



## Great Vigil of Easter, Year B – April 11, 2009

Mark 16:1-8

### A Homily preached by the Rev'd James J. Popham

Tonight we observe the great vigil of Easter...a time of watching, waiting, even praying during the night when we might normally be asleep. But the night also is the time when our deepest fears leap from our subconscious and insinuate themselves into our restless consciousness.

Now fear *per se* can be good or bad. Fear is good and reasonable, for example, when it keeps us from jumping off the roof or driving without seatbelts. Fear also can prevent us from doing what we ought to do. I won't belabor the point with examples. Most of us have our own. But sometimes fear can be as incomprehensible, even as silly, as the seeming threat that provoked it.

On April 1, 2009, April Fools Day, a young man taped a sign to the wall on a hallway bulletin board in his office building. Here is a copy of the sign. For those of you more than a few feet away, this is what the sign says:

I believe that I may have invented a time machine. This is a courtesy notice that I believe that I will be materializing at this very spot this Friday at 10:00 AM. Again, this is merely a courtesy notice so that you will not be standing here at that time. I will not be arriving in a Delorian; I will not be covered in slime, and I will not be half man, half fly. This is not a movie, after all. And he signed using a pseudonym, which includes his real name spelled backwards.

This message even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is preposterous on its face.

Two thousand years ago a young Jewish prophet declared himself to be the Son of God. He further claimed that he would die a brutal death as a condemned man. And he said he would be raised up three days later and then meet his friends in their native province of Galilee.

This message, too, even in the first century, was preposterous on its face.

Both messages drew a response. Some who read the message on the bulletin board were incredulous. As, indeed, were many who heard the claims of the young Jewish prophet. They likely snickered lightly, rolled their eyes, and dismissed the possibility that someone really had invented a time machine or for that matter, could be raised from the dead.

Others interpreted the message through the prisms of their own particular predilections. When the young man who had placed that sign on the bulletin board returned to his office last Tuesday after working off-site for several days, he was quite amazed to learn that someone had called the local authorities, the bomb squad had appeared, evacuated the building, and searched high and low for whatever threatening device the "time machine" might have served as a metaphor. As his co-workers observed in one of the great colloquialisms of the day, "You sure got some peoples' pressure up around here. I guess you just can't be too careful after 9/11." Perhaps, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was right. "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." We can be easily bound up even in unfounded fears.

Two thousand years ago, three women, who had been followers of our young Jewish prophet, went to the tomb where his tortured body had been placed quickly and unceremoniously after his crucifixion. No doubt, they wanted to believe his message, but even on this third day, when he had foretold his being raised from the dead, they

still took spices to anoint his body, to complete the task left unfinished as the sun set and the Sabbath began late that Friday afternoon. But the body they came to anoint was not there. Instead, "as they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe ....He said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised ... Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' And the preposterous became true.

But they were alarmed. They did not rejoice. They did not run to their friends and spread the news that the preposterous had become the truth. They were so afraid that they ran away and told no one. Was their fear unfounded, like the bomb wary staff in the office building? Did these three women have more to fear than fear itself? Certainly they lived in a world hostile to their nascent faith in Jesus. They must have thought that they, too, might be subject to arrest, persecution, or ridicule. As fear drove someone in a 21<sup>st</sup> century office building to overreact to a clever homage to April Fool's Day, fear also drove the three women at the tomb to flee and keep the greatest news the world would ever hear to themselves.

Are we also sometimes too afraid to believe? Is the news of the empty tomb too good or just too awkward? Can we be seized by fear of looking foolish? Of proclaiming as truth what appears preposterous in a secular world?

Do we so easily forget that God created us and called us good? That we are the apple of God's eye, made in God's image. Are we unmindful that as Abraham's story reveals a single act of obedience to God made in complete faith can change the world? Do we remember how God responded to the fleeing Hebrews' fears of annihilation by the pursuing Egyptians, by parting the waters of the Red Sea? And what of the instruction to tell Peter, the very same Peter last seen denying he never knew the Jesus who was now seeking him out. Our God is so incredibly faithful and forgiving. How preposterous is that!

We have no excuse for letting our unfounded fear seize us. We know better. Unlike the three women at the tomb, we know exactly what the empty tomb meant. We know that however preposterous it may sound, the promise of Jesus Christ that he would be raised from the dead was spot on. And we know the rest of the story. It is why we are here tonight. Watching, waiting, praying.

It's nearly seven a.m. in Jerusalem right now. The sun has been up since 6:14. The empty tomb has been discovered. Let us go forth not in fear, but in solemn celebration that the preposterous is true, that the Son of God has been raised, and the kingdom of God is up and running. We just need to catch up with it!

Amen.