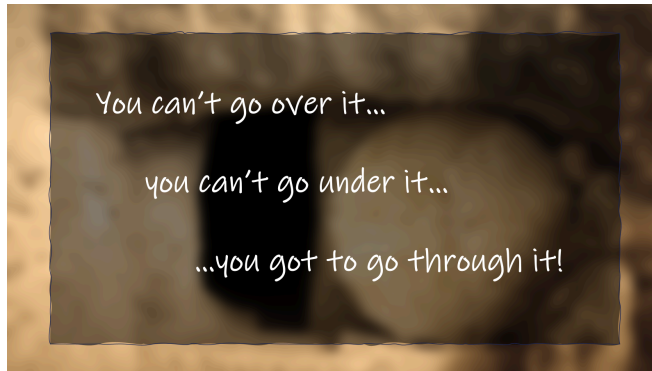


“...for they were afraid” // Easter Sunday  
Wildwood Mennonite Church // Joe Heikman  
March 31, 2024

The sermon opened with a video version of the children’s book classic, [We’re Going on a Bear Hunt](#) by Michael Rosen. The refrain echoes across a wild journey through tall grass, the river, the mud, the snow storm, the forest, and the cave:



Before this was a children’s book, the bear hunt was an American folk song. It’s one of my best memories of my Grandpa, sitting on his knees when I was like 3 or 4, and he would bounce his knees, and grab my arms and make me swish-swish-swish through the grass... and scare me half-to-death with his giant bear roar!

*You can't go over it, you can't go under it--oh no, you got to go through it.*

When you get past the bunnies and chocolate and religious imagery, that’s the Easter story.

You gotta go through it.

Now, there’s a lot of temptation to imagine that’s not the case.

Easter is a joyful day for Christians around the globe. And it is a good news story, for sure. We should celebrate!

But sometimes, we forget how we got here. We like to skip the messy bits and go straight to the party.

You’ve been in the retail spaces--the day after Boxing Day, the Valentines’ candies go out. And then the Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs, before the end of January. Spiritually, we sometimes follow that path as well--directly from Christmas to Easter without really bothering with Lent. A 40-day journey through the wilderness of sacrifice and lament? Ugh, no thanks!

Or this week, some of us sing our “Hosanna, Loud Hosanna”s on Palm Sunday, then go through a normal week and show up again for more cheers on Easter Sunday.

“He is Risen!” (the congregation echoes: “Christ is Risen, Indeed”). Indeed... but there was a whole dramatic story in between: betrayal, prosecution, crucifixion, darkness. *Where was I for that part?* Good Friday services are always less popular than Easter Sunday.

And theologically, it’s tempting to do the same. Sometimes we use Jesus’ pain and death to distance ourselves from our own vulnerability.

*Good Friday happened to him, so that it won’t happen to me.*

*He suffered and died, so that we don’t have to.*

*He bore my sin, so I don’t have to take responsibility for it.*

*His death and resurrection changed the formula, changed the game, so that we are saved from death and destruction.*

Well... yes and no, and no and yes.

For Christians, Easter *does* mean that death is not the end of anything, that mercy and grace get the final word, that Love Wins.

And still... you can’t go over it, you can’t go under it... you gotta go *through* it.

All of it.

When I was a kid, my Evangelical culture was *very* invested in “End Times” theology. The signs were all there, the end of history was near, and Jesus was going to come back to rapture me and the rest of the True Believers! None of that dying stuff for me, it was straight to heaven, *do not pass Go, do not collect \$200.*

I really believed that when I was a teenager, that I was literally going to be saved from death, that mine was “the last generation” and the faithful Christians would rise to meet him in the air, like, tomorrow! I heard that over and over, and I believed it was inevitable. Although I hoped Jesus would wait for a while longer... there were certain, ugh, “delights of the flesh” that I really wanted to experience before Jesus took us all up to heaven.

Not all Christians share that particular belief system, but still... that's the dream, right? Live the good life, then skip the painful parts and go straight to the Good Place, the better place.

Of course that's unrealistic. Life is full of sorrow. To varying degrees, but *that's* the inevitability.

And I see now that, for me, that "end times" worldview was a defense mechanism to cope against my mortality. And fair enough. Mortality is scary, and it's perfectly normal to use the story of Jesus as protection *against* the fear.

But, this year the gospel readings have been taking us through the gospel of Mark. And Mark offers a different way to understand Easter, an invitation to *go through it*.

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I'm sure that you're all familiar with the Easter story. And we've already heard the reading from the gospel of Mark once today. But I'm going to read it again, because the tone is important.

**Mark 16:1-8 (The Inclusive Bible translation)**

*When the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought perfumed oils so that they could anoint Jesus. Very early, just after sunrise on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb.*

*They were saying to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked, they found that the huge stone had been rolled back.*

*On entering the tomb, they saw a young person sitting at the right, dressed in a white robe. They were very frightened, but the youth reassured them: "Do not be amazed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the One who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. Now go and tell the disciples and Peter, 'Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see him just as he told you.'"*

*They made their way out and fled from the tomb bewildered and trembling; but they said nothing to anyone, because they were so afraid.*

Bewildered and trembling, silence, and fear. The traditional emotions of Easter?

Why is fear the tone that Mark sets for this Easter story?

Why are these friends of Jesus so afraid at the news of his resurrection? I suppose there are lots of reasons--the shock of the empty tomb, on top of the trauma of the past few days, is the big one, obviously. *This is not what we were expecting! AGHHH!*

And then there is the surprise of the stranger--possibly a heavenly messenger, though Mark's gospel does not make that clear. And the towering implications of his message--*Jesus is risen?* If that's true, even though that's what they longed to hear... if it's *true*, a miracle like that would shake their whole world.

All legitimate explanations for a reaction of fear and trembling.

And there's one more hidden in the details that I didn't notice until one of my favourite Bible teachers, Alexander Shaia, pointed it out.

*"Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see him just as he told you."* Why Galilee? Why not just meet them where they are already, in Jerusalem? And why does this detail matter enough to include in the Scriptures?

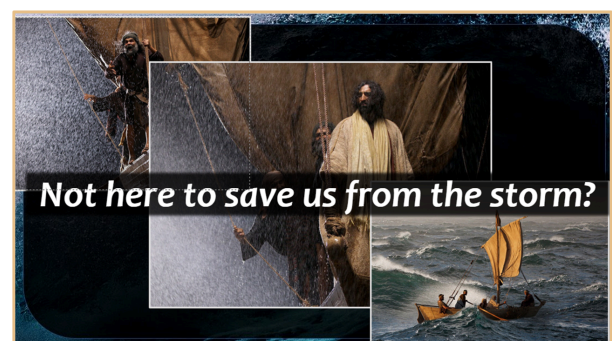
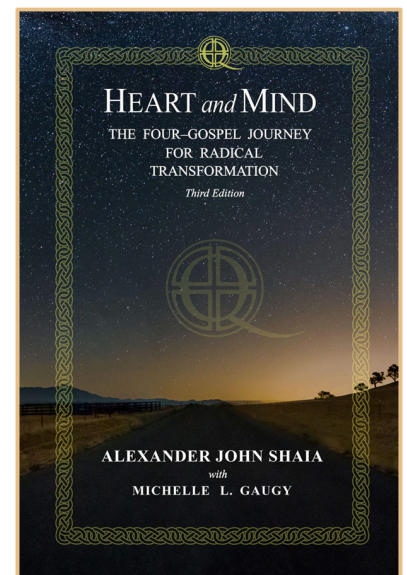
I don't expect any of you to recall a sermon series from three years ago, but we did spend a month going through Mark's gospel, with [Alexander Shaia's book \*Heart and Mind as our guide\*](#). Shaia calls the theme of this gospel "Sailing Mark's Stormy Seas".

Over the first half of the book, Jesus leads his disciples back and forth across the Sea of Galilee, no less than four times. And each time, they encounter a storm.

Which is likely both literal--the Sea of Galilee was notorious for its quick and intense storms--and also literary--"the sea" was ancient symbolism for chaos, danger and unpredictability.

That's the main theme of Mark: Jesus calls these disciples, and they naively follow. Only to have him send them into the storm, again and again, where they respond with fear and doubt and confusion. *We thought you were the One here to rescue us? Why is this still so hard?*

And then in the second half of the gospel, Jesus leads them away from Galilee--finally! And straight into a different kind of storm in the capital city, of politics and conflict and betrayal and crucifixion.



So that's the context of Mark's Easter story--yet again, the disciples find themselves adrift on the metaphorical sea, spinning in the turmoil, wondering if Jesus had really left them this time.

And when these women *finally* hear some good news--the tomb is empty! He is risen! Go tell the rest of the disciples: Jesus is going to meet you... in Galilee.

Oh no. Back to Galilee? Back into the storm? More uncertainty, more chaos, more vulnerability?

Yeah. No wonder they went away in silence.

Now, that seems like an odd place to end the story. *Yay, Jesus is risen! Now get back out there into the storm!* Where's the victory? Where's the joy, the grace, the good news?

Again, the context is significant. The gospel of Mark was written for a community of Christ-followers in Rome, in the mid-to-late 1st Century.

This was a community in crisis. They had been scapegoated by the Roman Emperor, Nero, for a massive fire that had devastated the city. These Christian Jews were blamed for starting it--they were hated. They were hunted. They were betrayed by their neighbours. They were forced to flee. They were publicly executed in the arena when they were caught.



They were *living* the storm. In spite of, *because of* their faith.

And so Mark tells the stories of the storm, over and over again--Jesus is with us in the storm. You will have what you need. This is not the end.

And yet... you can't go over it. You can't go under it. You gotta go through it.

Even on Easter, even at the moment of greatest victory, Jesus calls them back to Galilee, back into the chaos. Because that's where the Roman church lived, even after the resurrection.

And that's we find ourselves, too, sometimes. All of us, in some measure, from the least to the greatest, we gotta go through it.

And, somehow, beyond all hope, when you go through it, you find God with you, Christ Among Us, in the middle of it.

That's Mark's Easter message: there is salvation, there is hope, there is courage, and strength, and healing, and friendship, and grace, in the middle of the storm. Along with the chaos and uncertainty and vulnerability, you will have what you need.

But you gotta go through it.

Easter *happens*, Christ is among us, and still, we're human. We gotta go through it.

Mark's gospel ends not with a conclusion, but rather an invitation. Okay, you are afraid. What will you do with your fear?

In ending this way, I see the writer of Mark offering two gifts to people in the storm:

For one, Mark is normalizing fear. Scared of the storm? Welcome to the club! That's been the way of Jesus' followers from the beginning.

And not just the folks on the fringes.

This is Peter, first of the Apostles, the founding father of the church. The Christians in Rome *knew* Peter. He moved to Rome at the end of his life. He was one of those who was caught and tortured and killed by the Emperor. This Peter--Peter the Rock--he was afraid, like you are afraid.

And this is Mary Magdalene, one of the few female disciples of Jesus to be named in the gospels. There is [some fascinating recent research](#) demonstrating that Mary Magdalene was just as important as Peter, that she was the female counterpart to Peter's male leadership. *Magdalene* is a title: in Aramaic, *magdala* means "tower." Mary the Tower, standing alongside Peter the Rock.



This Mary--*Mary the Tower*--she was afraid, like you are afraid.

Fear did not disqualify either of these from faith, from belonging, from leadership in Jesus' community.

Eventually they found their courage and their voice, we know that from other sources. But there was no shame in going through their fear first. There was no rush to get over it or to pretend otherwise. They were afraid, full stop.

So if you are afraid of the storm, okay. Be afraid. Sit with that. Feel it. Let it be.

I'm told by the psychology experts that we are physiologically wired to need our emotions to run their full course. When we experience strong feelings, if those get interrupted, if they don't have time and space and attention to complete the wave, the full cycle, that's when trauma solidifies.

Our minds and bodies know how to process our emotions, even the extreme ones like fear in the storm. But we need to give ourselves time and space and attention to feel, deeply and fully. That is the path to healing.

There can be extenuating circumstances, and of course it's not as simple as I'm making it out to be. But in the right context, with good supports and a healthy environment, we heal when we can let our emotions *be what they are*, for as long as they need to be.

So, Mark says to those in the storm, it's okay to be afraid. You will still be yourself, you will still be a gift to those around you, you will still belong in the community of God.

Take your time, storms are hard. And you gotta go through it.

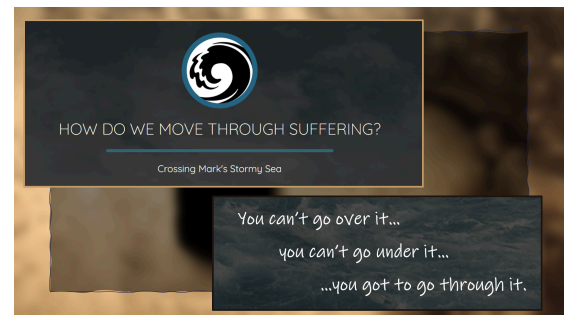
The second gift here is that fear is not only okay, it's actually a teacher.

If you look back over Mark's gospel, Galilee, the place of the storms, that's where all the lessons happened. The disciples' fear got their attention, it primed them to learn, it moved and changed and deepened and offered wisdom along the way.

Again, not quickly. But patiently, with time and reflection, Jesus' followers learned a lot from their fear.

My internet friend Rob Bell looks at those kinds of repeated life events [as a kind of curriculum](#). This thing that you keep coming back to, maybe it's a storm or maybe something more casual... when an experience or relationship or some pattern keeps happening, it can be helpful to ask, *"okay, what is this trying to teach me? Why does the curriculum of life keep giving me this particular pop quiz? There must be something that has me stuck here. Or more positively, there's something captivating here that's trying to get my attention."*

When you do the first thing, when you let yourself feel the fear, or whatever emotions surround an experience, when you're not afraid of your feelings, then you can explore them. What is it about *this* storm that has me shaking? Is there a particular quality to the emotion in this that points to something deeper going on? What is my fear trying to teach me?



I need to be careful here, because some of us have been taught that God does this *to* us, that God brings storms into our life *in order* to test us or discipline us or teach us. That's not what I'm saying. If God does it *to* us, that makes God a bully, not a teacher.

I'm saying that storms happen, because that's life. And when they happen, because they're going to happen anyway, then within the storm is an opportunity to learn. God meets us in it, though God does not cause it. It's the difference between a punishment and a choice.

The gift of choosing to see fear as a teacher, choosing to see any experience as part of the curriculum of life, is that it gives you distance and agency. As a learner, you step back just a bit, to examine the thing, roll it around, play with it, poke it a bit, ask it questions. You can do with it what we've been able to do with the fear in this Easter story--why is this here? What is this saying to us?

We may or may not get an answer every time. But the process has been good, the process changes us. The fear is manageable, it's a little bit less urgent, maybe even kind of fun. Learning is fun--when nobody is *forcing* you to go to school.

So maybe there's a lesson for you in this particular storm. Or maybe not, but taking the position of active learner for a while gives you the opportunity to *hold* the storm instead of simply being battered by it.

I hope that's helpful. I know that some of you are in the middle of the storm... for real. It probably doesn't feel like a gift. I'm in no way saying you have to be pleased by it or accept it as a teacher or anything like that.

Storms are hard, even on Easter. You don't have to like them. But you do have to go through it.

And, as we do, the ancient wisdom of Mark, of Jesus, is that we are not alone in the storm today. We are enough, in spite of and even through our vulnerability. We can let our fear, and all of our emotions, be whatever they are for now.

We are not alone, Christ is Among Us, and we have what we need.

Trusting that takes faith, absolutely. But so does showing up in this place on this day. You've got what it takes.

In a few minutes, we are going to celebrate the ritual of communion together. Today, the bread and the juice serve as a reminder of two things.



These are resources, food for the journey. It's just a bite of bread, a sip of juice. It's not much, but, somehow, believe it or not, it's enough. The promise of Easter is that we will have what we need in the storm, in our fear.

And, we're in this together. From Peter the Rock and Mary the Tower, to the faithful, battered church of Rome, across the centuries to the community of love in this room--and across the fiber optic lines of the internet--we are in this bear hunt together.

We can't go over it. We can't go under it. We gotta go through it.

This unites us, with each other, with our ancestors, and with the Spirit of Christ.

Amen.

