

Final Sermon

Mark 16: 1-8

I began my sermon preparation this week with a thought or maybe a challenge to myself: How would I preach differently if this morning's sermon were my final sermon? I mean, I suppose I always preach with the thought in the back of my mind that I'll be doing this for twenty or twenty five more years, and that's about 1000 more sermons, give or take, which is a long, long time to say everything I have to say.

But what if I only got one? This one. Today: One chance to get one message across and to preach it as if my hair were on fire, and nothing else mattered.

What would the message be?

Well, there are a lot of temptations there—not the least of which is the siren's song of the ego. If it's my final sermon, I want it to be **memorable!** I want people to laugh and to cry, to be moved to the core, I want the stories to sparkle and the words to be beautiful and

quotable...and that, in the end is a plea: remember ME. Even after I'm preaching no more, keep this sermon alive. Talk about how great it was. Make me immortal. It's a little embarrassing to admit that—but it's true. Who wants to be remembered for a dud?

Get past that one, and there is the temptation to give it one more shot at advancing my agenda—to fill the sermon with my very best thoughts on faith and on stewardship and on mission priorities, and come to think of it, since it's my final sermon, there are no consequences!

I can tell you what I REALLY think about everything, unfiltered! I can make the pulpit a platform and give you ALL the right answers on life and politics (mine, of course) and what the Bible says (my interpretation) and I can give you a whole LOT of shoulds and oughts about what the church (and therefore you, her members) needs to do. That in the end, is about me too—make my agenda immortal.

Avoid those twin temptations and there's still this one more—to try to say everything in a single sermon. It's a big Bible...thousands of

years of the story of God and God's people, filled with commandments and instruction, prophecies and proverbs and parables, timeless wisdom—sixty six books of scripture and I get one message to sum it all up, or to condense it to its irreducible core.

What's the message?

Well, of course, the answer to that is obvious—we being Christians and this being Easter, there really is only one message and it requires only three words: He is Risen!

But that raises yet one more little....trifling...issue. Hardly worth mentioning, really. But here it is: DO I BELIEVE THAT?

I mean of course, I do. I'm forty-five Easters into this, I've HEARD it all my youthful life, PROFESSED it all my adolescent and adult life, PROCLAIMED it all of my professional life...DO I BELIEVE IT as if everything else depended upon it?

Because really, it's a profession that goes against everything I know and have ever experienced. The first thing I learned about death was as a young child when we had a pet rabbit that died. I remember how much that loss hurt, I remember how I cried. And you know where that rabbit is today? He's dead. So from my first experience onward, I have internalized that death is powerful and that it's painful, and that it's PERMANENT.

"Well, yes," you say, "a rabbit. But rabbits don't have immortal souls like people do." Well, there's a WHOLE OTHER lecture there about Greek dualism—our bodies are temporary but our life force is eternal...but without getting bogged down in the philosophy of it all, I will simply ask this: how many PEOPLE, in your life and in your experience, have died and lived again—not been resuscitated or defibrillated, but actually died...TWO DAYS DEAD...and lived again?

I'll give you a minute to count. I come up with—zero.

Yet the Bible says, Jesus died on the cross, was buried in a tomb, and on the third day, he rose again from the dead.

So in opposition to all of my experience and my understanding,
DO I BELIEVE THAT, ENOUGH TO PREACH IT WITH MY HAIR ON
FIRE? And do YOU believe it, enough to listen to it or to live it, with
YOUR hair on fire?

I simply want to begin in an utterly honest place...Easter's news is
unparalleled in our experience, unexplainable in our scientific and
medical knowledge, unprecedented in all of human history BEFORE
the resurrection and unrepeated in all of human history since.

In a word, "unbelievable."

Does it bother you that I, a preacher, use that term from the pulpit on
Easter Sunday? When Mary, Mary Magdalene, and Salome go to the
tomb on the first Easter morning, they have no expectation of a risen
Christ. Their conversation is, "Who will move the stone, so that we
can anoint the body?" And if we go by the original ending of Mark's
gospel, the place where I stopped in our scripture lesson for this
morning, "They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and
amazement had seized them, and they said NOTHING TO ANYONE,

for they were afraid. Their first response, in other words, is utter, fearful, disbelief.

Why? Because their experience was the same as ours. They KNEW the power of death. And nothing, in their experience, told them that life, or God, or anything was more powerful.

Our struggle to believe that news is PRECISELY what makes this message, HE IS RISEN, so urgent. Everything, everything, everything hinges upon that news!

It came to me as our Bible study group was studying Revelation earlier this week—a difficult and highly symbolic book of scripture that I have tended to avoid.

In Revelation, evil and its power in the world is symbolized by a great and powerful beast. The beast symbolizes the power of empires—the power of political oppression; the power of persecution; the power of warfare and military might; the power of death. And the response of the WORLD to the beast is awe, wonder, fear, and even

reverence: “Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it (Revelation 13:4)?” The implied answer is, “No one. No one is like the beast. No one can fight against it. Death wins. Might makes right. In this life, there is no ultimate hope.”

Well, what if that is true? If that is true, then we might as well just eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. If that is true, then we are ultimately hopeless and powerless. Death gets the last word, turns the last card, sings the last solo. Nothing in this life is more powerful than death. If we doubt death’s power, we need only read the headlines: another war, another coup, another uprising. Another shooting in another home, another school, another university, another nursing home, another immigrant community center.

This, then is the truth the world knows, believes, and proclaims: Who is like the beast, and who can fight against it?

But what if, instead, THIS is true?

HE IS RISEN.

If that message, that proclamation, that all but unbelievable reality is true, then NOTHING we have just said can be true alongside it. NOTHING is beyond the power of God, NOTHING has ultimate authority but God. If God in Jesus Christ has overcome this world's most powerful, most authoritative, most irresistible, most irrefutable, most unavoidable LAST WORD...death...then

NOTHING IS BEYOND THE REACH OF GOD'S LOVE FOR US! Is that a message I can preach with my hair on fire? I think it is!

Who is like the beast and who can stand against him? HE IS RISEN!
Who or what is like the Lord, and who or what can stand against the power of his love? NOT EVEN DEATH!

And what does that mean to us? That nothing else in life has ultimate power over us.

Our most hidden hurt, our most secret shame, that which we think is so unforgivable that we have passed final judgment, weighed

ourselves in the balance and found ourselves unworthy—is not beyond the reach of God. Sin has no power before the risen Christ.

Our most hopeless plight, our most insoluble problem, that which we think is so utterly beyond repair that we are tempted to give up hope and give up trying—is not beyond the reach of God. Human frailty is no impediment to the risen Christ.

Our most broken relationship, our most irreparable hurt, our most irreconcilable difference, our deepest division—is it deeper than death? Then it is also is not stronger than life! It is NOT BEYOND HOPE, NOT BEYOND RESTORATION, NOT BEYOND REPAIR. It cannot be, because he is Risen!

That is a message indeed that I can preach with my hair on fire, and if this WERE my last sermon, if these were my last WORDS, then I could say with conviction and hope, HE IS RISEN, death has been swallowed up in victory! Where O Death is your victory? Where O death is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

But here, my friends, is the challenge. We can proclaim it until the cows come home. But when will we live as if it is true? If HE IS RISEN is the core of the gospel, then we must live as if that truth is at the core of our lives, our allegiances our commitments and our priorities. But we have not. We have settled for a lesser world—a world where faith is an option or an opinion; where church is a social club; where worship and proclamation and sanctuary and Sabbath and truth and transformation and resurrection and hope have no greater priority than a day at the lake, or an extra day of work, or a round of golf, or a travel club's sports game, or waxing my car, or a dance competition, or the New York Times and a cup of coffee. And then we despair that our world is untransformed.

HE IS RISEN! Do we believe it? HE IS RISEN! Do we proclaim it? He IS RISEN—do we LIVE this news as if our hair is on fire as if it is a truth in face of which no other truth can stand?

It changes our lives, our loves, our hearts, our hopes, forgives our sins, illuminates our deepest despair, reconciles our relationships, and is the hope where we have no other.

He is Risen! It is the final sermon—there is nothing more to proclaim, and nothing else to say.

Alleluia! Amen.