

## Blessed Fools

Easter Sermon  
Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society  
March 31, 2024

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This is the eleventh, perhaps twelfth Easter service I've led in which I've offered the account of Easter morning from the Gospel of Mark as one of the readings. As you might surmise, I'm particularly fond of the account recorded in Mark. Not because most scholars believe it to be the earliest, dating from around 70AD. Or because I prefer the author's style to that of Matthew, Luke or John. No, I'm fond of it because of how it ends.

If you recall, the women, alarmed to find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, depart from the scene seized by terror and amazement. Further the author of Mark claims they told no one of what they found. Indeed, rather than ecstatic by what they discovered, he tells us they were afraid. And Mark is the only canonical Gospel in which there are no recorded sightings of a resurrected Jesus. A problem "solved", if you will, by later adherents troubled by this ending who took it upon themselves to tack on a more acceptable ending—an ending that I did not include as part of our reading as it is not original to the Marcan account.

However, the addition of a more acceptable ending to Mark's gospel should not be taken as an attempt to deceive. If anything it validates a point the author of Mark makes throughout his gospel right up to its unsettling end... which is, Jesus' disciples didn't quite get what he was about.

Like us, Jesus' followers wanted things to make sense. They wanted things explained. They wanted facts. They wanted proof. And they wanted them now. As the saying goes, "Seeing is believing." The author of Mark reminds us of this very human tendency when he describes the women as alarmed and afraid, suggesting what they encountered was not what they expected. Who among us has not experienced alarm or fear in reaction to the unexpected?

With his Easter account, the author of Mark makes one last attempt to draw us into an experience of unease by bringing us to the threshold of the world we thought we knew and a new uncertain world before us; an experience of liminality.

As the spiritual teacher and writer, Richard Rohr observes, "We are often trapped in what we call normalcy—"the way things are." Life then revolves around problem-solving, fixing, explaining, and taking sides with winners and losers. It can be a pretty circular and even nonsensical existence... To get out of this unending cycle, we have to allow ourselves to be drawn into sacred space, into liminality... We have to allow ourselves to be drawn out of "business as usual" and remain patiently on the "threshold" (*limen*, in Latin) where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely

unknown. There alone is our old world left behind, while we are not yet sure of the new existence.” It is there, in the space in between, Rohr says, “All transformation takes place... and where.... “genuine newness can begin.”

Mark’s Easter story draws us into liminal space, that place of loss and uncertainty but also of transformation where genuine newness can begin. And Mark not only draws us there, he leaves us there...with the discomfort, the uncertainty, even the fear. The challenge is for us to stay there, patiently, long enough for transformation to take place, resisting the temptation to avoid, explain, or resolve the experience by retreating back into what Rohr calls, “Business as usual” or what Jesus might call, “the ways of the world.”

This is harder to do than it seems. One of the reasons we have trouble tolerating liminal experiences is because they don’t feel normal, which means we don’t feel normal. And although we often claim otherwise, we really, really worry about being...or at least being seen, as normal.

And what we do mean by normal? Based on human behavior and concerns past and present, normal would appear to be life lived or experienced in conformity with “business as usual” or the ways of the world, which has most often meant the ways of the socially, culturally, and politically dominant.

But at what cost do we pursue such conformity?

Unitarian Universalist minister Erik Walker Wikstrom, notes “One thing that stands out about Jesus—both as he is remembered in the scriptures and as he is rediscovered by scholars—is his radical freedom.

Indeed, Jesus did not call his followers to a life of normalcy, of business as usual, but something quite different. He called them to a life of radical freedom, a life in what he called “the kingdom of God.” The life we were made for.

Still, it is a scary proposition. “Jesus”, Wikstrom reminds us, “lived a life in which the distinctions between rich and poor, holy and unholy, righteous and sinner, male and female, became increasingly meaningless.” But, for many of his followers then, as now, not so much; they didn’t and still don’t, get it.

The radical freedom of Jesus goes against things we’ve been taught, told to expect, and consider reasonable...In other words, things we think of as normal.

In his book, “They Mystic Heart” monk and author, Brother Wayne Teasdale tells a story about his uncle. He writes,

“Twenty-five years before his death in 1985, my uncle was operated on for prostate cancer. The surgeon performing the operation had been drinking and was in a hurry to leave for vacation. He rushed through the ninety-minute procedure in forty-five minutes, and accidentally cut a vital nerve. From that day on, Uncle John was

incontinent and had to wear diapers. He bore it with heroic patience. He never sued the physician, who was dismissed years later for incompetency. Uncle John let the matter go, and kept the man in his prayers. Some people would describe his behavior as wimpishness. Yet Uncle John was absolutely fearless.”

It has been more than a decade since I first read that story and it still moves me. In part because it reminds me of how much greater our capacity to live freely is and how far I am from knowing that depth of freedom myself.

As Teasdale notes, some, perhaps most, would describe his uncle’s response to the physician’s negligence wimpish, or foolish. The way of the world would have had Teasdale’s uncle grab hold of anger, embrace bitterness, and sue that doctor for everything he’s got. That would have been the “normal” thing to do.

But again, Jesus called people not to normalcy, but to radical freedom. Something the world derides as foolish. So, in effect, Jesus called people to be fools... blessed fools.

The qualities of a blessed fool are spelled out in the Beatitudes. (Matthew 5:1-12)

Now blessed doesn’t quite mean today what it meant in Jesus’ time. While we might equate being blessed with being fortunate, especially materially speaking, Jesus was referring to something else. If we consider the Hebrew of Jesus’ own religious tradition, the Greek, which is the language of the Gospels and the Latin of the Roman Church, we find the word commonly translated as “blessed” used to describe an inner quality or state of deep satisfaction....happiness or joy that is self-contained and not dependent upon outside circumstances or outcomes. In other words, radical freedom.

Thus the “fools” Jesus proclaims blessed are those who...

Are poor in spirit. Which is to say spiritually humble, rather than impoverished. The spiritually humble recognize that as living beings we are dependent beings. Dependent on what or whom? That will differ according to your theology. God. Goddess. Spirit of Life. The Great Mystery. The Universe. Nature. Community...

Those who mourn. Who, according to Richard Rohr, are “those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to extract themselves from it.” People who care about the state of the world and its people. Who find ways to engage rather than run away.

The meek. This describes people who exercise gentleness in their relationship with others. Think of a person who may have the authority, power or right to do something which will benefit him or her personally, but who refrains for the benefit of others or a greater good.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. These are people who try to live what we’d call a good life. A life lived in accordance with what a theist might call God’s will, and a non-theist might articulate as a set of noble principles or values.

The merciful. As noted in a biblical commentary (William Barclay's Study Bible) mercy, as Jesus would have understood it, means, "the ability to get right inside the other another person's skin until we can see things with their eyes, think things with their mind, and feel things with their feelings." The merciful then, are people who seek to know rather than judge the experience of another.

The pure heart in heart. These are like children who play together with no bias or prejudice towards one another. Or a person who does something of benefit to others without expecting a reward in return.

The peacemakers. People who understand their own transformation is inseparable from that of the larger world. They are people who cultivate peace within and carry it out into the wider world.

And then we have those persecuted, reviled and hated for living as blessed fools. These are the people who know the world thinks them fools or worse, and who nonetheless continue on in faith.

To those who would be blessed fools is promised radical freedom, life in the kingdom of God here and now, not in a time to come.

Surely, there are some qualities of the blessed fool described in the Beatitudes which resonate or are familiar to you. And others which seem distant or unfamiliar. Which are most uncomfortable? Pay attention to those.

The disquieting Easter story in Mark's gospel beautifully reminds us Jesus was really good at making people uncomfortable...and on purpose. Indeed, his teachings, sayings, parables all point to a person trying to right the world by turning things upside down. In doing so he drew his disciples, and continues to draw us some two-thousand years later, into the space between the world we know and a world we can't yet imagine. A place where "genuine newness" was manifest during his physical life and which is the resurrection we celebrate and are called to begin today. A world lived into being by blessed fools.

Amen and Blessed Be