

The First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Mourning, Mystery, Mission: Doing Some Cool Mysterious Stuff”  
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April 12, 2015

Psalm 133, Mark 16:9-18

Here in this bag I have some poisonous snakes, some poison and out in the hallway there are some Linda Blair-like people who are demon possessed. So who wants to go first? Who wants to handle the snakes, drink the poison, cast out a few demons or speak in tongues? None of you? Well me neither. What is interesting though is that there are people who do indeed do all of these things. There are groups of Christians that handle poisonous snakes, drink poison, cast out demons...note that the Roman church has exorcists...and speak in tongues. They take all of this literally and seriously. Yet, as mainstream Protestants, we generally don't. Most of the time we have simply jettisoned this part of the Gospel. We argue, rightly so, that it is a very late addition to Mark, meaning all of the earliest copies of Mark that we possess do not have this section...as Rev. Joanne pointed out at the Easter sunrise service. Therefore we can ignore it. Or we just find it so odd, that it is easier to ignore than deal with. But if we do so; if we put it aside I believe we do a disservice to both those to whom it was first written and to ourselves.

In order to understand this we need to once again jump in our Biblical time machine and take a trip back to the time of those who wrote and first read this text. By the time this portion of Mark is written, the church has been outlawed in the Roman Empire. In 64 CE Nero fashioned a law that made Christianity and its practice illegal. Christians could be imprisoned or executed. Thus the first people reading this section of Mark were those who needed to know, with certainty what they were dying for. They needed to be sure that this Jesus they were following was the one who lived, died and rose again; thus assuring them of resurrection if they were to give their lives for their faith. The writer of this portion of Mark assures them in two ways. First he offers the three witness accounts of the resurrection; first the women, then the disciples on the road to Emmaus and then to the entire group of disciples. Second he offers proof of Jesus' resurrection power given to Jesus' followers as exhibited by the list of the miraculous activities mentioned at the end of the section; which by the way are taken directly from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. The bottom line then is that these persecuted people could be sure of the one for whom they might give their life. He was Jesus the resurrected one.

As I mentioned before, if we jettison this text we also do ourselves a disservice and we do so for two reasons. First because this text gives us our identity; that we are resurrection people. We are here because Jesus, the one who lived and died is also the one who rose. What this means is that we are not followers of just a great teacher, like the followers of Buddha or Confucius. Even though Jesus was a great teacher we follow him because he was the one who lived, died and rose again. It means that we are not the followers of just a prophet such as Isaiah or Mohammed. Even though Jesus was a prophet, we follow him because he was the one who lived, who died and rose again. This is why the writer of this portion of Mark takes the time to tell three different stories which witness to Jesus' resurrection. The writer wants us to be certain of our identity, and even though we are not faced with

the kind of persecution faced by those in the first century there are others who are, such as those Christian students in Kenya who when faced with death at the hands of Al Shabab terrorists two weeks ago, chose to claim their identity as resurrection people; an identity which led to their deaths. This unknown author gives us our identity. We are resurrection people.

Second because this passage gives us our mission. We are those who are to tell the good news of Jesus of Nazareth. I realize that even the term, Good News, comes loaded with a lot of baggage and is in many ways a very “churchy” term. For many people it means trying to convert others; trying to convince them that they need to believe in Jesus to be saved. Rather than seeing the Good News in that fashion, I want us to see it as truly news that is good. The good news of Jesus is that there is a God who loves not just one small part of the world but all of creation; a God who was willing to be enfleshed in such a way to show us what that love looked like. The good news of Jesus is that the power of death and sin have lost and that forgiveness and life have won. This means we do not have to spend our lives worrying about what happens when we take our last breath. We do not have to spend our lives feeling shame, but instead know that we have been forgiven. It means that in God and Christ there are always new possibilities for our lives. The good news of Jesus is that people can find reconciliation. People can live together because we are bound together by the love of God in Jesus Christ; a love which spans race, creed, gender and sexual orientation. All of this is the good news that we get to offer as those whose identity is shaped by the resurrected Christ.

What should we do with all of that other stuff; the snakes and poison? Well that is up to you. If you want to try all of those things, go for it. But for me I will look for signs of the power of Jesus’ resurrection elsewhere. I will look for it in changed lives and communities. My challenge then for you is this, and it is twofold, to ask yourselves, How am I living as a resurrection person and how am I sharing the Good News with those around me?