

Goosebump Gospel  
Resurrection of the Lord Sunday, April 5, 2015  
Mark 16:1-8

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There are many surprising things about parenthood – but, for me, one the most surprising and disturbing was discovering my daughter’s love of horror stories. And it started early. Someone gave her a Goosebump book – one of the nearly endless collections of stories by R. L. Stine. I tried hiding them, arguing against the whole genre, substituting them (she did and does enjoy a wide variety of literature). Of course, all of my efforts to redirect her interest only resulted in cementing her interest. And then she was old enough to go to the movies. “Mom, let’s go see Ring – you’ll love it.” No I won’t.

I have always had a low threshold to terror – even the ads for horror movies scared me. Even the low-production-value-50’s-monster movies scared me. I did go to one, though. I was 20 and was on my way home from a semester of college and went through Roswell, New Mexico where I had attended a couple of years of High School. I was to spend 2 nights with my aunt and uncle and I hoped to re-connect with a high school friend. I called she had plans for the evening but I was free to join them at the movies. Sure – only it was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>. No problem, I thought. I’m mature. It’s just a movie. . . . By the end of the movie I was in a state. Clammy hands, dizzy, trembling and unable to face going back to my aunt and uncle’s house. Did I mention their house? It was an old mansion that had gone through several incarnations: gracious home, divided into apartments, an orphanage, and even a business. My relatives had bought it and were in the process of restoring it. I had stayed there the night before with no problem, but now in my fear-saturated state I could not imagine driving to the outskirts of town to climb the stairs in the dark (you had to turn off the lights at the bottom of the stairs) to sleep in a room with doors that opened to brick walls. Called my aunt – I’ll be staying overnight with my friend, Koni. She lived in a little 2 bedroom bungalow but one of the bedrooms was her studio so I would be sharing her bed – which suited me fine since I did not want to be alone. We walked all around her house. I checked all the closets and looked under the bed – of course! Then we settled down for the night. My heart rate slowly slowed. Her two dogs curled up on the bed along with us and the cat. Koni and I chatted and then silence. . . . Until, Koni reached over and poked me. I came up off the bed – actually levitated – with a house shaking-wake-the-dead-scream. The dogs scrambled wildly barking at they didn’t know what. The cat screeched and clawed its way off the bed. And Koni was laughing. “Karen, its only me!”

There was probably some small part of my brain that was trying to agree but my brain was in a total fear / flight / adrenaline rush. Fear is not rational. And I mention it because amidst all the sunshine, flowers and butterflies is this truth: Easter begins with fear. At least that's the way Mark tells it.

Early in the morning, three women approach the tomb bearing precious herbs and oils to wash the body of their Lord. They have come to comb out Jesus' hair, to sponge away the dried blood, to massage precious myrrh into his skin. They hope to engage in the ritual act (the act of care) that is traditionally done *before* sealing a body in the tomb. They have come to anoint the crucified one.

They are not frightened of seeing a dead body. Grief-stricken, I'm sure. Saddened, yes. But their world is not our world.

In our world the meat we eat is slaughtered out of sight and choice pieces are tidily wrapped in plastic – no gore in sight. Dead bodies are not taken to a mortuary and prepared for burial. Our part, in our world is to decide what clothes to bring and to choose between embalming or cremation. And executions rarely occur and when they do it is with needles, out of sight of the public.

Not so for the women on their way to the tomb. In their world they wrung the necks of the chicken and plucked its feathers before putting it in the cook pot. In their world executions: stoning, beheadings, and crucifixions happened all too regularly and in public view. And preparing the bodies of the dead was the last caring act they could perform for their loved ones.

Their fear was not the fear of seeing or touching the body. They did not lack for courage, Mark tells us that the disciples had all fled – but the women they were there bearing witness at the crucifixion.

So, they are on their way to the tomb to do the last thing they could for Jesus. And, even as they discuss how they will gain access to the cave (after all, it is closed by a massive boulder), they find that the stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty--vacant, except for some guy who is definitely not Jesus; and suddenly, they are afraid.

Perhaps they are disappointed that their last chance to pour a little compassion on the broken body of Jesus has escaped. Perhaps they feel disturbed wondering if they are witnessing the final insult of this whole horrible affair. First, Jesus' life is stolen, and now, even his body has been taken. And, perhaps, there is also an overwhelming despair that death has won. Death, the ever-ravenous monster, has finally, and utterly, swallowed up their beloved friend.

Sensing the distress of the three women, the young man robed in white offers some surprising news as a comfort to them. "Do not be alarmed," he says, "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."

Easter begins with fear – fear is a response to the unexpected – not just surprising – fear is a response to an unexpected, disturbing, unsettling event. Like reaching into your sock and encountering something alive and wiggling when all you wanted to do was turn it inside out.

The women encountered an empty tomb when they expected the dead body of the one they loved.

Then they encountered someone unknown to them who proclaimed Jesus was alive.

Unsettling, disturbing, unthinkable.

This is, of course, the Easter proclamation. He has been raised; he is not here. This is the hopeful message that we have been waiting for. The stone is rolled back. The tomb is empty, not because further damage has been done to Christ's body, but because there are some things that even the monstrous power of death cannot digest. This is holy comfort at its best. So why are the women still afraid? After hearing the young man's pronouncement, Mark tells us that the two Mary's and Salome "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Their fear an adrenaline response as visceral as mine to Koni's poke.

What were they afraid of? Did they fear that the message from the man in white was a lie? Were they afraid that they were being duped by a Roman guard who was having a bit of sick fun at their expense? Or was it something altogether different? Were they afraid that the mind-bending report that they had just heard was true? "He has been raised." Now, how could that news stir up fear?

To answer, we might want to consider our own fears this Easter day. Are we afraid (after the pageantry and the glorious music) that we will return to life unchanged--untouched? Are we afraid that we will retire to an afternoon brunch among the azaleas without seeing God? Are we really "afraid" that we will find the tomb empty – the ultimate symbol of the almighty power of God? Or are we afraid of the possibility, however slim we consider it to be, that God is out there and will meet us this day? Are we afraid that God is waiting for us? Perhaps we should be.

After all, if Jesus is waiting on-down-the-road in Galilee, you can bet that he has plans for us. No doubt he will ask things of us, the same way he challenged the disciples--thoroughly mucking up their lives. Uh oh. Perhaps this is the morning that the living God will grab us by the scruff of our souls to propel us into some wild scheme. Maybe this Jesus is like those people you encounter on sidewalks with clipboards and petitions to sign. You there, yes you, I've got your name on my list, now march out into the world and make some kind of holy difference. Maybe that's what scares us. Surely we love Jesus; we go to church, at least once in a while. Yet we really do not want God to mess with us, to make demands on us, to cost us anything. Leave us politely alone--hands off our career plans and our politics--oh, and keep

your nose out of our approach to doing business and our way of conducting relationships. We want Jesus to stay where he belongs (a kindly figure who presides over the sweet dreams of children); we don't want him wandering around the countryside, tapping his foot--impatiently waiting for us to show up. That sort of Jesus is more than enough to make a person afraid. If he is not cold on the slab, if he is raised, well, then, to quote Flannery O'Connor, "He's thrown everything off balance!" No wonder that Mark tells us that the women "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them."

A lot of scholars think that this verse, this hasty departure from the empty tomb is the conclusion of Mark's Gospel. It seems a funny way to end, doesn't it? Is that any way to finish "the greatest story ever told"...with people running away in amazement and fear? The gospel simply leaves you hanging, almost in mid-sentence. "So [the women] 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 is "all she wrote." It's even more abrupt than the tidied-up version of the Greek that translators give us. In the original Greek it simply says, "afraid they were, for." Is that anyway to end a paragraph, much less a gospel? My high school English teacher would not have been pleased!

You know, my daughter Kat read many Goosebump books – there are several series of them in fact. One of the series is called 'Give Yourself Goosebumps' in those books at the end of the chapters you choose a direction to go. They are interactive – the reader participates in the direction and outcome of the story. I think the ending of the Gospel of Mark functions in much the same way. You, yes you – me, all of us, are a part of the ending of Mark. How will you respond to the news of Jesus' resurrection from the dead?

What will we do after fleeing in terror from God's unleashed power? Will you follow Christ to Galilee – back out into the world outside the church – back into your neighborhood and be a follower of Jesus at your job, in your relationships? How will you write the end of this gospel with your life?