

## **Just Dying for a Change (Mark 16: 1-8)**

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Christ is risen!

C: He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

### I.

You have heard the expression, "We are just dying for a change." Isn't that what the Easter Jesus had been doing, literally, just dying for a change? Recall what the messenger in the tomb told the women, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." You see, he was just dying. But now, says the messenger, "he has risen, he is not here." (Mark 16:6) That is the change for which he was dying.

That does not mean Jesus approved of dying. For him death was not something to "accept." He did not die like Socrates, philosophizing stoically between sips of hemlock. Jesus did not take death lying down. No, he complained with a loud voice. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:34) He did not, you might say, die like a man, John Wayne style, with stiff upper-lip. He was terrified by the God-forsakenness of dying. The centurion at the foot of the cross, who knew a thing or two about dying, noted that the only one who could have died protesting the way Jesus did was God's own child. "Truly this man was the Son of God." (15:39)

Jesus must have known something frightful about death that the rest of us deny. In the whole Gospel of Mark the only other characters who resisted death as anguishedly as Jesus did were the demons. Remember how one of them had cried out, "Jesus of Nazareth, have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy[ing] One of God." (1:24; 5:7) And now on Good Friday on the cross it was Jesus' turn to die, crying out against it — against God?— sounding very much like the demons had sounded.

The difference is, Jesus was dying for a change. "He has risen, he is not here." All along that is what his dying had been for, resurrection. On how many previous occasions in the Markan gospel (I count five) hadn't Jesus forewarned his disciples that he would be arrested and executed, yes, but always also in the same breath, that on the third day he would rise from death? (8:31; 9:9; 9:31; 10:34; 14:28) You would think, wouldn't you, that if Jesus really was so sure of surviving he would have met his death more serenely than he did? The exact opposite is the case. Exactly because he was counting on outlasting death he did not have to deny its real horror. His hope of resurrection freed him to see the sheer God-forsakenness of human death, and in all honesty to be appalled what he saw. It was with an eye toward Easter that he dared to cry the Cry of Dereliction. Because in the end the Father would find some way to remove the bitter cup, Jesus could go ahead meanwhile and drink it to the dregs, terror and all.

What was the change for which Jesus was just dying? Answer: a changed way of dying. He died to be rid of dying. The old way of dying just gets rid of the deceased, period. The new way gets rid of the deceased, comma, only until the deceased has died out on death itself. It is one thing, said Paul, to die in your sin, it is quite another to die out on sin. That is why Jesus had to do such a thorough job of dying — the whole *Stueck*, including its agony, its despair of God — so that never again would it have to be done the old way. Jesus made a career of dying the new way. You might say, dying is what he did for a living. He died his way into power, kingship, dominion. Beginning already with his baptism, his whole ministry was one long process of losing his life. But guess what he called it? One long "baptism." (10:38) His christening, his Christ-ening. Dying was the making of him as the Christ. Dying was for him the royal anointing, the ointment of coronation. Easter triumph, his and ours, that was the change for which all along he was just dying.

## II.

The change **in us** for which Jesus was just dying he called "repentance." That was the opening theme of his preaching, "Repent and believe the gospel." (1:15) In a way isn't that what the women at the tomb were doing, repenting? Repenting is a sinner's version of what Christ was doing, just dying for a change. The women, we are told, "fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them," And the story ends, "They were afraid." (16:8) As one translation puts it, they "were beside themselves with terror." (NEB) Picture Mary Magdalene gasping to the others, once they had made it home and had bolted the door, "I thought I would die." They were mortally afraid. Almost literally were they frightened to death. Easter, we said, means Jesus' just dying for a change. Notice now how that is being replayed in these gutsy women. Following him, it is now their turn to be dying for a change. It took his Easter to free them to suffer their own Good Fridays. Thanks to his rising from the dead they could now cry their mini-version of the Cry of Dereliction. (Would that his macho male followers could have managed as much.)

Afraid the women were, yes, but is that repenting? Well whatever else repentance is-- and surely it is not just being sorry for this or that sin — it is the newfound ability to be truly afraid, the freedom to fear that One, the only One who deserves to be feared, the good and honest God. Repentance is not the old kind of fearing which "the chief priests and the scribes" did who "feared the multitude." (11:18) That kind of fear, people-fearing, the gospel condemns. Repentance is not the old kind of fear the disciples felt in the storm at sea. That kind of fear, the fear of perishing, Jesus rebukes. (4:40) But then, once he stills the storm, what they fear instead, is Jesus. **That** fear he does **not** rebuke. (4:41)

In the Gospels the ones who experience the new fear are those poor sinners for whom Christ is their only hope. But because he is, him they fear. They are the penitents, the only fearers whom Christ ever comforts with "Don't be afraid" — but only after he has first let them **be** afraid. First he lets them drink the anxious cup, then he removes it. "Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved." The vacated tomb

-- grace if there ever was! — alarmed the women. (16:5) Then first were they told they could now stop being alarmed. Repentance is both: dying, and the post mortem change.

### III.

Oh yes, let us not forget the ointment. That, you recall is why the women had gone to the tomb in the first place, because of the ointment. The story is not without humor. The evening before, once the sabbath had ended at sundown, they had hurried to pool their money and buy the fragrant ointment. Had it cost them a bundle? Was this perfume a luxury they would never have spent on themselves? At any rate at the crack of dawn they were off and away to the tomb of their dead rabbi, for his an-ointment. He must have had a sense of humor. Maybe he was even a bit of a practical joker. For when they arrived at the tomb he had already moved on. (Was that legal, so much activity on his part, on the sabbath yet?) This has to be the sweetest prank ever of bait and switch.

His prank had a point. It was a pointed reminder to the women. Had they forgotten so soon what had happened just a short time before at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, when a woman there had brought an expensive alabaster jar of ointment and anointed Jesus' head? In fact, she may have been one of the same three women who was now back here at the tomb, trying to re-anoint him, as if the first time hadn't taken. All the more reason, then, why they should have remembered what he had said at that earlier anointing, "She has anointed my body **beforehand** for **burial**." (14:8) The joke was now on them for forgetting, though it was a kindly joke between friends. The bigger joke, which he has played on us all, is that his real anointing was his very burial, and his rising again —for our lasting enjoyment.

But what did the women do with all that ointment once they returned home with it, unused, yet were too terrified to tell what they had seen? That by itself is humorous. Here all these months Jesus had forbidden his followers to tell anyone about his healings, a secret they could hardly keep, and now on Easter morning they are finally charged to "go and tell," only to be scared speechless. Still, the women must not have remained speechless. How else could we have learned their story? Eventually their terror must have turned to joy, the way cross turns into Easter, and they told all, even if at their own expense. What great good sports. And the ointment? Who knows? Maybe they sold it and gave the proceeds to the poor. I hope they saved some of it for themselves, for their reunion soon after with the risen Christ back home in Galilee. Can you imagine the laughter! That is the change for which they had been just dying. So had he.

### IV.

Given this Easter version of repentance, two names come to mind, Suleiman and Saddam. Both of them, Suleiman the Magnificent and Saddam Hussein, have prompted Christians to be just dying for a change. I mean, these two dictators have prompted Christians to repent, Easter style. No thanks to these tyrants themselves but to the God who has used them against us, there have been believers who have gotten the message,

have capitalized on the crisis by just dying for a change — repenting — and so have parlayed the God-forsakenness of it all into resurrection.

First, Suleiman the Magnificent. Back in the days of the Reformation, Suleiman and his invincible Muslim armies — European Christians called them "the Turks" — had been encroaching upon Christian Europe from the southeast, leaving a hideous trail of atrocities, and were now threatening the very gates of Vienna. Martin Luther incurred bitter criticism when he declared that God was "visiting our sin upon us by means of this scourge," even though Luther eventually agreed that Christendom had no choice but to defend itself against the approaching menace.

In fact, Luther went his critics one better. He proposed to Europe a practical strategy for defeating Suleiman: repent. Christendom, Luther pointed out, currently had two enemies, of whom Suleiman was but one, the other, the more daunting enemy being God. If the truly brave Christians among us would repent, said Luther, even if they were only a tiny remnant, all of Europe might yet be spared. For with such bold penitence there would then be, no longer God but merely Suleiman to contend with. Suleiman, by the way, suddenly had to drop everything and return to pressing business at home.

For us today Suleiman's tyrannical equivalent is Saddam Hussein. But who's afraid of Saddam anymore? Haven't we won the war? So what's to repent? Ah, yes, comes the reminder, but have we won the peace? Are the Iraqis at peace? The Kuwaitis? The Palestinians? The Israelis? Are we? All around us, now that the bills are coming due, the bills also for new wars back home, people are seeing signs of "Saddam's revenge," if out of the ashes. Then does that mean we never should have entered the war? Not necessarily. It seems that finally we had no choice. Then was that the judgment upon us: the only way left for doing right was to do evil, irreparable evil, even to our own children? Or if we do think (as many of us did at first) that we should have gone more slowly, would even that have exempted us from repenting? Maybe Saddam's worst revenge is that by being so obviously in need of repentance himself he has successfully blinded us to our own need of it, still.

What is wrong with this kind of talk is not that it is untrue but that it is only half true. The other half of it is that repentance, while it is something we've got to do, is far better than that: it is also something we **get** to do, thanks to the risen Lord. Repentance never did mean being afraid of Saddam, anymore than it meant being afraid of the tempest or of the multitude. That is the old way of fearing. The new fearing means God-fearing, fearing Saddam's User, fearing the only One the loss of whose grace would be the loss of everything. But to fear **that** One already implies how amazing we know that grace to be. What is more, in that case fearing is only the beginning. It is dying, yes, but just dying for a **change**. And the change is resurrection with Christ, starting here and now.

Maybe it is only a tiny minority of folks who are gifted with that Easterly repentance, folks who in face of the present chaos fear not the chaos but the One who controls it and **therefore** dare to cry the Cry of Dereliction, just because they trust that that same One will say, "Don't be alarmed," "he has risen." I know from experience and so do you, there

actually are such liberated God-fearers among us, Marys and Magdalenes and Salomes and Simons, who do brave that new kind of fearing and that kind of Eastering. What they dare to do is not merely what everybody does, "Pray for Peace." What they do, without pretense and without show, is "Repent for Peace, " Christ being risen. Imagine the consequences for Europe, also for the Middle East, even for the Middle West. Imagine the laughter!

Christ is risen!

C: He is risen indeed! Hallelujah!

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