

Mark 8:31-38

8:31 Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.

8:32 He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.

8:33 But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things."

8:34 He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

8:35 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.

8:36 For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?

8:37 Indeed, what can they give in return for their life?

8:38 Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

So...we don't just read stories and sing songs and say prayers during our preschool chapel. Sometimes, we go on adventures, and this past week, we went on a bear hunt. And if you've ever been on a bear hunt, you know it's full of tall grass, and swift waters, and muddy bogs, and even dark caves. You can't go over them. And you can't go under them. And you can't go around them. You've gotta go through them.

We're not on a bear hunt this morning, but we are on a hunt for meaning. And we find ourselves faced with an unenviable task – we're seeking to derive something substantive, encouraging, valuable from a text that is hard, and jarring, and full of sharp edges. And for some of us, maybe even most of us, our first reaction is to simply push this text aside, and get back to something that feels a little warmer, more accessible and approachable.

But...but, If we are to take our scriptures seriously, if we are to live faithfully, if we are to be a people of authentic discernment, if we are guided by the Holy Spirit, then we must go through this text. Yes, there are crosses to bear; multiple rebukes; a stern Jesus; mention of Satan; death and sacrifice; even the adjectives *sinful* and *adulterous* for good measure. Yikes, that's a lot to process!!!

We will face it all, together, with faithfulness, with creativity, with the grounding of the peaceful and loving God who centers us, and through a lens of hope.

Here goes.

This is where I want to start.

I believe that for the writer of Mark, and all of the gospel writers, the resurrection is THE profound moment of history. Resurrection changes

everything. Once you've experienced a post resurrection world you can never again experience the world in the same way.

If we're not careful, or if we are lazy in reading today's text, we can hear this business of cross-bearing and suffering as predetermined and predestined. This good, peaceful, loving imaginative Creator of ours concluded there was a simple fix for the corruption of the world. Jesus must meet the cross, suffer a humiliating death, and in so doing atone for corporate sin. Because, surely, that's the best, and most complete, and most humane path of redemption that the most intricate and sophisticated being in the universe can conjure. Right? Yeah, that doesn't make much sense to me, either.

I choose, and I faith, to be more measured in my interpretation of the gospels. Jesus fully devoted himself to the love of God and neighbor. When someone makes that choice, and expresses and lives out that choice publicly, vocally, and consistently, and does so under brutal Roman occupation, sooner or later, they will be at odds with the systems of this world. And sooner or later, the empire will strike back. It's not that God concocted the cross as a redemptive path for humanity. Instead, it's that Jesus chose an ultimate allegiance to God, and in so doing, willingly and ultimately subjected himself to the rejection of the powers that be. God's lasting and resurrecting hope stands in stark contrast to Caesar's fleeting and puny cruelty.

For if you have lived in God's enough-ness, if you have recognized your full value as God's beloved, what hold, what power does this world have on you?

Fast forward a half-century, maybe a little more or a little less, and Mark's author is seeking to make sense of Jesus' world-changing resurrection in an era every bit as volatile as the days following Pearl

Harbor, or 9/11, or the first weeks of the Covid pandemic. In a world feeling the crushing, dehumanizing nature of Rome's brutality – remember Jerusalem and its temple have been leveled, and the occupation is even more pronounced – how can Jesus followers find hope?

For our author, Peter's character expresses the desire, felt by so many throughout the ages: for God's justice to be manifested in a re-tinkering of human systems. Peter isn't so much concerned about the new world order, as much as he is about his status in it. Peter, living in a pre-resurrection world, believes Jesus' role is to reclaim human systems in God's name. Jesus is trying to tell Peter, and you and me as well, that he has come to help humanity reclaim God in a way that transcends our human systems. Jesus is helping us shift our dependence, indeed our very existence, away from tired systems, and back toward God.

Pain, fear, anxiety, uncertainty, doubt...ALL of these things are part of the human experience. Oppressive systems, in every age, seek to deflect these things. The hard parts of life can be resisted with power, forced onto neighbors who are more vulnerable. Rome's cross seeks to be a symbol of its dominance over every aspect of the human experience.

But none of these things exist in a vacuum. It's not pressure or force that eliminates these darker elements of living. We also experience hope, faith, love, kindness, humor, inner strength, and joy. We overcome our pain, our anger, our grief when we are met with love, and kindness, and care. Rome commands that the *many* bear all the pain to ensure the prosperity of the *few*. God chooses to be present with us, to see us through our pain.

Caesar asks you to deny your humanity in order that you might alleviate your anxiety. Jesus tells us that when we deny our humanity, we're not really living.

Jim Valvano, in the final stages of his cancer journey remarked, "Cancer can take my life, but it can never take my mind, and my heart, and my soul." The body is simply the vessel of what lives.

Jesus had a heart, soul, and mind rooted in God. Jesus refused to live in world that would deny him such an expression, even if there was a cross to bear. Because for Jesus, to suppress his humanity, to ignore his rootedness and calling in God, was to forfeit his very essence.

If we choose to follow Jesus, we too will have a cross to bear, and an obligation to deny ourselves the lure of worldly systems. In most instances, our cross will not be as brutal as the one Jesus and other martyrs had to endure, but it won't be without discomfort.

We experience a present certainty in the spaces we occupy, and even the uneasy certainties offer a kind of comfort. At least we know what to expect and how to manufacture a sense of safety and control. Jesus asks us to give up such certainties, and in so doing brave alienation from the familiar. For in this uncomfortable leap is life.

I want to say a word about Peter. He is rebuked by Jesus, both publicly and privately. In a few more chapters he'll deny even knowing Jesus at all. And on Easter morning, he'll dismiss the accounts of Mary and the other women (faithful Jesus-followers I might add!) as too outrageous to be true.

I believe Jesus' forceful rebuke of Peter, as well the more public corporate warning that follows, is a literary tool. Mark's author seeks

to remind us of the urgency and importance of the forces at play. What is grounded in God, our very lives, is too precious, too vital to be discarded in the pursuit of bureaucracy, minutia, and lifelessness. This is a hot stove moment. If a person desires to live they must seek God's kin-dom over Caesar's kingdom. To do otherwise is to be burned, is to live in the matrix, man!

And this is a resurrection story after all. Peter will eventually become the rock upon which the Jerusalem Church is founded. He'll stop worrying about sitting at the righthand or the lefthand of Jesus. Instead, as he'll find commune with the left out, he'll devote himself to doing what is right. And he'll enjoy a banquet void of spatial qualities – a level plain with limitless possibilities of love. Even if it means staring down a cross, Peter will dare to believe in life beyond lifelessness.

Let me finish with the idea of seismic moments. 9/11 and the Covid pandemic forced us into a recalibration. We have made changes and adjustments to exist in a newer, safer, reality. And there's not a day that goes by when we don't consider or reflect on those choices and changes.

I wonder what would happen if we chose to make the resurrection story a similar line of demarcation in our lives? Resurrection is the reality that light is not overcome by darkness, that death is not the final word, that God is indeed invested in this world with us, that life is known in heart, and soul, and mind, forever. Would such a mindset free us to finally be secure in ourselves, and to ultimately secure a better world?

May God give us the strength to remember the moments in each of our lives where there are crosses to bear. And may the bearing of such crosses free us to be secure, and confident, and safe in the arms of a

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loving God. And may our renewed love for one another finally bring about the purposeful world God intends for all of creation to experience.

May it be so, and may it begin in our living, right now.

Amen.