

Date: April 16, 2006

SUNDAY: Easter

SERMON: Loose Ends, New Beginnings

Text(s): 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

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Like many people Carol and I enjoy good detective fiction. Whether it's the 11th century Benedictine monk and former crusader named Brother Cadfael solving the latest murder from his monastery in Shewsbury, or Detective Adam Dalgliesh, the wryly skeptical parson's son who is P.D. James's sleuth, we enjoy working through the usual puzzling combination of multiple suspects, red herrings, and tantalizing clues, to try to figure out who the real culprit is before the author finally reveals the answer. But I also think that a deeper, perhaps unconscious appeal that accounts for the widespread popularity of detective fiction, is that murder mysteries have tidy endings. It belongs to the essence of the genre that all the loose ends, all the false leads and cold trails are brought together so that at the end, the murderer is exposed, the crime punished, and the innocent vindicated.

That preference for hard answers and tidy resolutions seems to be an almost universal human preference. It even finds expression in the way we talk about things. For example, we say, "Well, I've got this job all wrapped up." Or we describe people whose lives are untidy or in a muddle as "being at loose ends with themselves." At the opposite pole from being "at loose ends" with oneself is "having it all together." I suspect we all know more people in the first category than we do in the second, perhaps because life is hardly ever tidy, is it? Most of the time, life is full of loose ends.

In the small Kentucky town where I went to seminary, there was a young man who always hung around the grocery store. He came from a very large and very poor family, and all the children had the names of 1950's cowboy movie stars. His name was Gene Autry Johnson, (If you remember who Gene Autry was, you're giving away your age.). This Gene Autry was definitely

not the "singing cowboy" of movie fame. Mostly, his life consisted of standing outside the door of the supermarket and greeting everybody who came to do their shopping. And he always had a standard greeting. He'd say, "Hey!" (which was the way everybody in Kentucky greeted one another). You'd respond, "Hey yourself, Gene Autry, how're you doin'?" And Gene Autry would invariably reply, "Always sumpin', ain't it?" That's about as good a description of life as I've heard. There's always something, isn't there? "Having it all together" is a temporary, very short-term condition at best. There's always something waiting in the wings, it seems, to disrupt our lives and hurl us back into chaos.

That's undoubtedly how Jesus' disciples and followers must have felt during his arrest, trial, and subsequent crucifixion. Here was a group of men and women who had pinned their hopes for a better future on this strange and compelling man. How moved they were by his proclamation that in God's realm, a different kind of justice obtained, a different kind of social order was practiced, an order based on love rather than power, and his invitation to enter that realm by becoming part of the community of his disciples.

And then he was crucified. Nailed up on a wooden cross to die a lingering, tortured death, mocked by his enemies and derided as a deluded fanatic. *He saved others; himself he could not save,* his tormentors taunted. *"If you are the Messiah, come down from the cross."* But he couldn't. He died there, shouting out his last words, *"My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"* Can't you imagine what an unmitigated disaster that was for his followers? What a chaotic loose end to their lives and hopes?

While we can well imagine their dismay at the crucifixion of Jesus, we can no more imagine what came next than they could. That something came next— something that broke into that badly unraveled loose ending of their lives and transformed their chaos into cosmos, into order and wholeness— is evidenced by the

fact that we're here this morning. Something happened to transform the disaster of the crucifixion into a vital, forward-looking movement that within fifty years had spread throughout the Roman empire, and within two hundred years had become the official religion of the empire and had spread to virtually every part of the known world. St. Paul appears to be the first to have named this "something" that came next. Using language drawn from the particular religious tradition within Judaism of which he was a part, he called it "resurrection from the dead."

Later, the gospel writers told stories about how the first disciples experienced that "something." Their accounts are full of mystery and ambiguity as they try to describe the indescribable. Some of the accounts really dramatize the women's discovery that the body of Jesus is not in the tomb, and Matthew, Luke, and John all tell their stories in such a way so that all the loose endings get neatly gathered up and resolved.

But not so with Mark's story, which is the one we're reading this year, and the first of the gospels to have been written. At first glance, the ending of Mark's gospel appears to leave Jesus' disciples and us, the readers, in chaos. It ends abruptly with some women coming to the tomb where Jesus is buried, and being told there by an unidentified young man dressed in a white robe, "*Don't be afraid. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Go tell his disciples and Peter: He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him.*" Then comes this rather incredible sentence, a sentence that appears to be a loose end if I ever saw one: "*And they fled from the tomb for terror and awe had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.*"

What kind of an ending to a story is that? That ending has always been a problem, even for some of the earliest readers of this gospel, and

probably explains why the later gospel writers gussied up their accounts with angels and mysterious appearances and disappearances of Jesus and nice, tidy endings. In fact, early church leaders and scribes who copied the gospels were so uncomfortable with Mark's loose ending that they helped him out by adding several other endings later on, which are now included in most editions of the Bible and indicated as later additions. The thing that all of these later endings have in common, is that they tie up Mark's loose ends. They make everything tidy.

But somehow, that loose end that Mark leaves us with is more true to life; it leaves us confronting a mystery too great to comprehend in a neat, tidy package. And that's the way it is in real life, isn't it? Life is full of mystery.

But Mark's ending, while mysterious, is also perhaps, much more skillful than it first appears. When we really read it carefully, it contains a clue that sends us back to the beginning of the gospel to read it again. "*Go, tell his disciples and Peter: He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him.*" Galilee is where this Gospel began. All the stories of Jesus that we've already read took place in Galilee. Mark is saying, I think, that now we can read them again, this time with our hearts fortified and our eyes and ears illuminated by the announcement of the young man at Jesus' tomb; "*Be not afraid. You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He has been raised; he is not here.*" Mark is saying, I believe, that if we want to see the risen Lord and hear his voice and discover the deeper logic, the deeper coherence of life, we have to do it in the only place it can be done: in Galilee, in the midst of the chaos of everyday life. In the midst of our brokenness and confusion and plans gone awry, in the midst of all the wrong turnings we take and the back-tracking we have to do—that's where we'll encounter the risen Lord, if we look for him with eyes of faith, and hearts full of courage. Don't be afraid. Look for Jesus where he is now, not where you laid his

body in the grave. Look for him in all the loose ends of your life and your relationships. Look for him in the world around you. That's where you'll find him.

By leaving us with this (I believe) intentional loose end, Mark prevents us from thinking of the resurrection of Jesus as some event of the distant past, "back there," that solves all our problems, ties up all our loose ends, and delivers us from the mystery and confusion of real life. Instead, it offers us the hope that we may encounter the risen Lord in the midst of real life, and those encounters orient us toward the future, toward the hope that our lives will have a larger and deeper meaning, a coherence, a wholeness at which we can now only guess.

Most of us will have seen what is perhaps the most famous photograph to come out of the Viet Nam war. It was the Pulitzer prize-winning photo taken by Nick Ut, a Vietnamese photographer working for the Associated Press. It's the photo of the nine-year old girl running naked down a road toward the camera, her arms outstretched as if in crucifixion, her face a mask of terror, her mouth wide open, screaming in pain and fear. It's an unforgettable scene. Her name was Kim Phuc and her village had just been hit by American planes dropping napalm. She was horribly burned and nearly died. It took many years and much plastic surgery to finally restore her to some semblance of normality, though her left arm was nearly completely burned off.

When that photo first came out, it had a particularly powerful impact on a man named John Plummer. Plummer was the F-4 pilot who led that napalm strike on Kim Phuc's village. He had been assured that all civilians were out of the village, but as often happens in wartime, information is unreliable. War is perhaps the ultimate example of a situation in which chaos rules. Plummer says, "My heart was wracked with guilt in the realization that it was I who had sent the bombs into her village." Although he

told almost no one about the incident, his guilt took a terrible toll. He began to drown his feelings in alcohol. He turned inward to the point where his family-life was destroyed, and he and his wife, the mother of his four children, got a divorce.

Later he remarried, and his second wife Joanne was a devout Christian. Through her, he too came to faith, and began to feel that God was calling him into ministry. He went to seminary and became a pastor. And while he managed to live with his guilt, it was still there deep within him, like a heavy weight he carried around.

In 1996, he happened to see a network news story that updated the case of Kim Phuc, who now lives in Toronto. He learned later that she was going to visit the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington in the company of the photographer Nick Ut, who had helped raise the money for her many operations. Plummer felt he had to go to Washington to see her, to beg her forgiveness. But he was unprepared for what was to happen.

From the introduction that preceded Kim Phuc's speech, he learned for the first time, that her two younger brothers, one of whom is pictured in that famous photo, had died in that napalm attack. He says, "Being in a pretty precarious emotional state already, this just pushed me over the edge. I began to shake all over as wracking sobs were torn from my body. I felt like I was going to scream at the revelation that not only was I responsible for Kim's burns, but that I had also killed her two brothers."

Kim Phuc was told that the man who led the attack was there, and she turned to find him. Plummer reports, "She saw my grief, my pain, my sorrow. She held out her arms to me and embraced me. All I could say was 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry; I'm sorry,' over and over again. At the same time she was saying to me, 'It's all right; it's all right; I forgive, I forgive, I forgive.'"

She then invited him and his wife back to

her hotel, where they spent two hours together. He discovered that Kim Phuc was a Christian too, and they talked and prayed together. Plummer tells in wonder of how Kim got down on her knees in that hotel room and prayed for the man who had maimed her and killed her brothers. “I was floating,” he says, “I was free. I was finally at peace.”

Out of that meeting has come a friendship that is now developing into a joint ministry as these two broken people, who have encountered the risen Christ in the midst of the chaos of their lives, to tell their story to others.¹ They have discovered the deeper coherence, the greater wholeness, the new beginnings amid all the loose ends.

H.A. Williams, in his book *True Resurrection*, says,

*What we hanker for . . . is an experience in which we are lifted out of the tears and sweat and dirt of our humanity into a serenity where the gritty quality of our everyday life can be forgotten. But resurrection as a present miracle does not deliver us from the unevenness and turmoil, the fragmentariness of being human. The miracle is to be found precisely within the ordinary round and daily routine of our lives. . . Resurrection is always a mystery. It is always a miracle. It is always the creative act of the Eternal Word.*²

Like the women at the empty tomb, we will always leave amazed and frightened and confused in the face of the mystery of life and death; but if we have the courage to go back to Galilee, back to our real lives with all their chaos and loose ends, and if we look for Christ there, we will meet the risen Lord, and discover in his presence, the power of a new creation.

1. Kim Phuc and John Plummer’s story and all quotations are from *Christian Century*, February 19, 1997, 182-184.

2. H. A. Williams, *True Resurrection*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 10-11.