

Trauma and Ecstasy

Mark 16:1-8

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In the novel *The World According to Garp*, John Irving tells of a little boy whose family goes to the beach every summer, and every summer the little boy is warned to stay out of the water because the undertow is strong. For several years the little boy heard from his family:

'The undertow is bad today.'

'The undertow is strong today.'

'The undertow is wicked today.' ...

When he asked what it could do to you, he had only been told that it could pull you out to sea. It could suck you under and drown you and drag you away.

One year, when the boy was four or five, the family saw him *watching the sea. He stood ankle-deep in the foam from the surf and peered into the waves, without taking a step, for the longest time. The family went down to the water's edge to have a word with him.* They asked him what he was doing.

'I'm trying to see the Under Toad,' he said.

'The what?' said Garp.

'The Under Toad,' ... 'I'm trying to see it. How big is it?'

The family realized that all these years the boy had been dreading a giant toad, lurking offshore, waiting to suck him under and drag him out to sea. The terrible Under Toad...

Between the parents, the Under Toad became their code phrase for anxiety... [They] evoked the beast as a way of referring to their own sense of danger... [and

fear, or their depression and even despair] *they said to each other, 'The Under Toad is strong today.'*

Let me say to you this morning, the Under Toad is strong today. It is as if the whole world is dreading a giant toad, lurking offshore, waiting to suck us under and drag us out to sea.

Twice in the last month I've mentioned the theologian David Ford who talks about being overwhelmed in our lives. The word "overwhelm" has roots in Middle English which means to be submerged. To be overwhelmed is like being sucked under the waves and dragged out into the deep. Ford says that our lives are overwhelmed and we are constantly aware of being pulled under. To put in John Irving's terms, to be overwhelmed is to face the Under Toad. And these days we are facing it every day (*The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life*).

In Mark 16 the Under Toad is strong. The three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, were overwhelmed with death and darkness. And even though the male disciples had all run and hid, these three women stayed faithful and went to the tomb of Jesus in one final act of devotion and commitment to their dead master, to dress his mutilated and decaying body with sweet-smelling spice.

They had witnessed their beloved teacher, betrayed by one of their own disciples, arrested by a massive show of force by the official Religious Security apparatus combined with an armed mob. They had watched helplessly as Jesus was tried in a kangaroo court, beaten, and lynched by a mob made up mostly by people

who had praised him a week before. They watched him tortured and nailed to a cross and watched him die slowly over several hours... and they couldn't do a thing about it.

They had tried to help when some of Jesus' secret admirers, took him down from the cross and buried him in a borrowed tomb. Then the women waited in shock on the sabbath. They didn't sleep. They couldn't. They simply sat in silence and fear, and as soon as they could they gathered some spices and walked in the gathering light toward the tomb. They hurried and did not want to be seen. As they walked toward the cemetery, the road was lined with crosses, many with people suffering in agony on them, while on others, the victims had died but were still hanging there. As they entered the cemetery they stumbled along between grave after grave, tomb after tomb, and one of the women started crying saying, "Who are we kidding? What do we think we're going to do at the tomb? We can't even roll away the stone."

But as they rounded the bend in the road, they looked up and saw that the large stone had been already rolled back. "What in the world?! Who did it?!" They ran forward and actually entered the tomb and found a young man in white calmly sitting on the right. He said, "Don't be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who has been crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. You can look right there where they had laid him. Go back to the other disciples, particularly Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. It is there that you will meet him, just like he has told you."

Mark concludes, “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.”

That’s it. That’s how Mark ends his re-telling of the resurrection. Scholars agree, even conservative New Testament scholars agree, that the verses following were all added over the next century by well-meaning preachers who didn’t know what to do with Mark’s abrupt ending.

And it is abrupt. What happened next? Did they go tell Peter and the other disciples? Did they go to Galilee? What happened on Monday? Did they get to see the resurrected Jesus? We know none of this. All we get in Mark’s original version is fear and silence.

Matthew, Luke, and John tell of earthquakes, meeting the risen Jesus on the road, the men not believing the women disciples, Mary meeting Jesus in the garden, on and on. But Mark has none of this. Just, the women ran from the tomb for terror and amazement seized them. And they were silent because of their fear.

It is interesting to me that the words usually translated as “terror and amazement” are the words in Greek “tromos” and “ekstasis” or in English: trauma and ecstasy.

Of the two words, trauma is easier to get at. It is hard but we can get a handle on what’s going on with it. Trauma is usually defined as fear-based suffering that does not go away in the aftermath of events in people’s lives that threaten to overwhelm (there’s that word) their ability to function. Trauma consists

of psychic wounds of disorientation and chaos in the lives of those who have endured awful events (see Deanna A. Thompson, *Glimpsing Resurrection: Cancer, Trauma, and Ministry*, p. 4).

Theologian Shelly Rambo, says trauma is “life continually marked by an ongoingness of death.” It never goes away. After “an overwhelming (there is the word again) event of violence everything is changed. Life is never the same again. Death haunts every day” (see Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining*, p. 2-3). Death becomes an excess that overflows into everything else.

To use the words we spoke earlier, trauma is the sense that the Under Toad is always lurking just below the surface, just waiting to grab us, pull us under, and out into the sea.

When my grandmother was 9 years-old, she lived through a tornado that destroyed her little West Texas town. She survived and her family survived but many people in town did not. She used to tell me of walking out of the storm cellar after the tornado and seeing dead farm animals in the tops of barely standing stripped trees, of debris and destroyed houses everywhere, and even seeing dead bodies blown this way and that, some of whom were people she had known. She survived. But she never got over it. From then on for the rest of her life, thunderstorm clouds on the horizon terrorized her. In middle age, she and my grandfather were able to purchase a home in my hometown that had probably the strongest, most reinforced storm cellar in town located under the concrete foundation of the house. And when the storms came, my grandmother was in that cellar, and she expected all of us to be there, too.

Now, we didn't know what to call it then, but my grandmother suffered from trauma – a kind of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

Mark says the women fled the tomb because of trauma. They had witnessed their beloved rabbi's arrest, torture, and agonizing and brutal lynching and death on a cross. And that very Sunday morning, they had walked the path right past that cross and other crosses with other people brutally dying. Furthermore, they walked, always looking over their shoulder to see if more soldiers might show up and grab them, past grave after grave, tomb after tomb to get to this tomb. For three days nothing but out of control trauma and now they were standing right in the middle of the tomb of Jesus, the place of Death.

Furthermore, trauma is exactly what the Roman Empire intended when it crucified those accused of sedition or resisting Rome. It was not simply capital punishment. Crucifixion was meant to overwhelm people with brutality of not just dying, but total and complete brutal Death in all its physical, psychic, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

These women, says Mark, were traumatized.

But that's not all. Mark says they were also experiencing a kind of ecstasy. Maybe ecstasy is not the best word, but it is the only word Mark can come up with that perhaps describes an event and experience that these women have that is the opposite of trauma. Ecstasy here is a kind of deep, profound, life-changing, physical, psychic, emotional, and spiritual experience of the resurrection, of what John calls Life in super-abundance (John 10:10), Life in its abounding fullness of

joy and strength for mind, body, and soul, Life beyond anything ever conceived before.

David Ford says the only way to counter bad overwhelmings are bigger and better good overwhelmings. I think that's what is going on here in the tomb with these three women. They are overwhelmed with the violent trauma of Jesus brutal death. But then they are more overwhelmed with the completely unexpected news of Jesus' resurrection. Up to now, everything in their lives has been overwhelmed and defined by Death. But now even Death is overwhelmed by Resurrected Life, and the only word Mark can come up with is ecstasy – ecstatic, super-abundant Life. The Resurrection Life of Christ is so excessive that it overflows even into Death.

Now, that's a lot to take in. I'm not surprised the women could not speak. I'm surprised they could walk out of that tomb at all. An extraordinary traumatic sense of Death confronted and overwhelmed by an explosion of super-abundant resurrection Life. Wow! What did they do with all that? What do we do with it?

Writer Rebecca Solnit is helpful when she writes, "People have always been good at imagining the end of the world. What we humans are not so good at, is cultivating hope when the future seems unsettled and uncertain." Solnit suggests that instead of the total either/or of victory or defeat, that we want to learn how to "hope in the dark" which is "ultimately a form of trust, trust in the unknown" ... trust in the possibilities of what might yet come to be (*Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, p. 27, 16).

That's what I think these women were doing here at the end of Mark: hoping in the dark and trusting the unknown. Super-abundant ecstatic resurrected Life collided with the deep brutalizing trauma of Death, and the trauma did not instantly go away. Trauma never goes away. That's part of what trauma is, it is the ongoingness of Death.

But I think they go out of the tomb, they keep going into the unknown, and step into a new future in the Light. Deathliness will linger and keep trying to pull them under but over time, learning to live the life of the Resurrection of Christ, their lives will be defined by ecstatic joy and life. And even their trauma, even Death, will be integrated into a larger understanding in light of the living Christ. That's part of what it means to be Christian and what it means to be part of the church: that no matter what, no matter the trauma or the uncertain days we're living in, there is always a sense of Resurrected ecstatic Life just under the surface. Church is where we learn to live into the resurrection instead of being defined by trauma and Death. Fear of the Under Toad no longer dominates us. Rather, we can trust the unknown with courage as we learn to live into the resurrection.

Tom Long refers to the book, *Intensive Care*, by Mary Lou Weisman about the moving and tragic story of the death of her fifteen-year-old son, Peter, from muscular dystrophy. She tells about an astonishing thing that happened right at the moment of his death. Peter's body was completely paralyzed in the final stages of his disease, and the delirium of death was taking over his mind in his last few minutes of his life. He was moaning, random and disconnected in his thoughts. His voice, wrote Mary Lou, "sounded so far away, so lost." But then, suddenly, in a surprisingly clear voice, Peter spoke directly to Larry, his father.

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Bewildered and frightened, Larry and Mary Lou looked at each other. What could this strange question from their dying son possibly mean?

“Daddy, what does ‘impudent’ mean?”

Even though he had tears streaming from his eyes, Larry answered Peter matter-of-factly. “Impudent. Son, impudent means bold. It means shamelessly bold.”

Peter paused for a moment, death closing its grip on him, and then he said, “Then put me in an impudent position.”

And sure enough, just before their son died, Larry and Mary Lou, positioned Peter’s arms and legs in a posture of bold defiance, an “impudent position” in the face of death (from “A Living Hope,” by Tom Long).

Because of the Resurrected Christ we can live impudently, boldly in the face of death and in the face of an uncertain future. Instead of cowering on the shore, afraid of what might be under the surface of the water, we can launch out, dive in, and see where the current might lead us.

The days in front of us are uncertain and even when this pandemic passes, we will never be the same again. The trauma will remain. But the overwhelming Life in the Resurrected Christ will remain even more.

The women are told by the young man in white that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. Like the women, we can impudently go forth into the unknown future because Jesus goes ahead of us.

These women were speechless by all that had just occurred. But when they start speaking, I want to hear what they have to say.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.