

Home Again

Mark 16:1-8

March 31, 2024

I wonder if you have ever returned to a place you once knew well, only to discover that everything had changed? The house where you once scribbled on the walls has been painted a different color. The tree from whose sturdy branches you used to swing has been chopped down. Someone else's car sits in the driveway where you learned to drive. The best coffee shop in town is now a Chick-fil-A. The little league fields are townhouses. And of course, you have changed too. You've grown up. You've moved out. You've moved on.

I remember walking into the gym where, decades earlier, I had spent my glory days as a basketball player. When *were* my glory days? Thank you for asking. Fifth grade. I wore number 12 for my hero, John Stockton. My assist-to-turnover ratio that year was off the charts. Now, in my memory, in my mind's eye, the gym at the elementary school in Pleasant Garden, North Carolina is Madison Square Garden. It's filled to the rafters with screaming fans, and all of their eyes are on that star point guard for Vandalia Presbyterian Church Peewee Boys Team. (Why do they call it peewee?)

Now perhaps the picture feels like a bit much. But then again, you weren't there. You don't know how it felt. Well, I regret to inform you, upon further investigation, it turns out that the arena in my mind is in fact a dusty, dark, aging school gymnasium. The day I made my triumphant return, that space was filled not with cheering fans to greet my arrival, but with kindergartners learning how to jump rope. I bet you've had a similar experience. Maybe the author Thomas Wolfe was right: you can't go home again. After all, so much has changed. Going back is unsettling. It's humbling.

And yet, we all do it. We do go back. We have reunions and homecomings. We take family trips to the places that hold our roots. We drag our children to small towns and hole-in-the-wall spots where our stories begin. There is this compulsion, this instinct, this human behavior that leads us back. There is the desire within us to return home, to remember where we've been. We go back not only to recall the good old days, but to retrieve a part of ourselves we left behind, a part of ourselves we ache to rediscover. Going home again can awaken us to who we are.

Three women arrive at the tomb early on a Sunday morning. They find the stone rolled away and a mysterious young man in a white robe. An angel? Mark doesn't tell us. The messenger shocks the women by announcing that Jesus, whom they are seeking, has been raised from the dead. *Good news! But! He is not here. He's already gone. Gone away. Gone where? Galilee. Galilee? Galilee.* I would not have gone to Galilee. If God had resurrected me, I wouldn't even have gone to Disney World. Maybe Hawaii... But the message is clear. Jesus has gone to Galilee. And we must go there too.

So, where *is* Galilee? It is where the story of Jesus began. A small town, hole-in-the-wall spot, where he called his first followers by the lakeshore. Where he healed disease. Where he extended hospitality to the stranger. Where he made outsiders a part of his inner circle. Where he spoke of a love so strong it could overcome death. Where he promised a future in which God's dream for human flourishing would come true. You see, Galilee is home. And this is where they will see the resurrected Christ. You have to go home again.

Friends, if we remain in the tomb too long, we will miss Jesus. Put another way, the most consequential part of faithful living is not coming to church on Easter Sunday (though we are certainly glad you did). But, be warned. If you stay in the sanctuary too long, you will miss Jesus. He is already ahead of you. In front of you. Gone home again.

Yes, Jesus has been raised from the dead. But. He is not here. Go. Tell the others. He is alive. He is on the loose. He haunts the places you know the best. He resides in the sites where you spend your days. But not only that. He exists in the experiences of joy and grief, pain and pleasure, mountaintop and darkest valley. Go home again. And there you will see him.

And so they did. Filled with a dynamic mix of fear and amazement, terror and wonder, they went home again. Back to that ordinary, dusty place where a young carpenter named Jesus had lived. They returned to the spot, the very spot, where he had spoken their names out loud, where he had seen something in them they could not see in themselves. And there they remembered. They recalled how that man had looked them in the eye and said, "Follow me."

And so they do. They follow him home again. And *that* is where they see it. That is where they see *him*. That is where they remember who *they* are. Where they find their voices to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus and start a movement that will take over the world with God's love.

Mark's Gospel includes no appearance of the risen Christ. Not in its earliest versions. You see, the gospel writer Mark understood that it is a fool's errand to attempt to prove the resurrection or to convince anyone of what happened. Instead, Mark tells us where we will find him. He urges us to open our eyes to resurrection all around us. Not in electrifyingly dramatic, theatrical displays of divine power, but in glimpses. In moments. In the ordinary. In Galilee. And when you believe it, you see it. And when you see it, then you know.

And so, the summons of Easter is to go back to Galilee. The summons of Easter is to go home again and see the place for what it truly is: illumined by God's love, overflowing with possibility, alive with resurrection. The summons of Easter is to be alert to glimpses of grace in every direction. The summons of Easter is never to explain, but always to see, to know, to tell.

And so, I have to tell you what I heard and saw on Tuesday afternoon. Over lunch, a small group of friends was studying scripture and sharing stories as we do every month. One member of the group reflected that afternoon on the rawness of grief following the death of his son, far too young, just before Christmas. He used powerful words to describe that grief, words like astonishing and breathtaking. A constant hollow aching for what has been lost.

And then he shared something unexpected. Something filled with beauty. Something equally breathtaking. He described how his son, a man of deep faith, was a lover and avid observer of nature. He told a story that not long after his death, his wife was walking in the woods when a red-tailed hawk landed on the trail just in front of her. It sat on the ground, staring up at her, and she knew. She saw and she knew. She knew and she smiled. She smiled and she said out loud, "I'm okay. I'm okay." Since that day, the family's group text has been filled with stories of similar encounters. The family has seen red-tailed hawks everywhere. In ridiculous places. Swooping overhead as his daughter drove up the east coast. Showing up on a family trip to Japan. Landing on the fairway of a golf course. The window frame of a restaurant. Regular appearances in the woods around his parents' home. Always staring, always looking, always stopping long enough. "I'm ok. I'm ok."

As our friend shared that story, we were all deeply moved. We discussed how God shows up whenever we need assurance the most, to offer glimpses of a promise kept. Holy moments of encounter. The lunch

ended, and we went our separate ways. Ninety minutes later, I got in my car to deliver an Easter lily and prayer shawl to that family. They weren't home that afternoon, so I put the flower and shawl on the porch and headed out. They have a long and winding driveway. And when I came to the street, I pulled out my phone to check directions to make sure I was headed the right way back to the church. As I did, the hair on my arms stood up on end, and I looked up. And that's when I saw it. The red-tailed hawk resting on the power line just above me, staring straight down at me. Two minutes passed. The hawk opened its wings and lifted off. And I knew. I just knew. I knew I had been given a glimpse, and I could not wait to get into this pulpit and share it with you on this Easter Sunday.

I will make no attempt to explain it. I'm not going to try. I could not if I tried. But this is what I know. Hear this gospel truth: Life—your life—has an eternal significance, a weight beyond all human measure. Your life matters because God says so. Yes. It does.

The world, *this* world, is filled with a power that we cannot comprehend, a goodness that sits at the center of reality. Here is what I cannot prove and know to the core of my being: that love will have the final word in this world. Yes. It will.

Yes, Jesus Christ is risen. But he is not here. He's ahead of you. Gone home again. So, get going. Find your courage, lift your eyes, and open your hearts. Follow him. You will see him. And you will know. Tell the others. Amen.