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 First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham, AL
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Rise Up
 Mark 16:1-8

Growing up there was always a trumpet on Easter.
 It helped that our organist is married to a trumpet player.
 So there was always a trumpet on Easter.
 Don't get me wrong – I'll take Honney Kim and her violin over a trumpet any day.

What I mean is, my memory is that Easter always came with fanfare and rejoicing.

New dresses and shiny shoes, and for a few unfortunate years in the early 90's, hats.
 Cheese grits and baked ham and once, only once, tomato aspic.

In our culture, Easter drips with triumph – RESURRECTION! DEATH DEFEATED!
 Yeah! Bring on the trumpets and lilies and chocolate eggs! Unmitigated joy and
 unrelenting hope!

Except. Mark's story isn't like that, not really. Mark's story of the resurrection is short: only 8 verses. And it feels unfinished: it ends with women running away, amazed, but also scared and silent. Our culture isn't comfortable with this ending. It's an ending that's decidedly un-comfortable. Most of us are more satisfied with a happy ending, with the plot resolved and the story over: Resurrection! world saved! Wahoo! We're not the only ones who feel this way – the early church clearly struggled with it, too. So much so that ten more verses - the rest of the gospel - was tacked on by scribes in the second century. But in the original story, we don't see the resurrected Jesus at all, we only hear the good news second hand: he has been raised.

Mark is the oldest of the gospels, the first account of the resurrection story that we have, and he doesn't tell us about a Jesus who appears behind locked doors and shows us the marks in his hands and cooks breakfast on the beach. Mark shows the women going to anoint Jesus' battered body. Women, who did the dirty work of bearing children and keeping the house and caring for the sick and preparing the dead for burial. Women, whose testimony would never be believed if they had the courage to say anything. It is the women who go to anoint his corpse, and instead find an empty tomb. They meet a man who might be an angel, who says Jesus has been raised and that he's gone ahead of them to Galilee like he promised, they'll see him there. Then they flee, terrified and amazed, and they don't say nothing to nobody.

What are we to make of that?

On Friday, several of us walked the stations of the cross through downtown with folks from St. Luke's Episcopal Church and Greater Birmingham Ministries. The event was

called *seeking the suffering Jesus on the streets of Birmingham*. The stations of the cross take disciples through the last hours of Jesus' life – there are 14 in all, beginning with Pilate condemning Jesus to death and ending with Christ's body being laid in the tomb. On Friday, the crowd of disciples stopped in a variety of places to lift up those who suffer in our city, and to pray for Christ's presence to heal, comfort, and transform injustices. We prayed for our schools, for the poor and those experiencing homelessness, for those who suffer domestic violence or addiction, those who fall prey to predatory lending, and gun violence. For the three years I've done it, it's been my annual rendition of "The Old Rugged Cross." all the years they've been doing the walk, I think, the prayers and the stations have been the same. Almost twenty years have passed since First Light moved out of our basement and its services are more needed now than ever – the stations are the same because poverty and homelessness and racism and violence are still problems here. We haven't overcome those things yet. They are part of our Good Friday world.

On Saturday, more than 1400 Palestinians were injured and 17 were killed on the first day of a peaceful protest at the fence between Gaza and Israel.¹ Israeli soldiers shot more than 700 people with live ammunition and harmed far more with tear gas and rubber bullets. The first person killed was a farmer named Omar. He was 27 years old. He was working in the field, turning the earth, hands dirty and back hunched when the bullets pierced his body.

If Easter is trumpets and triumph, joy and hope, it seems like the world hasn't gotten the message. Because near and far, no matter where we look, no matter who we ask, suffering sneaks in. Violence and death are real and unavoidable. We are stuck in crucifixion mode. Even lives of the wealthy and comfortable are not immune to life-shattering diagnoses of cancer or dementia. The sticky fingers of addiction pluck up friends and loved ones no matter their age or address. Tragedy does not discriminate.

And yet, today we proclaim that there was a time when death did not win. A heart still for 36 hours began to beat again; a body bruised and battered and seemingly defeated by Jerusalem's finest breathed and rose up and went on with its work. There was a time when the powers and principalities did not get what they wanted – you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, but he has been raised. He is not here!

What must those women have thought? After rising in the dark to hurry to the tomb, dirt road crunching beneath their feet, mud caking their sandals... the stone was rolled away? They were clutching their oils and spices – lavender and myrrh and the tiny bit of costly nard Mary was able to salvage from the jar she'd broken a few days before. They were ready to see death. They were prepared. Mark typically portrays the women as model disciples, but they don't get it this time – they're looking for a dead body, after all.

Grief stricken and scared – scared not of the dead, but of the living, the women move swiftly in the darkness afraid of the Roman soldiers who killed their friend. But when

¹ Balousha, Hazem and Oliver Holmes, "Gaza Strip Mourns its Dead After Protest Met With Bullets," The Guardian online, 3/31/18.

they hear news of the resurrection, they're not just scared, they're terrified. Because that means Jesus is the real deal. He meant what he taught and the work he called them to must continue: The work of love, and healing, and justice for those on the margins – the work that got him killed – isn't over. They aren't off the hook.

I don't blame them for fleeing in terror and amazement, because sometimes I'm afraid, too. Christ's way of reconciliation, love, and justice can be a scary thing to *really* follow. And *resurrection* can be a dangerous thing to preach anywhere – especially in a city that was once called *Bombingham*. It's hard to know all it would take to bring about justice and reconciliation in a metro area as divided as ours, where poverty is so entrenched and the tax base is divided largely along lines of race and class. A city that once jailed a famous preacher over Easter for disturbing the peace -- NO, I don't blame the women for being terrified by news of the resurrection.

I imagine many of us here at church on Easter morning have wondered – is it true? Could it possibly be true?

I don't know. None of us can ever really know. We can only hope. I do know that I've seen resurrection.

It happens down the street at First Light all the time. Women dead to their families, enslaved by addiction or trapped in the cycle of poverty find new life, liberation, and hope for the future.

Here's how it happens - two women linger after bible study, deep in conversation. One is young, early twenties maybe, with a Caribbean accent. The other is older, and as the group packs up to leave around them they tell their stories of survival: the violence and abuse that haunted the younger one's childhood, the fists that brutalized the older woman's marriage. They affirm each other's courage, their heads held high, long fingernails punctuating each phrase, emphatically. These women have been to hell and back – and they have the scars to prove it. One takes the other's hand, warm and dry, in her own, and pats the back of it and says, “you can do this. You are better than the things that have happened to you. You are safe now, and you will rise above.” And because the older woman has been there, exactly there in that wobbly blue plastic chair at the table that squeaks when you rest your elbows on it, because she, too was once new to the shelter and afraid of the demands of a new life, the younger woman listens. Tears fill her eyes. She stands a little straighter, I can see her resolve strengthen. She is not alone. A new life is possible.

In Gaza, there is a fair trade company called Canaan that is building a network of small farmers growing olives and almonds and a grain called freekeh. They're part of a network that's the largest supplier of fair trade olive oil in the world. By building a cooperative of small farmers selling on the fair trade market, they've successfully raised the price of olive oil across Gaza – bringing more income and investment to the embattled and isolated region, enabling farmers to make a living and feed their families. They've resurrected hope across Gaza, one farm at a time.

The angel tells the women not to be alarmed, because Jesus has been raised and is going ahead of them to Galilee – they will see him there, just as he promised. Galilee is where Christ’s ministry began. It is where he taught and healed, cast out demons, brought outcasts in, challenged empire, and proclaimed the arrival of God’s kingdom. So maybe Mark’s ending is unsatisfying and unresolved for a reason. Because if the women must go to Galilee to see the risen Jesus, then maybe that’s where we’ll see him, too: in the serving, healing, loving work of following him. If the women were too afraid to speak – although clearly, they must have told somebody – we’ve heard the story now, too. So it’s our job to go, and tell the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.

Empty triumphalism is no use to me. But God taking on the powers of this world, defeating death, and calling us to build the kingdom here and now, one heart at a time – God calling us to rise up, to practice resurrection with unmitigated joy and unrelenting hope- that’s an Easter I can get behind. Because Christ is risen! He is risen indeed.