

WE'VE GOT GOOD NEWS!

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, April 5, 2015

Easter Sunday – Communion – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Text: Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV, adapted)

¹When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus' body. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸And going out they fled from the tomb, for fear and trembling, ecstasy and amazement had come upon them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were filled with awe.

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Back about ten years ago, when Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* began showing in theaters, it caused quite a stir. Those of you who saw the film may recall that it was largely about Jesus' suffering and death. There were occasional flashbacks to earlier times in Jesus' life, but the film was, as its title implied, an extended graphic meditation on the suffering, on the passion, of Jesus, which as we know culminated in his crucifixion. What was missing from the film was any historical sense of **why** Jesus was crucified.

One segment of the scene leading up to Jesus' crucifixion stands out in my memory: it's a closeup of a hand holding a hammer and pounding the nails into Jesus' hands on the cross. The hammer-holding hand in that scene, I learned after I saw the movie, was the hand of Mel Gibson. The maker of the movie was metaphorically involved in making Jesus the atoning sacrifice for his sins—which was Mel Gibson's answer to the question of why Jesus was crucified.

Ever since the medieval theologian Anselm developed his theory of substitutionary atonement—which basically says that Jesus took upon himself the punishment that God should have meted out to the rest of us—most

Christians have learned to view the passion of the Christ through this lens of substitutionary atonement. There are certainly biblical texts that support this interpretation. “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures,” wrote Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3). The first letter of John refers to Christ as “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

But there's another, equally significant, explanation for the passion of the Christ. And that has to do with the passion of Jesus. Jesus was passionate about many things that ran afoul of the interests of the Jewish and Roman authorities. He was passionate about the nearness of the kingdom of God, the empire of God: which put him at odds with the empire of Rome. He was passionate about the proper use of the Jerusalem Temple as a house of worship for rich and poor alike: which put him at odds with the priests whose livelihood depended on the various forms of Temple taxation. He was passionate about giving voice and visibility to the outcasts of his day: which the authorities perceived as a threat to the security and stability of the status quo.

Jesus of Nazareth—a peasant from the restive province of Galilee—was so passionate about the nearness of God's reign of justice and peace that he had attracted a large following. All this energy around the nearness of the reign of God could lead to an insurrection, especially during the Passover festival, which remembered the liberation of the slaves in Egypt. But the Romans would quickly and brutally put down any insurrection. Small wonder, then, that Caiaphas the Jewish high priest argued forcefully to the council that “it is better for [us] to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50). Small wonder that Pontius Pilate the Roman governor agreed to convict Jesus of blasphemy and treason and to condemn him to death by crucifixion. The passion of Jesus—his unyielding devotion to the way of God—led almost inevitably to the passion of the Christ.

I like to think that if I had been in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus, it would not have been my hand nailing him to the cross. I like to think that I might have been a bystander, not a close follower of Jesus, but not a stranger to his ministry either. I like to think that I might have heard one of the last things he cried out from the cross before he died: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

These words are actually the first verse of the 22nd psalm. They are words of agony, not words of comfort like those of the 23rd psalm. These words so impressed themselves on the witnesses to his suffering and death—the same women who were the first witnesses to the empty tomb—that Mark records them in their original Aramaic, the language that Jesus and his companions spoke.

These anguished words of Jesus have led Christians through the centuries to ask: where was God in the passion of the Christ? To wrestle with this question, let us imagine the story of Jesus' suffering and death and resurrection as a drama being played out, not on a movie screen, but on a simple stage in a darkened theater. You and I are the audience in this theater. Where might we find God in this drama of a cross on a hill and a tomb in a garden?

Unlike in many atonement theologies, God is not an unseen hand offstage, directing and controlling the drama. Instead, in an incarnational theology, God is actually onstage, visible and tangible in the very person of Jesus on the cross, in the very flesh of the man from Nazareth. God in Jesus has become one with an innocent victim of sacrificial violence. It is the Roman and Jewish authorities who have sacrificed God's Beloved Son, not God.

Now we might think that God as suffering victim would wreak vengeance on his victimizers. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life. But when Jesus on the cross is heard to say of his tormentors, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," this is the first clue that the drama we are witnessing will have a different final act from every prior, and every subsequent, human sacrifice.

In the story of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, God in Christ has sided with the crucified and risen One, not with those who thought they could bring about peace through the suffering and death, through the human sacrifice, of an innocent victim. When Jesus "set his face toward Jerusalem," he was not intending to re-enact the story of Abraham and Isaac, where this time the Father would indeed sacrifice the Son.

Instead, Jesus knew that his self-identification with the outcasts of his time and place would make him the perfect sacrificial victim, not for God, but for the powers that be: Caiphas the High Priest was speaking for both the Jewish and the Roman authorities when he said, "It is better for [us] to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed."

As we follow the narrative of the passion of Jesus in the gospel of Mark, which began with Jesus' proclamation of the nearness of the kingdom of God, we witness during Holy Week two scenes in the final act of the drama: the crucifixion and the empty tomb. There are two props on the stage: the cross on which Jesus breathes his last, and the tomb in which his lifeless body is laid to rest.

We watch as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus take Jesus' body down from the cross, and wrap it in a linen shroud, and place the body in the tomb. Together they labor to roll the heavy stone across the entrance to the tomb, and the stone locks into place with a loud thud. The stage lights go dark. The entire theater stays dark for an uncomfortable several minutes, until the stage crew slowly and silently rolls the stone back from the entrance to the tomb. The stage lights come up just enough so we can see three women approaching what is now an empty tomb.

As the women cautiously enter the tomb, they suddenly stop, frozen in their tracks. They, and we, see light streaming from the tomb. They, and we, hear a young man's voice from inside the tomb: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

No longer frozen in their tracks, they turn from the tomb to the audience, their faces and their body language revealing fear and trembling, ecstasy and awe. Wordlessly, they run from the stage down the center aisle through the audience. They say nothing to us, the audience. We, the audience, can only contemplate both the empty cross and the empty tomb on the stage, waiting for the house lights to come up before we speak a word.

These first witnesses to the empty tomb said nothing to anyone on Easter morning because they were still processing their awe and amazement at what they had seen and heard. They probably also knew that Peter and the rest of the men disciples would dismiss their experience out of hand (which, according to Luke's account of the resurrection, was exactly what happened: the women's words "seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them").

The women did not remain silent, however. We know from other New Testament narratives of Easter that their credibility was tested, but in the end, these faithful witnesses to the **crucifixion** were heard and believed and honored and remembered as the first witnesses to the **resurrection**.

Against all odds, Jesus had faith that God would indeed vindicate him and his teaching and his way of life. And that is exactly what happened while thick darkness covered the stage. God raised Jesus from the dead and rolled back the stone from the tomb so that the Risen One could go forth into the light, as the very embodiment of God's amazing love for this broken and beautiful world of ours. This is the good news, the gospel, that we as Jesus' followers strive to embody, not only on Easter, but throughout the year.

This Easter morning, we've got good news. In word and sacrament, we rejoice in Jesus' victory over death. Both the cross and the tomb are empty. This is good news!

We recognize the Risen One in the breaking of the bread and the sharing of the cup. This is good news!

We remember the impact of the empty tomb on those faithful women who had witnessed his suffering and death: fear and trembling, ecstasy and awe. This is good news!

We celebrate in Jesus' resurrection God's decisive and indelible and merciful "No!" to every form of human evil. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are set free from sin and freed to love. This is good news!

There can be miracles when we believe this good news. Who know what miracles we can achieve, when we believe this good news.

For God is indeed in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself, and us to one another, not counting our debts against us, and entrusting to us, the beloved community, this amazing story and ministry of reconciliation. This is good news!

[image on p. 1: <https://s-media-cache->