

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

April 12, 2009

Easter B 2009

In the Name of our One Living God who always goes before us: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

This morning's Gospel reading is the ending of the Gospel of Mark. A lot of people have trouble with the Gospel of Mark. It is the oldest Gospel and by far the shortest. But if you look at its ending, it troubles many. Jesus dies alone on a hill outside the city walls surrounded by two criminals. Peter has denied him and all of his disciples had cut and run, abandoning him. The women go to the tomb where a young man dressed in white tells them that the Jesus they are looking for has been raised and has gone ahead of them to Galilee. Go, he says, and tell his disciples that they will see him there. So what did they do? They fled in terror and amazement and out of fear said nothing to anyone.

How's that for a happy ending? A lot of people are dissatisfied with it – including two unknown people who wrote their own more complete endings in later copies of the book. I like the comment I read once: “When is an ending not an ending? When a dead man rises from the tomb –and when a Gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.” My vote goes to those that think Mark ended his Gospel where he did for a purpose. I think his Gospel is one big parable that leaves us with questions to answer for ourselves. Does the barren fig tree bear fruit after the gardener spends a year caring for it? Does the older brother put his resentment

aside and join the party? The question for us is: Will we bear fruit? Will we join the party?

It is easy to celebrate Easter and the Risen Christ in a church filled with fragrant flowers and beautiful music. It is easy to celebrate Easter and new life surrounded by friends and happy children. But how about when we go home? How about tomorrow?

I was ordained priest on the Saturday after Easter, 2004, in Boonton, NJ, and I celebrated at the altar and preached for the first time the following day. I was driving alone on Route 280 the 20 miles from our home to the church. About half way there, I realized to my horror that my sermon was on the kitchen island where I had left it. What to do? Go back and get it and be an idiot for being 20 minutes late? Keep on going and be an idiot for not having a sermon? I pressed on and it was the best decision I've made – it got me out of my old role of student and into my new role as priest; out of my head and into my community's heart.

When I stepped into that pulpit, I honestly explained what had happened and the reflecting I had done on the ride there. It had been a difficult time for the people of St. John's, Boonton, and I was honest about that. On Monday of Holy Week I had to leave my bible study to meet with a parishioner. She had just gotten a phone call. On Sunday her stepson had placed third in a surfing competition in Florida and then went home and shot himself. What was she to say to her husband and to her 17year old daughter and 12 year old son who adored him? We prayed. On Maundy Thursday morning we buried that young man in a church filled with high school seniors and seventh graders. At Great Easter Vigil I baptized my first two children and Easter was my first Easter as an ordained person.

I took Monday off. Tuesday morning I entered the church office to find the rector and music director planning a funeral. I thought it was one of the two very elderly parishioners I visited in the nursing homes. No, it was our 38 year old female sexton who had overdosed. That is shocking in the best of circumstances. But many of my parishioners were themselves in 12 step programs – AA or NA or both. Karen’s death was profoundly felt. On Friday I stood on the chancel step, placed my hand on her casket and commended her soul to God.

Saturday morning was ordination day! We learned that my bishop’s mother had died the night before and another bishop would ordain me. So on Saturday I knelt on that same chancel step and was ordained priest. The bishop in front of me may have been a stranger but the people behind me certainly weren’t.

So what did I preach that unprepared day? I looked them square in the eye and said, “You know what we need? This year we need another Easter!” I reminded them of the words spoken by Karen’s 22 year old nephew. He was not going to allow her death to define her life in his heart. He didn’t know why she never could catch a break in life, but he admired her courage. He was not going to let her failures overshadow the strength she showed in her struggles. The love she showered on him was not going into the grave with her body.

This year we may well need more than one Easter. We may feel insecure and more vulnerable as our net worth decreases with the economy; we may have lost our jobs and know that our life and more will change or are worried about it happening to us our loved ones; we may be rethinking our budgets and reevaluating our priorities and, indeed, our values themselves.

Note that Mark's Gospel ends with promises. "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." God's promise at the tomb is "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him." Like a good parable, Mark's gospel poses questions to us. Are we willing to look for the risen Christ in our own lives; not just in our great moments of suffering or of joy, but in our everyday lives, the jobs we do, the people we meet. The disciples were Galileans and that's where they were going to be going, back to Galilee and back to their lives. Jesus has gone on ahead of them – that's where He promises we will see him – in our own lives and relationships.

It must have worked since the story of the Risen Christ got told. That is the Easter promise. The living Christ is ahead of us, waiting for us in our own daily lives if we but look for him.

The last question Mark's gospel poses is: When we do find the Risen Lord in our lives, are we willing to go out and show others?

Amen.