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The Irony of the Resurrection

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**Texts: Mark 16:1-8; 1 Corinthians 1:18ff
(The Octave of Easter)**

This version of the Easter story, which might well be the oldest version, has always made the church uncomfortable. I'm sure you've all learned from Tim that from early on the Christian community, unable to be satisfied with the ending of Mark as it stood tried to make it better. There were at least two main attempts which made it all come together much more nicely. In those endings the disciples were not silent. They spread the story to the ends of the earth. Of course, the first communities who added these endings knew that they had heard precisely because those original women and men had not remained silent. So they improved on what Mark had written.

In the process, though, they missed the point about Easter that Mark was trying to make. The original Easter was not at all pretty. There were no cute bunny rabbits, no chocolate eggs, no pastel colours, no new dresses and bonnets, no parades, no mass choirs singing alleluia this and alleluia that, no lilies adorning Friday's cross. The first Easter was bleak. The disciples were hiding for fear of ending up just like their erstwhile leader – the one they thought might lead the revolution – the Romans and their clerical collaborators were comfortably asleep in their palaces and nice houses, the stark, bloody cross was still presiding over the world.

In this bleakness the women went out to do what they had not had time to do on Friday, prepare the body for an eternity in the grave and found the scene not at all what they expected. Not a sealed tomb, but some guy dressed in white telling them some cock and bull story about Jesus being raised and heading off to Galilee. No wonder they ran off afraid and kept their mouths shut.

I have no doubt that we are just as dissatisfied with the ending of Mark as the earliest Christians were. Of course, we are much too sophisticated to just make up a better ending – God forbid! We're not a bunch of crazy Fundamentalists! No, we, in our academic smugness *interpret* the story. We spin out some long, involved hermeneutical theory about "narrative" and "story" and "mythos" to make ourselves feel better. In the end, though, our sophisticated tricks are just our own version of running off afraid. We say nothing by talking our silly heads off.

Whether the early communities or ourselves, either way we miss the point that Mark is trying to make. We can begin to see that point when we listen to the first lesson we read this evening from Paul: "The message of the cross is sheer folly to those on the way to destruction" Wait a minute! Cross? Isn't that Friday's message? By Sunday haven't we moved beyond the now empty cross?

Actually, no we haven't. Easter is still about the crucified Jesus. As German theologian Jürgen Moltmann reminds us, the resurrection is always the resurrection of the *crucified*

Jesus.¹ If the cross is empty, it is only because the victim is dead and the body has been removed. The cross is never a sign of triumph, only of death and injustice. And Easter does no erase that.

We are embarrassed by the resurrection of the crucified Jesus for very different reasons than the disciples. We can't believe that anyone could rise from the dead. We've never seen that sort of thing happen and our understanding of how the universe works has no room for such things to happen.

In the first century the scandal was for quite a different reason. The problem was not that *someone* rose from the dead, but that this *particular* someone rose from the dead. Jesus had deeply disappointed his followers. He was supposed to be the liberating hero. He was supposed to be *the* son of David who would restore justice to the world by the might and power of God wielded against the Roman oppressor and Rome's local collaborators in the priestly and land-owning class. Instead he had allowed himself to be taken, had not even spoken in his own defence at his trial, and walked meekly to his execution. To the Romans he was a seditious provincial, a minor irritation to be squashed like all the other gnats Rome squashed every day throughout the Empire. To the religious leaders of his people he was a blasphemer, one who claimed to speak for God with no right or authority. Properly tried and condemned, he had been suspended on a cross between heaven and earth where both people and the gods could see him and laugh at his naked shame. He was hung on a tree and cursed by God forever.

If the arrested, tried and executed Jesus is raised from the dead then everything we ever held to be true must be wrong. We must be wrong about God; we must be wrong about ourselves; we must be wrong about the world. Even our self-chosen notions of what Christianity is are revealed as false. What is the point of sacrificing a scapegoat if the scapegoat rises from the dead? If that happens we have to face the reality that God is not on our side, God is on the scapegoat's side. We are the problem, not the other we have sacrificed.² It is we who demanded the death of Jesus, not anyone else and certainly not God. God is not the foundation of everything we call holy, but the earthquake that destroys it all. All that we call god is revealed as idols we have created in our own image. The real God is beyond our imagining.

The message of the resurrection of the Crucified God is sheer folly to us because our way is the way of destruction.

St. Paul also says, "The folly of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God [is] stronger than human strength." That is where the Good News, the Gospel, begins. The way of God is the way of life and that way leads right through the folly and weakness of the crucifixion of Jesus. When we say "Jesus is risen!" we can immediately follow that with "Alleluia!" because God has proven all our notions of what is right and proper, what ought to be, wrong by raising the crucified Jesus from the dead and vindicating the victim we sacrificed. By exposing us for what we really are God has actually immersed us in grace and

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1974).

² This is based on the ideas of René Girard, especially René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, in collaboration with Jean-Michel Oughourlian, et al. (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1987), and René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY; Ottawa: Orbis Books; Novalis, 2001).

mercy. By defeating our self-created idols, God has opened to all creation otherwise unimaginable possibilities.

This is true in part because God did not undo our schemes and idols through a demonstration of power and might, but through hidden weakness and folly. From Friday to Sunday there was no spasm of apocalyptic violence, only an execution, a burial and quiet. Hidden in that quiet weakness, God did what God does. On Sunday the executed criminal was vindicated and was alive—still hidden, mind you, but alive none the less.

Hidden in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus is a promise, a promise that in the destruction of our rules and regulations enforced by gods of power and might is a radical reversal. No longer are you to be judged by your ability to conform. No longer is anyone to be judged by their achievements within the system or to be sacrificed on the altar of merit. Now, in the new life of the crucified Jesus, the God who raises seditious blasphemers from the dead has found you and everyone else good enough. Because of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, your destiny is good.

This isn't what we have been taught; this isn't what we really believe. Still, if God is weak and foolish, if the crucified Jesus is risen, it is true. And not just because some not-so-young guy dressed in white says so. For now we should be afraid and silent. Soon enough the risen Jesus will come through our carefully locked doors and we will be silent no more.