**TPC’s Values: Courage**

**OT 31C-19**

**Mark 16: 1-8**

**11/21/21**

**Prayer for Illumination**

**Anthem**

**Mark 16: 1-8**

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.

And very early on the first day of the week,

when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

They had been saying to one another,

“Who will roll away the stone for us

from the entrance to the tomb?”

When they looked up,

they saw that the stone, which was very large,

had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb,

they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe,

sitting on the right side;

and they were alarmed.

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.

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.”

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.

TPC’s Values: Courage

It may seem strange, in the middle of November, to preach on a passage that is, traditionally, an Easter lesson. To use the end of the liturgical year to preach on Mark’s telling of resurrection—the greatest, most hope-filled, joyous proclamation our faith tradition holds—right before we enter the season of Advent. Except, as Mark tells it, it wasn’t hope-filled or joyous for those who first encountered it.

No. Despite the angel’s best efforts to communicate the Good News… to share something joyous and hope-filled, the women were seized by terror. Didn’t matter that the angel told them, plain as day, “Do not be (afraid)… Jesus is raised, just as he told you,” Mark says the women just ran away, and said nothing to anyone.

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Scholars are clear. This is how Mark’s Gospel originally ended. Not with joy. But with terror. Fear.

So while the gospels were all written to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ… and the transformational new life Jesus came to reveal… While the word “Gospel” itself literally means, “Good news”….

We shouldn’t think for a minute that even Good News isn’t scary sometimes… or that faith leaves no room fear. Or that faithful people never let fear, rather than faith, motivate their actions.

Let’s be real. The Gospel is filled with fear. Jesus was killed because religious leaders were terrified of his growing popularity, and the new way of life and faith he was revealing.

Jesus was killed because the Roman leaders were afraid that if they didn’t abide by the religious leaders’ demands, they’d have a revolt on their hands.

But Jesus’ opponents weren’t the only ones who were so often afraid, right?

As we just read, the women fled the empty tomb that first Easter morn with terror. But at least the women had the courage to show up on that resurrection morning.

The men sure didn’t. They’d already succumbed to their fears when they abandoned Jesus—every last one of them—as soon as he was sent to be hung.

Heck, when Jesus was being interrogated by Pilate, and some in the crowd spotted Peter and wondered if he might be one of Jesus’ disciples, Peter denied even knowing Jesus. That’s how afraid he was.

But even that really wasn’t all that surprising, was it? It had all been foreshadowed when Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for what would happen to him. Jesus flat-out told them that he’d be handed over to the authorities, be killed, and three days later rise again. But Mark says the disciples didn’t understand. And instead of asking for help or clarification, they “said nothing because they were afraid.”

They were afraid… as they were when Peter, James, and John got to travel with Jesus up a mountain and witness his transfiguration. But Mark says that, after blurting out some nonsense, the three of them just stood there, frozen, because “they were terrified.”

They were terrified… as they were when all 12 were out at sea… and they saw Jesus walking towards them on water. Except they mistook Jesus for a ghost… and became so afraid… so terrified that a ghost was coming towards them, Mark says they started “crying out in fear.”

Crying out in fear… just as they had done another time they were out at sea… this time, though, Jesus was with them, asleep in the hull of the ship. But as a storm set in and waves began to overtake them, they began crying out that this would be their last storm… until Jesus woke up and finally silenced the winds and stilled the waters.

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To be sure, the Gospel is filled with fear. The Gospels is filled with fear because life is filled with things that scare us.

Death… loss… failure… neglect… poverty… violence… These are just some of the big, universal fears we carry. We’ll each find a heckuva lot more the deeper we dig. Because life is filled with things that scare us.

Which is why the gospels give us such a blessing every time they reveal the fear of Jesus’ followers. I, for one, find it deeply comforting to know that they, too, were sometimes afraid. That sometimes even Jesus’ most trusted followers let fear get the better of their faith. Because life is filled with things that scare us.

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And yet… as filled with fear as the Gospels are… it’s also clear it’s filled with an amazing amount of courage, too.

Like our lesson today. Sure—the women fled the tomb and the disciples abandoned Jesus in fear… But we know they eventually found the courage to follow their faith.

Because we’re here, right?! We know the women eventually found the faith to tell others about Jesus’ resurrection because you and I are here, claiming to be Easter people… People who trust in the salvation of God and the new life God offers in Jesus Christ.

We’re here… as part of a church community… because those first disciples found the courage of their faith to continue Jesus’ mission in the world once he ascended to heaven. The whole book of Acts tells us how the Spirit started using them to form a new kind of community… a church community that spread the mission and ministry of Jesus throughout the areas… not just to other Hebrews but, in time, to non-Hebrews, too.

So we know… we know that while these followers knew what it was to be frightened… they also found the courage to pursue what faith makes possible. They found the courage discipleship so often requires.

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It’s why I love… I love, TPC, that courage is one of our key values.

I love that we claim right up front this thing called discipleship requires courage. Because it can be frightening at times.

* It can be frightening to follow a Lord we can’t see with our eyes or touch with our hands.
* It can be frightening to pursue a kingdom that none of us can locate on a map.
* It can be frightening to eschew the priorities of greed and power this world so rigidly adheres to in order to pursue the priority Christ has placed before us—to love God with all that we are and to love our neighbor as ourself.

So count yourself in good company if you sometimes find it frightening to strive for inclusion… if it’s sometimes intimidating to confront the divisions and bigotries amid a world that seems to erect dividing walls every chance it gets.

Know you’re not alone if you’re sometimes afraid or hesitant to pursue your curiosity--to dig into the questions and doubts or struggles of your faith amid a world that tries to make everything so black and white.

And rather than rationalizing your way out of helping another in need, it’s helpful to be mindful of just how frightening it can be to truly pursue compassion—love in action—for a neighbor in need—whoever they are, wherever you find them.

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You see, friends, when we name our core values, the value of courage comes last because, quite frankly, if we’re really, truly going to strive to be inclusive, curious, and compassionate, then we better also be prepared to be courageous.

Because love and grace do not simply share themselves in this world. As you’ve heard me say before, the kingdom of God does not grow by osmosis. It is dependent on Jesus’ followers finding the faith to follow the Holy Spirit as it is perpetually leads us to truer revelations of the love and life God is calling us share.

Put simply… it takes courage. Courage that we sometimes lack. Courage we will occasionally fail to summon. But rest assured… it is courage you have in droves, Towson Presbyterian Church.

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When I look back at just the most recent steps we’ve trod, signs of your courage abound.

I see courage in your staff and in your Session—our governing board.

I see courage in your committees and mission teams.

And I see courage in you. Every… single… one of you… from our long-time members to our recent visitors. Because it hasn’t been easy being the church amid a pandemic… just as it isn’t easy exploring church life amid a pandemic.

When the pandemic first struck 20 months ago… as frightening as it was… you didn’t stop being the church. You didn’t hunker down as if God wanted us to just bide our time until the pandemic was over… as fear would’ve told us to do.

No. You creatively and courageously kept finding fresh ways of being the church… regardless of the obstacles that arose. You gathered virtually for worship… you met in Zoom meetings to carry on our ministries… you built new missional bridges into the community in order to not just continue… but even expand our outreach into the community.

To be sure, it took a special kind of courage to give more mission dollars than this church has ever given before.

Just as it took a special kind of courage to commit to reframing our community into not one, but two campuses—in-person and virtual.

But you’ve been doing it. We’ve had more participants these past three months in our Adult Spiritual Formation programs than ever before. We’ve had over 40 combined participants in the new Hunger and Peacemaking Action Teams so far. And an Environmental Action Team now on the horizon.

And I could go on and on… we’ve seen courage in the choir’s commitment to keep bringing us music… virtually and now again… in-person. We’ve seen courage in our children’s and youth ministries… and the commitment to keep telling the story of God’s love to our younger members. We’ve seen the courage to invest big sums in our building to drastically improve our ventilation in the sanctuary… and soon… in the coming few months… bring a tremendous upgrade to our video and livestreaming capability.

It doesn’t mean it hasn’t been scary at times. I’ll be the very first to admit… it’s been both scary and challenging in various ways at various times.

But that’s also the point! As scary and challenging as it has been at various points along the way, it’s been a year of deeper and broader growth than I can ever remember in any church I’ve ever been a part of. It may not look always look like it—grant you. The sanctuary isn’t as full as it was two years ago. And you, at home, weren’t watching our worship services two years. Yet here we are. Averaging more worshippers than we have in years.

Because you’ve had the courage—pandemic or no pandemic—to pursue what it means to be an inclusive, curious, compassionate church in the 21st century.

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I’m personally grateful for it all. Just as I’m grateful for all of you. For your presence in our worship. And for your presence in our community of faith. As I hope you hear most Sundays… none of this happens without you… and the offerings of your presence—to be sure—but also the offerings of your talents and, yes, your treasure.

Make no mistake—the primary reason our Session has been able to so readily invest in all this new mission and ministry the Spirit has put before us—the new campus, the new staff, the new mission outreach—is because of you… and your courageous support… and your courageous participation.

So again, I say thank you. Even as I also say that there is more… so much more… we are called to do. Both individually… and communally.

So if I might offer you a word of encouragement… If you have been offering your presence in worship… but have yet to taste a small group or some kind of formational offering—I invite you to courageously take the next step… and taste one.

And if you’ve been thinking about using your heart and hands in mission work, but haven’t done so yet—I invite you to courageously explore one of the new mission action teams.

And if you believe in what the Spirit is doing here—if you’re participating in any way in the life of our community—virtually only or in-person… If you believe that what we are doing is and will make a difference—but you haven’t yet been able to financially support the effort… or you haven’t been able to give to the level to which God calls—I invite you to courageously explore the joy to be found in generosity. Give a gift. Or courageously increase your gift in 2022 Make no mistake, the growth of our ministries deeply needs your increased investment. Our mission and ministry is 100% dependent on your courageous support and investment, and requires your courageous support to sustain.

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And yes… as I share these invitations with you, I realize it may seem more than a little self-serving. I mean, as one of the pastors of the church, I want our ministries to grow. But I don’t want them to grow for my sake. And not just for your sake.

I want them to grow for the kingdom’s sake. For the gospel’s sake. For the more courageously we pursue our mission and ministries across our values… the more inclusive… the more curious… the more compassionate the world ultimately becomes… bit by bit… moment by moment… person by person… disciple by disciple… one courageous step at a time.

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I thank God for you, Towson Presbyterian Church. You are remarkable community of faith, who has just given testimony a remarkable year of mission and ministry. And I can’t wait to see what your courage enables the Spirit to do through us next. Amen.