm and soft  
With her talking,  
Saying nothing,  
Asking silly questions –  
"Is that you?" She'd ask,  
And I'd say, "No, it's Santa Claus,"  
Or "the man-in-the-moon,"  
But I felt like me  
Then.  
A lot of time now I don't.

- Maclay, Elise, *Green Winter*, p. 76

"A lot of time now I don't." Many of us who have wept outside one grave or another can agree with that. "A lot of time now I don't." Hopes, dreams, fond expectations, plans for the future – all sealed away, buried, dead. It is hard to swallow, difficult to take. But it should not be a surprise, should not be unexpected. For we know what it is like not to feel like ourselves a lot of the time now.

If you can understand that, you know why the first Easter greeting was not, "Be of good cheer!" but rather "Do not be alarmed!" And you know why Mark's gospel ends the way it does with the woman saying nothing to anyone for they were afraid! For in a world grown accustomed to the sickly smile of Death, defeat and disaster, has come a strange, new and shocking invitation and possibility: Look *through* the trees, look *through* the tomb! There, did you see that movement at the corner of your eye? That movement which shouldn't be there but is -- that is what to look for.

And that is amazingly frightening, for it means the God with whom we interact and covenant acts through dying and suffering and disillusionment as well as through joy and pleasure and encouragement. When all is said and done, God is behind it all!

God does not save us - any of us - from suffering and pain and dying. He saves us *through* them! Be not amazed! Be not afraid! Look through the tomb, look through the tragedy; look through the hurt into life. Suddenly those religious sounding words - "Take up your cross and follow me!" - take on meaning. Life is not cheap, it is expensive. The Lord of Life calls us to life through the tomb. He has moved beyond it; he is not there in the tomb; he is free of its imprisonment and has set us free to live beyond fear.

The late Dr. Carlyle Marney, former pastor of First Baptist Church of Austin, Texas, as well as Charlotte's Myers Park Baptist Church, was lecturing at a convocation of Southern Baptist pastors in Georgia back during the heated days of Civil Rights marches. One of the pastors asked Dr. Marney to lead them all in a prayer asking God to help

with the "Black Problem." Marney said that he would not bother God with the problem! God had already put a majority of his people in every county seat in the South, and God expected them to do something about the problem. Ah! There was a man who looked *through* the trees and *through* the tomb, and who knew that God had invited us to join him on the other side of fear!

## II.

Many of us spend so much time and energy running from darkness, insecurity and discomfort - fearing they will keep us from enjoying life that we never see *through* the darkness into the ultimate security of God's presence. And we take a strange sense of relief in noting that the majority of people are like that - just like us. But sometimes a majority simply means that all the foolish ones are on the same side!

The question is not whether or not we shall die. We shall die. We shall all die. The question of course is, given the fact of our physical dying, how do we choose to live now? The last word about us is not that we die! The last word is how we choose to live!

We are not exempt or safe from suffering, pain and dying. We are saved, made whole and complete, through and in spite of them. Be not amazed! Be not afraid! Look through the tomb, through the tragedy, through the hurt, look through the painful personal relationship, the disappointed hopes, the divorce you still don't understand, the lost job, or the boring job. Look through all of that into resurrecting life which Jesus gives to us. The Lord of Life calls us into life through the tomb. He has moved beyond it, he is not there in the tomb; he is free of all its limits and has set us free to live beyond fear.

Eventually Mary's life and that of the other women will implode as a new world opens for her and all others who follow Jesus out of the tomb and discarded grave clothes. That is what this day is about. The old dominion of Death has been broken and its power at an end unless you and I choose to bow before it.

All my life I have heard people say, "I wish we could keep Christmas all year!" But I have never, not ever, not even once, heard anyone say, "I wish we could keep Easter all year!" Why is that, do you think? I think it is because it is too dangerous! Too frightening. God's provocative intrusion of power in the Easter Resurrection is not a story to comfort children whose little kitty cat has just died or whose grandparent has expired. It is something that can happen, is indeed happening, on Trade Street in Charlotte and also on your street when God's Spirit gets inside us and causes us to reach out to one another, to care for the least among our citizens, to love our most hated enemies.

I have heard of baptisms deep in the interior of Mexico in which the infant to be baptized is carried into the church in a burial casket. His or her parents carry the casket. The priest removes the covering of the casket and lifts the infant to the light. And then the child is baptized into a new life - from death to life! And right there and then the church is claiming that the child is leaving behind the powers of this world and all those powers can do to harm, defeat and kill the child. And the church is claiming a resurrecting life and all that God's Spirit will do in and through this child in every resurrecting moment in the future.

This is so important, so utterly important. Beloved, this Sunday is not about giving you comfort at the end of your life - at the eschatological last day for you or me. This day is all about giving us courage to live now, in these existential days. Easter matters now, or it does no matter at all.

There is a doctor in midtown Manhattan named Joyce Wilkins. She lives a resurrecting life now. She drives a van around New York City's Midtown looking for prostitutes. She has developed relationships, won on trust and respect, and offers them blood tests and medical care as well as a needed word of hope now and again. A *New*

*York Times* newspaper reporter interviewed her and said, “Even though you give them medical care, many of them die. You lose a lot of your patients. It must be very discouraging.” She responded, “Well, that’s one way to look at it, but my mother taught me to look at it another way. My mother was a teacher of brain-damaged children and taught me when you look at people you don’t look at the damage. You look for the image of God in them beneath the damage and all. I realized that most forcefully one evening when my mother had her class do a performance of *My Fair Lady* for parents’ night. And it never occurred to my mother (or the girl’s parents) not to let a brain-damaged girl in a wheelchair roll across the stage singing, “I could have danced all night; I could have spread my wings.”

My friends, this resurrecting life is for now. And if it cannot happen in a wheelchair, it cannot happen anywhere.

A new life! Life in the face of dying, but not under the power of Death. A new life! Life lived through whatever comes our way with the Christ who has walked with us into his new day.

I have sat with my sons and daughter listening to the world wake up. The snap of a twig broken by unseen feet, the rousing of sleeping birds as something or someone silently moves pass them, the birth of dawn and the beginning of day, the end of darkness and emptiness - and I have marveled at God's gift of life. I have learned slowly – no, that is not quite true. I am *finally beginning to learn slowly* to look *through* the trees. I am slowly learning to look *through* the tomb for the One who is no longer there but gloriously let loose everywhere!

There! Do you see him? He is going on before you. There!

Christ is risen!

He is raised indeed!

Amen.

