

EASTER DAY, YEAR B.

12th April, 2009.

Mark 16:1-8
Breaking Free

One of the more amazing and touching stories to emerge from the earthquake at L'Aquila in Italy last week was that of the 98 year woman pulled free some thirty hours after the quake. She had spent that time, she told her rescuers, crocheting. An Easter story of hope, of hanging in there, of release from a dark enclosed tomb.

Hope is the message of Easter: a message of hope shining glimmers of light into financial meltdown, into broken lives, into earthquake and bushfire. This is the hope found in an empty tomb at that first Easter –the empty tomb proclaiming that no power can hold Jesus down. God's creative power is stronger than any darkness, birthing life in the midst of death. A risen Christ cannot be locked up in the past; a risen Christ collapses the barriers between life and death, past, present and future . this risen Christ offers us this hope.

Many of us can testify to that Easter light and hope; the light of life shining through the darkness of personal tragedy; many here, too, could testify to the struggle of being able to see that light.

But let's get personal here about the Easter message. How would we each describe what our Easter hope, and our Easter faith, is for us?

I think we'd end up with a vast array of stories; and I think our stories would be different year by year as our life journeys take us through different experiences and points of challenge and learning: through joy, despair, struggle. We'd talk about times when we know we're breaking free into a new and welcome aspect of life with Christ; and, *if we're really honest*, we'd own other times when it's been despair rather than hope breaking through; and times, faced with either tragedy or the ordinary hard slog of daily life, when we wonder and doubt.

Many of us have been taught –by the church, by others in life –that we shouldn't think or feel like that. The pressure to be certain, to be continually triumphant Christians, and even to manufacture an uncertain hope, can be like a real tomb.

The core of the Easter story is about being set free, Jesus breaking free- bursting free- out of the tomb from death to life. The message is that through the resurrection we are set free from death, from sin, from suffering, from hopelessness.

The resurrection also enables us to break free from being bound or entombed by a faith that says we can't doubt, or disbelieve, or be less than certain or feel less than good about God.

You see, the resurrection shows us that we are in fact talking about a God who can't be pinned down; who breaks free in every imaginable way – from limitations of the physical restrictions of life and death, from our expectations, from our tendency to limit him and package him as something he isn't. The resurrection also breaks us free from confining God to sets of propositions, and from locating God as being “in here” or “out there”, as if he is contained in time and space. This is a God of movement, who when we think we've found him, gets up and goes ahead of us, leading us somewhere else – as we heard the young man in white in the tomb say to Mary in our Gospel reading today: “he is going ahead of you to Galilee”.

How can this breaking free happen? How can it become real for us? Because even though there's miracle making power at work in the resurrection that somehow extends into our lives, we can still be

found in our tombs, with a self-imposed gulf between ourselves and the freedom that God is offering to us.

There is a sense that we need to go through a process of our own breaking free before we can grasp hold of and clothe ourselves in that freedom. Our openness to God, our breaking-openness, even our brokenness, begins to dismantle the barriers and distance we so often erect between us and the possibility of God's new life breaking into our lives. God has broken open the way forward for us, but there are things we need to do.

Now this is where we can listen attentively to the Gospel stories of the events following Jesus' death. For here we find base realism – the starting point for us in our process of breaking free.

The Gospel of Mark is stark and unadorned in its story-telling of the events following Jesus' death and burial. Just a scant eight verses in what is understood to be the original ending to the Gospel. If you were to look in your Bibles you will find additional verses named as the shorter or the longer ending of Mark – both of these are considered to be the work of later editors who wanted to tidy up the loose ending and make it all prettier. The Gospel as we read it today ends with the three women – Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Salome fleeing in terror and amazement from the tomb, saying nothing to anyone, “for they were afraid.” We don't know exactly what they were afraid of- we can only speculate – perhaps fear of the unknown, fear of the breaking through of a heavenly realm - something beyond their control, fear that something more dreadful had happened to Jesus' body, fear about what might happen next and where it was that Jesus was leading them to, going ahead of them to. All the same sorts of fears that we hold, as well.

So here in Mark we find real unashamed human reaction. They didn't do as the angel asked –didn't go and tell the others. They fled and said nothing to anyone. Here we see their terror; fear; running away; disobedience; silence. In the Gospel-writing processes of telling the story, all the copying and editing that went on before we end up with the final gospel stories, no-one's sanitised or removed that, even if they have added more. The early Church didn't reject it or deem it unworthy of inclusion in the final collection of the books that form our authorised Scriptures. These reactions were held as real and acceptable.

In this we have our first point of breaking free – owning our feelings and reactions, however awful we might try to tell ourselves they are. The second and third points follow close behind.

A second point: Our fears and doubts and stumbling don't stop God, nor do they lead to his rejection of us. All the Gospels recount stories of Jesus' disciples being inadequate, thick-headed, quarrelsome, fearful and unreliable. Just like we can be. Yet Christ still died for them, for us, despite all our imperfections and sin. God's work in rolling away the stone to the tomb happened regardless of people's beliefs; his commissioning of us to build his church and spread his Gospel happened regardless of our doubts and ineptness. The removing of that stone –that barrier – allows us also to *make the choice* to walk out of –break free from - our tombs to new life. This is about following and intention; we may not necessarily feel like a great freedom has happened, but nonetheless Christ has gone before us and accomplished that. We follow in trust and perseverance; hanging in there, not looking for the feel-good stuff (but loving it when it does come our way)

And the third point: in Jesus walking out of that tomb and leaving his grave cloths behind, as we read in John's Gospel, Jesus will be who he is – not a Jesus whom we have clothed with the grave cloths and label of “dead Jesus”, not a Jesus whom we would make to be someone that suits us, but the Jesus who bursts out of the identities we impose on him, to be who he is – resurrected, alive, God.

How does the resurrection become real for us? It becomes real for us by our owning of our selves, opening the door of our real, unadorned selves to God and welcoming him in, however messy we may think the home of our self is. We take action to become free: we own our feelings and reaction, doubts and questions; we choose to leave our tombs; we allow Jesus to be who he is, not someone he's not. We experience his love for us *as we are*.

In these things we begin our work of breaking free; and this evolving freedom, with its removal of barriers, allows us to be real, to hear more clearly, see more clearly; it allows authentic relationship with God. It opens the door to hope.

And while we take our steps towards breaking free, it's God who in the end has broken free in mighty power, rolling away the stone. He is alive, risen and goes before us. Hallelujah!