

Living Our Easter Faith

Mark 16:1-8

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church, Camden, UCC, Easter 2024

Contemporary Reading: by Dawna Markova

I will not die an unlived life

I will not live in fear

of falling or catching fire.

I choose to inhabit my days,

to allow my living to open me,

to make me less afraid,

more accessible,

to loosen my heart

until it becomes a wing,

a torch, a promise.

I choose to risk my significance;

to live so that which came to me as seed

goes to the next as blossom

and that which came to me as blossom,

goes on as fruit.

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they could embalm him. Very early on Sunday morning, as the sun rose, they went to the tomb. They worried out loud to each other, "Who will roll back the stone from the tomb for us?" Then they looked up, saw that it had been rolled back—it was a huge stone—and walked right in. They saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed all in white. They were completely taken aback, astonished. He said, "Don't be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He's been raised up; he's here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now—on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You'll see him there, exactly as he said." They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.

If I asked you what lies at the heart of the Easter story for you, what would you say? Every year we gather and sing, "Christ is Risen, Alleluia!" but what does this resurrection actually mean for our lives? What if it is essentially a paradigm for how we are to live today? What if God doesn't want to let this story get domesticated into something we just say we believe or reduced to arguments over resurrection physics? Rather, what if God can't wait to see how we will let the dynamism of resurrection dance its way into every cell of our own bodies, engaging our hearts' power to participate in God's dream for a new creation?

I think such intentionality drives the edginess of the original ending of what is presumed to be the oldest of the four Gospels in our Bible. In Mark's version, the Gospel ends with the earliest witnesses at the tomb retreating in confusion and fear when they find it empty.¹ They have beheld the horror of the cross and their beloved Jesus dying on it, spelling an end to their hopes and dreams, at least they thought. Now, they are stunned, frightened, and speechless. The messenger's admonition: "Do not be afraid!" cannot get through to them, not yet. Now why would a Gospel writer heighten rather than resolve this tension and discomfort (which later editors did by adding stories of Jesus' appearance)?

It is a trademark of Mark's Gospel to hold up the mirror for all listeners and ask: "How then will *you* live?" In the context of the Easter story, the question to us is: How then will we each be part of the community coming together, as with the first disciples, on the other side of defeat and confusion? How do we move from experiences of being shattered to imagining and living out in our own lives the sequel to this Gospel ending – by becoming the resurrection community? To focus only on Jesus misses the point that the first Christians experienced this event as an invitation to build community. This is not a matter of individual salvation but of how each life is empowered to contribute to the healing of the whole. We, too, like the earliest disciples, are invited to live into resurrection as a community together now: to face the challenges of our time marked by fragmentation, wars, lingering injustice, a growing taste for dictatorships, and the growing peril of climate change as a *community of witness*.

I would like to offer short portraits of people who have each chosen to turn their struggles into creating possibility and paving the way for others to thrive. They are featured in the short film *The Last Repair Shop* and repair musical instruments for high school students in

¹ Apparently, someone in the early church felt compelled to break the tension and add to this original ending. In Mark, Jesus subsequently first shows himself to Mary Magdalene who then shared the good news with the male disciples.

Los Angeles.² L.A. has one of the only school systems which still provides free instruments to students, often from families who would not be able to afford them. These technicians donate time because they know how a “small change in direction in one life can set off changes in the world” for the good. They are living the resurrection in and for the community.³

Let me tell you about Dana who plays guitar and repairs string instruments. He embraces every challenge to find where the wood in a student’s cello or guitar might be cracked causing the instrument to buzz. He sees parallels to living. He is quick to say, “It’s hard being a kid and not everyone gets the support they need.” Dana knows that emotionally and mentally wounded parts in us are harder to mend than a cello. “We can’t just glue ourselves back together,” he says, “but with care and time, we can heal.” Dana grew up gay at a time when people were even more openly attacked and demonized than now. “I thought I was broken like a cello with a buzz,” he says. “I tried to grow out of it, evolve, but couldn’t. I realized I could be miserable trying to be what I wasn’t or be authentic but get shunned and beaten.”

His parents were musicians and his mom always reminded him that music was like swimming, you find a constant rhythm in motion. “Whatever you do,” she would say, “don’t stop. If you stop there will be no music. Persist, don’t give up. Keep playing.” Over

² The Last Repair shop, a film by Ben Proudfoot and Kris

Bowers. <https://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=9088>

³ And additional portrait: Paty repairs brass instruments. She grew up in Mexico and came to the USA as a single mom with two young kids. She found a job in a small music repair shop and was given a trial week. She knew nothing about this work, at first did simple prep work and impressed with her dedication. One week turned into seven years as she learned the actual craft of repairing brass instruments. I am sure our Midcoast Brass Quintet musicians can appreciate her work! In the early years, Paty and her children experienced long stretches of having very little money. Sometimes she could not feed her kids or buy Christmas presents. When her son wanted to play clarinet, she could not afford the rental fee and had to say no. She still cries when she talks about that. Eventually, Paty got a job with benefits repairing brass instruments for one of the universities. She has also been part of the high school repair crew for a long time to make sure everyone can have an instrument. She often muses about the lives of the students as she fishes out marbles, candies, and batteries out of instruments. She smiles when she says, “Even though they don’t know me, I know I am part of their lives.”

time, Dana came to trust that there was nothing broken in him and that he thrived in being kind, loving and authentic. He has been married to his husband for over twenty years and they are raising a son together. Dana continues to fix string instruments so students can also delight in a sense of wholeness and reflect the beauty inherent in themselves.

Duane grew up getting picked on a lot for being “a bit off center,” as he calls it. He first got interested in music as a young teen when he watched the film “Frankenstein’s Bride.” In one scene, the supposed “monster” created by scientist Frankenstein, is being chased by the locals. As he runs for his life through a forest, he hears a sweet sound emerging from a cabin. Through the window, he watches an older blind man playing violin by the fire. He musters the courage to knock on the door. Without judgment, the man lets him in, offers him tea, and plays for him. The one who has been hunted begins to cry and is able to rest as the music calms him.

Duane could identify with him. When he saw a violin being sold for \$20, he pleaded with his mom. He did get the violin and played so much that he would often forget to eat. He met others who liked to play, made actual friends, and became part of a bluegrass band in high school. They would eventually even open for Elvis. Duane still plays fiddle and is also an expert at fixing complex woodwind instruments. He will spend countless hours to solve the puzzle that will allow a student to play again, to feel that comfort and calm in stormy times and to have a chance to thrive as he did.

Steve is the supervisor of the repair shop and fixes the pianos. He grew up in an Armenian family living in Azerbaijan during the Soviet era. Armenians and Azerbaijanis had lived peacefully together for a long time. His life dramatically changed in the later 80s when tensions arose. Armenians were being actively attacked and forced to leave Azerbaijan. His father was killed. Steve was twenty at the time and fled to the US with his mother. They had to leave everything behind, including his beloved guitar. He thought his music days were over. They were sponsored as refugees by Ken and Veronica whom they had never met

before. Steve did not speak English. Ken explained to him what he did for work by pointing to a Norman Rockwell painting of a piano tuner. Steve was immediately transported back to his childhood when people were still at peace. He remembered how mesmerized he was when a piano tuner came to tune the piano in his elementary school classroom. Ken took Steve under his wings, taught him what he knew and send him to further training.

In response to this generosity, Steve has dedicated his life to making sure that students have a chance to play again when things seem to fall apart. Steve likes to say, “I think a lot of people see a broken thing and just think it’s broken. But with a little something here or there we can make it whole again. We are not just a repair shop. One instrument could change a whole life.” Indeed, in the film a few students talk about how music has given them confidence, structure, a way to deal with anxiety and stress, and hope for the future.

I would like to show you the final scenes from this short film to bring these stories to life. The film’s directors, Ben Proudfoot and Kris Bowers, were inspired to bring these technicians together with students who had benefitted from their work. Kris wrote an orchestra piece. The repair technicians, current students, and many public-school alumni whose lives had been changed through the music program, volunteered to come together to play. Let us watch a short segment of their shared performance: <https://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=9088>

There is something so powerful about seeing people of all ages create harmony and beauty together. We may not all play an instrument or know how to fix one, but we can all contribute to living the resurrection together. Your gift may be art or connecting the dots for people through helping them see their gifts, forging connections. Maybe your gift is working with a young person who may need that extra help to succeed in school. Or you are the one who can sit at the bedside of one who is ill or dying and be that presence of God for them. Maybe you are called to prophetic witness, community building and advocacy in the face of injustice. Maybe you are fantastic at helping with your hands or know just how to bring

what one can spare directly to the one who needs it. Maybe you have a mind for innovation. Maybe you are called to remind us that the earth, that other species, are suffering as well and reconnect us with our love and urge to protect all of God's creation.

Just like the women at the tomb, we are called upon to transform suffering and fear into acts of courage, sowing seeds of resurrection living not only in our own day but also for future generations. May we, as the poet Dawna Markova wrote, not live in fear but choose to inhabit our days, to become less afraid and more accessible, to loosen our hearts until they become a wing, a torch, a promise. May we, too, live so that which comes to us a seed goes to the next as blossom and that which comes to us as blossom goes on as fruit.