



Is This Going to Be on the Test?

TEXT
Mark 16:1-8

September 20, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

You may have had one of those moments in class when the teacher is going over something that's not easy to grasp. She's talking about verbs in the subjunctive mood, or polynomials in algebra, or the significance of the Cambrian explosion in the evolutionary process. And you are thinking, "I do not understand any of this." That's when, if not you, someone will ask, "Is this going to be on the test?"

That's one moment in school. But there is another moment in school as well. It's when you quit worrying about what's on the test. That is a moment when the subject matter comes to life, and you no longer worry about what's on the syllabus. You read more than the assignment. You push past the edges of the requirements. When that happens, you are not just earning a grade; you are not just passing a test; you are becoming a new person.

For some, it happens in science and the hunger to find explanation of the world in which we live.

Some come alive with language. You discover what a metaphor is for, and it opens up a whole new world.

For some, it happens with music, and you delve deep to discover the intellectual component of the collection of sound.

For some, it happens with theology, and you search for the language to honestly talk about God.

In that experience, you pursue truth not because it is going to be on the test, but because there is something in you that hungers to know it.

I think both of these experiences in school are sometimes found in the church. Off and on through the generations, the church has treated faith as the subject matter that is going to be on the test. Christian faith has been articulated as God's key to acing the final exam. Say the right things on the oral exam, and you graduate to glory.

I am grateful that Christian faith is not that simple. Christian faith is more than getting into heaven. Christian faith is getting heaven into us. And if that is a test, it is a lifelong test.

If there is ever a moment when we gain insight into the ultimate test of Christianity, it is with the resurrection. The women went to the tomb where, seemingly, death speaks

the final word of this world. They carried spices and questions and broken hearts. And that's when the world changed — but at the same time, there was something familiar. This is what I mean: He is alive; there is a new future. Tomorrow is not claimed by death and meaninglessness; there is a promised day that is waiting.

There's an interesting thing about Mark's gospel. The first word of Mark's gospel is *arche*. It means "beginning." If I understand the text, Mark is saying, "I'm going to tell you the story of Jesus, but I can only tell you the beginning of his story." Why? Because resurrection is real, so his story is not over. Resurrection is real, so the Jesus story continues even now.

Mark says, I can tell you of his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness.

I can tell you he called disciples and taught them with stories they could never forget.

I can tell you that he calmed the sea and fed 5,000 and that he walked through this world in such an amazing way it would be like walking on water.

I can even tell you that he died accused of heresy and insurrection.

And then I can tell you that, by God's undying love, he was raised from the dead. But when I have told you all of that, I have only told you the beginning. Because his life goes on, all I can tell you is the beginning.

With resurrection, everything changed because the assumptions of what is real in this world were stood upside down. There is a new future shaped by God's love. But this new future seems familiar to these women — and the disciples and you and me. How? Resurrection means we are still following the one who first said, "Come and follow me."

Did you hear what the angel said? "He is not here. ... Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you. There you will find him."

Resurrection means we are still following Jesus. He is ahead of us.

There is a mystery here — not only about resurrection, but about the impact that resurrection has on us. In one sense, resurrection happens in a moment. That is what we celebrate on Easter. Jesus was dead, but the love of God refuses to grant death the power to hold him; so Jesus is raised. But in another true sense, resurrection defines the journey we follow all our lives. If there is a test to this faith, the test is the resurrection journey.

We are following Jesus toward new life, new hope, toward God's promised day. We are not there yet, but we see glimpses along the way. We

never catch up to him, but we do sometimes get close enough that we gain glimpses of God's promised day.

Can I tell you some moments when I have seen some of those glimpses?

We welcomed babies this morning. They were presented to us by their parents for baptism. And you welcomed them. They brought no résumés. They offered no credentials. They just came, and you welcomed them. Of course you did. That's what we do in church.

So it is noteworthy that a generation ago, when Donald Sewing brought his family, including young Henry Sewing, to be members here, the church leadership welcomed them — but not everyone did. They were the first black family to join the Village Church. Not everyone could support that. Some spoke harshly to the Sewings. Some left Village altogether. Dr. Bob didn't know it then, but he had one more reason to be grateful we hadn't invented email yet.

But that was then. Today racism still lives; and if anything, we have realized it is far more complex than water fountains and restaurants. But there are signs of a new day. For three years ago, you elected Henry Sewing to be an Elder, to welcome those who join us. And his friends on Session have elected him Clerk of Session for the past two years — and he is a fabulous clerk.

It's not God's promised day, but to me it is a sign that the Spirit of Christ is alive, and

we are following after him. That's the journey of resurrection.

It was the second Tuesday in February 2011. The previous Sunday, I had preached about a decision of your Session. The Session had voted that Village would be a place that not only would welcome gay and lesbian persons as members, but that we wanted our pastor search committees to find the best person and, if that person was not heterosexual, but was the best pastor for the position, to call him or her. Sexual orientation would not be a barrier to our calling the best person.

In that sermon, I said that I would come back Tuesday night to hear responses and to respond to your questions. I walked into Room 133 to see 70 of our church family gathered there. The room was quiet. There were a lot of crossed arms. Everyone was worried that the conversation would be tense, and nobody wants that.

An older woman stood — I won't mention her name because she has gone to glory — but she stood up. It had not been easy for her to get here, and it wasn't easy for her to stand. She looked at me for a long time. I could see the emotion in her face. I thought to myself, "I have broken this woman's heart."

I have promised to tell you the truth of how I see things. I may be wrong about these matters, but I will endeavor to be honest with you. Sometimes I know I say things that are hard to hear. It gives me absolutely

no pleasure to say things that hurt anyone in this church family.

I thought, “I have disappointed her,” and I was already imagining what I might say to comfort her. But I read the moment incorrectly. She said, “I have always told my son that he would be welcome in my church, but this is the first time in my life I can do so without wondering if it is really true.”

It was a holy moment. God’s promised day? No. Not yet. But it was, to me, a sign that resurrection is at work among us.

There was a Session meeting in 2006. The meeting hadn’t started but the room was quiet. Usually the Session is full of conversation before things get started, but not this night. Almost overnight, our neighbors had placed in their yards signs that said, “Village Church, respect thy neighbor.”

We aren’t used to our neighbors thinking poorly of us. It was an awkward place to be. We knew we had to do something. Some said, “There is a lot of misinformation out there.” That was true. There were only a few folks who were intentionally sharing misinformation. Others were just passing on what they heard. But the tidal wave was building. Some thought, “We need to confront them, set the record straight, stand our ground.”

Then some asked, “What would the Gospel ask of us in this moment?”

Someone then said: “I think we need to forgive in advance.

We need to remember that there are more people in this community who would be proud of such a ministry than those who would oppose it. We need to remember that those who are opposed to us are still our neighbors. Now is the time for us to listen and to show we care. It is time to trust what the Gospel teaches us about how to respond to neighbors.” That’s what we did.

Before it was all over, the family that filed a lawsuit not only dropped the lawsuit, they brought produce from their garden to be used in our pantry. And some who were really upset with us have joined us as volunteers.

It’s not the promised day, but it is one more reason that I am confident that the spirit of Christ is alive and that we are following his journey.

That’s the test in this life: to walk through the day trusting that the power of Jesus’ spirit is at work in this world; to keep following.

Mark said, “I want to tell you the story of Jesus.”

He was baptized and tempted in the wilderness. He called disciples to follow him wherever he would go. He taught them with stories that we still tell one another. He worked mighty deeds, always to lift up the broken and to welcome the excluded. He gave his life on a cross and then, because God is God, God’s love raised him from the dead.

That’s the story of Jesus, Mark says, but the most important thing to remember is

that this is only the beginning of the story of Jesus. The story continues. And at least for now, for this season of life, the Gospel pen is placed in our hands.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.