

The Resurrection of Our Lord (b)
Mark 16:1-8
St. John's Lutheran Church, Grove City OH
April 3-4, 2021 (Traditional)

That image from the Easter gospel, of Jesus' followers running away in fear from the empty tomb...strangely, it brought to my mind one of the dogs my family had while I was growing up. A dachshund named Reusch. He was untrainable. You'd try to teach him to fetch, roll over, sit. No matter what you did, he'd just smile, and lick you with all his might. In his early years, we had to really watch Reusch because whenever you opened a door, he was always there, ready to sprint through your legs.

I remember the day he finally realized his dream. My sister opened the front door and forgot to position her foot to block him. Reusch knew that this was finally his moment. He shot out the door. Dachshunds are amazingly fast. My sister and I bolt out onto the front porch. We're terrified he's going to get hit by a car. He doesn't know what he's doing. He sprints across the yard. In a split second he's at the street. And we figure he's gone. If he doesn't get himself killed first, we'll be chasing him for hours. His dream has finally come true.

But at the curb, he stops in his tracks, literally like he hits an invisible wall. He looks around. It's like, he realizes, "what is this? There's no leash on me. Where are my jailmasters?" I swear to this day that I saw look of human terror on a dog's face. He turned around, bolted back into the house like lightning, ran down into the basement, and hid under a couch for the next hour. Turns out being unleashed scared Reusch to death.

I read a real-life story about a family that was caught up in the horrific violence in central Africa, years back. The five children in this family witnessed the murder of their parents by whatever militia group that passed through their village that day. They burned the whole village to the ground. And these five kids escaped out into the forest. The two oldest were girls, about 11 and 13 years old. But they somehow kept themselves and the little ones alive for months by scrounging through garbage, and occasionally stealing food.

Some Christian relief workers finally found them in the forest, living in this little stick hovel that they'd built. They were barely alive. Malnourished, sick, living in utter filth. The relief workers brought them to a shelter. A nice place, with clean sheets and running water. Plenty of food. They cared for them and loved them and told them they could start school, get back into life, as soon as they were ready. No hurry. But these kids, other than saying their parents had been murdered, spoke to no one but each other. One of the relief workers said that she could see nothing but terror in those kids' eyes, every minute of every day. She could only imagine what they'd seen.

After about a week, one morning, the people who ran this shelter woke up to find these kids gone. They looked all over the place, all over town, asked people whether they'd seen them. No luck. A few days passed. And then something clicked with one of the relief workers. They went back to the forest. And there they found the five kids, packed into that same little stick hovel, eating garbage. Turns out, being rescued and starting a new life scared those kids more than anything.

Many years ago a stranger came to my office. She would not tell me her name or any personal information. She said she just wanted to vent to a stranger. In the course of our half-hour conversation, she step by step revealed more and more of what was going on in her marriage. She started by telling me her husband had a habit of teasing her in public,

in a kind of demeaning way. I asked her basically, “do you feel like you can be straightforward with him? Would it be OK to just honestly tell him how it makes you feel, and then tell him to please stop doing that in public?” Obviously an uncomfortable conversation, but that could be a good start. You see, I’m a very wise pastor.

But she kind of winced at that, and said, “there’s more to it.” Then she tells me how he’s verbally abusive. She tells me how, when she breaks out of her normal home routine and tries something fun and new, he tells her to stop doing it. So I’m getting a bad feeling here. Little by little, I find out she has lost touch with all her friends. Her husband doesn’t like it when she talks with people on the phone...not even with her family. I finally just stopped and said: “you can tell me what’s really going on.”

That’s when she broke down and wept. He had been abusing her physically for months. She lived in fear all day, every day. She never knew what would set him off. She showed me a bruise on her arm where he had yanked her around the night before. At which point I said, “listen—you are being incredibly brave right now. And you and I can call someone right now. I know exactly who can help you. Great people.” I wanted to get her to a safe place. I wanted so badly for her to know that that day was the day she could start getting her life back.

I literally started moving for the phone on my desk. Maybe that was a dumb thing to do. She jumped out of her chair. “No,” she said. “Not now. I can’t do it right now.” I said, “You had the amazing courage to come here. You know you need help. You know it’s not going to get better.” There was desperation in her eyes. She said, “I can’t.” And she walked out of my office. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to shake that one. I’ve prayed for her a lot. I’ve prayed that maybe, even though she couldn’t take a step that day, that meeting became the first step towards healing. Turns out, though, that that day...that day...she would rather stay in a very bad prison than set foot on a new road.

The women in the Easter gospel, Jesus' followers: when the messenger tells them Jesus has been raised—their first response is fright. When they see that stone rolled away, when they see the empty tomb, when they hear what God has done there, they run away in terror. Why? Because the prospect of a new life on new terms is scarier than death. Even a dog knows it's safer and easier to hide under a couch, than it is to go out there and be free. For a child that's been brutalized by a broken world, the prospect of starting a new life and trusting other people is a lot scarier than living in a hovel and eating garbage. For a person whose most defining, important love relationship is abusive, it's almost impossible to imagine another life. Being trapped in a miserable place is scary. Death is scary. But nothing—nothing—frightens us more than when a door opens to a whole new life.

What Jesus did on Easter was break the back of the abusive power that rules this world. We know this by faith, not by sight. But that announcement of victory...it changes the way we see everything, it changes the way we interpret everything going on in our lives. The enemy uses the fear of death and failure and loss and loneliness to rule over us. Jesus has broken the hold that fear has on us. He says "you, my child, don't answer to that abusive power any more. You don't live for him. You can live for the One who was broken for you, who paid everything for you, who walks with you now, who pours out his endless life for you. Who loves us and forgives us and tells us we don't have to hide, we don't have to live our lives playing defense, we don't have to settle for just eating the perishable food that the world offers. We can live with him, in him, through him.

Now we are in this new relationship. And yes there's a constant challenge to it. Faith is not easy for us; we're always tempted to fall back into that old defensive, fear-filled prison where death rules us. The place where we hold onto resentments, hold onto our self-righteousness, where we cancel anything that threatens us, where we cast judgments

on people thinking we're final and correct, where we hold onto thinking we see all the angles of every situation. That's a life bound on all sides by death.

But now with Jesus I have to give up death and all the easy certainties that come with it. Easter is where Jesus comes between us and that old life. We can't act like we're self-sufficient and final anymore. He's feeding us now. Now, life is an open book for us. Now, we can give up what we think we need, and take what God gives us. Now that we know we have no power to put people in their place, we can take people as God gives them to us. Now instead of being ruled by our fear of death, we can give that old death worship up and depend on him for every breath, and look to him to provide for us.

What are we going to do, now that we've been unleashed? Jesus opens up a new road out of the dead-end, and says "follow me." So I can ask myself a new question when I get up in the morning: am I going to hide behind the couch today, or am I going to get on that amazing road that Jesus has opened for me? Where I can live and give and love without fear! Here's the beautiful thing: either way, Jesus is with us. When we hide behind the couch, when we choose garbage, he's right there behind the couch with us, he's taking the garbage out for us. This is the total victory we're living now. Jesus now has us surrounded. Even when we die, he's there. He is risen. He is risen indeed!