

Easter
April 1, 2018
Mark 16:1-8
Boundaries Broken
Michael Stanfield

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Open our eyes and hearts to the mystery and wonder of your resurrection. In Christ’s name we pray, amen.*

In March, 2008, the mayor of the village of Sarpourenx (sar-poor-enks) in southwest France threatened residents with severe punishment if they died. The reason? The town cemetery was full, and there was no place left to bury them.

Mayor Gerard Lalanne arranged for the governing council to pass an ordinance that read in part: “All persons not having a plot in the cemetery and wishing to be buried in Sarpourenx (sar-poor-enks) are forbidden from dying in the parish. Offenders will be severely punished.” “Cemetery full, mayor tells locals not to die,” *Reuters*, March 5, 2008, reuters.com/article/oddlyEnoughNews/idUSL0552076620080305. Retrieved November 1, 2008.

The problem the women faced at the first Easter was no less absurd only they had the opposite problem. It wasn’t that the tomb was full. It was that it was empty.

Jesus was dead. And there was yet one last intimate contact of which *only* women in the first century were privy; one last excruciatingly painful act that (perhaps) *only* women were brave enough to do – anoint the body. It’s funny but in first century Palestine, women and men were allowed so little physical contact with each other in life. But in death, the most intimate of contact was not only allowed, it was required. Anointment – smearing the whole body with spices and perfumes.

The women buy the spices as soon as the Sabbath, which was Saturday, is over. Three of them are named, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, the mother of James, and Salome. We know of special relationships with two of them but not very much about Salome. We also note that the mother of Jesus, also a Mary, is not there. This is odd but not lacking in common sense. She was the chief mourner and so had certain responsibilities at home.

The women go to the tomb at dawn. They surely can't have slept well and must have been eager for the first light. On the way, they have a common sense conversation: who will roll away the stone for them when they get there? How can they anoint a body they can't get to?

The fact is, they face a boundary that will surely be insurmountable and yet these women go anyway. But as they approach what they think will *be* a boundary, they see that the stone is already rolled back. The *intractable* boundary of the stone is broken... even though it is very large, it is set aside... Easter – it's all *about* boundaries being set aside – about boundaries being broken...

There are many such intractable *physical* boundaries in life. We encounter them every day – particularly as we get older. But it would seem there are just as many such boundaries in our minds and hearts. Most religious groups – including us Reformed Presbyterians have traditionally emphasized intractable *religious* boundaries and doctrinal rigor – all with a marked suspicion of individual religious experience – and for good reason. Individual experience is unique and unquantifiable. It is not necessarily repeatable in exactly the same way across every human population. Yet individuals who have had such powerful spiritual experiences, with the very best of intentions, tend to want to mass produce them.

A perfect illustration of this is the story of a man who was on a religious pilgrimage to the Holy Land. He had a deep hunger for an experience of God that was real. He had saved all he had to make the trek across the ocean. Upon arriving, he was walking around an old ruin when he stepped on top of an abandoned well. The wood used to seal the well had rotted and then soil and debris covered the rotted wood. As soon as his full weight came down on the soft wood, he fell through the opening and down he went. Well this wasn't just any well. It sat on top of a cavern that went deep down into the earth's crust, thousands of feet down – to be exact. As he fell, the man therefore had time to pray that God would save him.

Well, the words, "God save me," had barely left the man's lips when all of a sudden, his rain-coat opened up like a parachute, landing him softly on a ledge of the great underground cavern. The man then began to yell for help and though the place was isolated, someone heard, ran and got help and the man was miraculously rescued.

The fallen man was convinced that the hand of God had intervened to save him. So what he do with that? He spent the rest of his life taking people to that ruin and throwing them down into that well. Few survived but he was sure that was only because they were not really interested in seeking the Lord with their whole heart like he had been.

There is a real danger inherent in absolutizing individual spiritual experiences and applying them to the whole human race which is exactly what individuals – especially us Americans who have had such experiences are want to do.

It is why, except in certain charismatic traditions, that such experiences are always viewed as a threat to the broader aims of the larger religious institution – specifically that of the *common* spiritual good over the *individual* spiritual good... In fact, at the heart of every major world religion is a marked emphasis on selflessness. It is why, by and large, the tenor of *American*

religiosity overall is really rather shallow developing into a kind of pragmatic moralism, or what sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls “Golden Rule Christianity.”

Indeed, in a famous study in Muncie, Indiana, sociologist Theodore Caplow found a pragmatic “common creed” religiosity that emphasized the importance of treating others well, of believing in heaven and that good people go there when they die, of prayer and good works. Today’s emerging adults very much share this pragmatic, non-doctrinal and moralistic approach to religion. But they have discovered that it is not enough. So they have added another dimension – a palpable craving for an authentic religious experience. Penny Edgell, "Faith and spirituality among emerging adults," *faithformationlearningexchange.net*. Retrieved May 31, 2015.

- A boundary breaking experience of God that lets them know unequivocally that the edges of their normal, every day consciousness are not nearly as absolute as they had imagined.

Kind of like the experience of the women at the empty tomb...

But breaking religious boundaries is dangerous. Doing so challenges the very essence of one’s reality. One can get lost or can lose oneself. People can even be lead to their deaths by leaders who have had a powerful experience and rather than having gratitude for it from a place of humility, instead identify with it and act like a mini-messiah.

We good church men and women provide and then monitor safe religious boundaries for a reason: Breaking boundaries is always risky, and dangerous.

And yet when it comes to discovery and growth, boundary breaking is absolutely necessary from time to time. The greatest lessons most of us learn in life come as a result of breaking the rules. And it just so happens that new life, resurrection life, comes when God breaks the rules; when a boundary we thought God had set, God suddenly breaks; when the rock is rolled away; when Jesus is not there but is said to have risen...

About this, United Methodist Bishop Will Willimon writes: “We, along with the women have been told at the tomb that Jesus is not here, that he will not stay nailed down, sealed shut, all tied up and secure. He will not be held by death. So if we would follow him – if we want to be his church – it will not be to places of certainty. It must be forward, into the future, out into whatever Galilee we must go to on Monday. That’s where he is, that’s where he will actually meet you. And *that* good news is more than a little scary. It’s crazy talk. No wonder the last word in Mark’s gospel, and in the story of the first Easter, is fear. “They told no one for they were afraid.” William H. Willimon, "Easter fear," *The Intrusive Word* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 141-42.

New life. Resurrection life. It always comes from beyond the comfortable, accepted known boundaries. In fact, every earthshattering experience of the Presence of God I have ever had – and I have had several – have come not within the safe confines of the orthodox ministrations of the institutional church (which, by the way, I very much respect), not in the gathered community of the fellowship of like-minded believers, (which I very much enjoy) but way out beyond those edges – from gripping dreams and visions, while on a Native American vision quest in Northern Ontario, while amongst mostly Buddhist psychotherapists during training sessions on meditation, the body, and the power of being absolutely open hearted.

Any power that *you* may have experienced or recognized in my preaching or in my service as a Minister of the gospel has come from those boundary breaking experiences. In fact, I have come to understand my calling as one in which God actually bids me to venture out with fear and trembling beyond the safe borders of religious orthodoxy.

I have not always had this clear of an understanding. This inclination began with a deep spiritual hunger that I discovered could not be met at any sanctioned Christian retreat of any kind no matter the denomination.

I yet had this need for unequivocal experiences of God. I was not finding them in the visible church so I began to look elsewhere while maintaining my connection to the church. And low and behold, Jesus made good on his promise of “Seek and you shall find; ask and it will be given; knock and the door shall be opened to you.”

For years, it felt as if I had to keep this part of myself secret –especially from fellow Reformed Church men and women. I therefore had this rich set of religious experiences both under my belt and to which I continued to be called, that I yet felt the need to hide since it seemed there was no way they would be understood or accepted by the good folks I was serving. I was not going to be the man at the ruined well!

But over time I have come to the conclusion that my experiences have been, in a sense, no different *in kind* to those about which the writers of the scriptures have testified – both terrifying and assuring.

All of those experiences – from the encounter of Adam and Eve with God in the Garden, to the story of the Exodus, to the resurrection of Jesus – every single one was boundary breaking. And every single one – just like with the women at the tomb, initially had me scared out my wits. With practically every one of those experience I have started out with the attitude of “What was I thinking to want this?” or “What was I thinking to put myself in this position?”

But it has always given way to experiences that, although not lending themselves well to words, have amounted to what Rudolf Otto defined as numinous experiences of the Holy.

Somewhere along the way I finally came to understand that this was my calling – bringing the vitality of firsthand experience of the Holy into an institution that so often felt to me to be filled with plenty of dutiful folks that I love and appreciate but not many passionate folks. In fact, the Reformed Church of my lifetime has generally not been so kind to Presbyterians with a deep passion arising out of a truly unique and creative soul.

Yet the God of Scriptures and of my experience *is* the Lord of *all* life whether within the confines of the Christian Tradition or outside of it. Over time, with great struggle, I have come to understand that I seek these experiences not for me alone – as powerful and wonderful as they are to me as an individual. No, I am called beyond the borders for a more humbling purpose – to integrate them into my religious tradition – the tradition into which I was born and for which I was called to serve – to help bring vitality and life to what has become, for many who have fallen

away from the church, dead and empty. The surprise has been just how much many of you longtime faithful church men and women have also appreciated this.

Breaking boundaries. It would appear that God not only does it in Christ in the resurrection, but that God also calls some – like those women and like Thomas to actually experience it.

You remember Thomas. I love Thomas. Thomas was the one who said, “Unless I jab my fingers through the nail marks in his hands and unless I stick my whole hand in the wound in his side, I won’t believe.” In other words, “Unless I experience Jesus alive and well for myself, I will never take your word for it.”

And then suddenly Jesus actually *does* appear and what does he do? Two things:

1. He tells Thomas to come closer. Jesus seems therefore to understand that some folks just have to experience it for themselves. He does not chastise Thomas. In fact, he basically says – “Do what you have to do to wrap your mind and heart around the fact that I am alive.” “Put your fingers in my hands and your hand in my side. I want you. I need you Thomas. So come closer!” And second,
2. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” In other words, faith is a blessed gift. If you don’t have to know based on experience it is probably not a good idea for you to seek it. You are blessed. Don’t go any further. Do what you are called to do and don’t look back.”

The point is that there is nothing wrong with you either way.

Today, though, is a day to remember that most boundaries are of human invention – like boundaries that we place between those with more or less education, with more or less money, with more or less skin tone, with more or less heterosexuality... or like the boundary of the stone that was put in front of Jesus’ tomb that those women approached on that first Easter morning... But most especially like the boundary we place between life and death...

I am here to tell you friends that the claim concerning Jesus is not that he picked up his old manner of life, but rather that after his death – his real death – dead as a doornail!, he entered into an entirely new form of existence, one in which he shared the power of God and in which he can now share that power with others.

The resurrection experience is not simply something that happened to Jesus that we are required to have faith in to make any difference. It is equally something that happened to us all whether we believe it or not. The boundary between life and death has really been shattered. It can be comprehended and lived out by belief or it can be experienced turning everything we ever thought about life completely on its head. Either way transforms the world as we know it. So, as John Wesley once said, “Preach the resurrection by faith until you experience it yourself (whether in this life or the next) and once you have experienced it, preach it precisely because you have experienced it.”

Either way, the greatest boundary known to humanity has been broken. I *have* experienced it and am here to proclaim its truth –The tomb is empty! Christ has risen! Christ has risen indeed! Let us pray.

Gracious Lord, we are so good at honoring the boundaries you set by the gift of faith you give us that we forget that you are not just a boundary setter but a boundary breaker. Help us to remember today that in Jesus, you shattered the very boundary of death. Let us therefore go forth boldly in the name of Jesus proclaiming this broken boundary as good news...

We pray these things in your name, amen.