

“WE’VE BEEN HAD”

Mark 16:1-8

Sermon by Mack Dennis, Pastor

The women don’t merely run from the tomb, they flee. Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, flee in the same way the disciples fleeing the garden of Gethsemane after Jesus’ arrest. “All of them deserted and fled” (14:50). They flee in the same way the certain young man who was following them fled. Remember? He’s wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They catch hold of him, but he leaves the linen cloth and flees, nekkid as a jaybird. In the same way, Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome flee. They escape. Fight or flight? This is *flight*. Gripped by terror and amazement, they’re fleeing the tomb in fear, trying to escape what is surely a great and terrible hoax being played on them.

They’d been there, y’know. Looking on Golgotha from a distance. They saw him crucified, heard the taunts, held onto one another during his cry of abandonment. They can’t get the memory of that place out of their heads—the rocky terrain shaped like a skull, the hollow eyes, the body of their Lord hanging there. They were there. They saw Joseph of Arimathea take down Jesus’ body, wrap him in a linen cloth, and place him in a tomb. They were there. They saw it. But now this morning the body is gone, vanished. And who is this stranger speaking in the tomb? Where’d he come from? Did the chief priests arrange this cruel joke? Pilate was a clever cat, you know. Did he orchestrate this elaborate conspiracy—this practical joke of cosmic proportions? One thing is for sure, whatever is going on...they’ve been had!

I know the feeling, myself. Growing up in Henderson, there was Sunset Cemetery down the road from my neighborhood. Sprawling acreage with graves and two mausoleums, and a scenic little lake set back from the road. As a freshman in high school, I remember hearing tell of the Sunset Cemetery ghosts. Supposedly, if you went there at night, and kept your windows shut, and sped down the embankment past the lake, as you came up the other side you would see ghosts dressed in white passing by your car on each side. And that’s just what happened when my friends and I—lawbreakers all—trespassed onto the cemetery grounds, and sped down the hill. *I saw them! Did you see them?! I can’t believe it!* But on the way home, someone in the back said, “Y’all know that was just the headlights reflecting off the mausoleum.” I’d been had.

Mark says that during their flight, the women “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid...”

But it wouldn’t surprise me if they were whispering to one another,

I told you they wouldn’t leave well enough alone...

It must have taken several of them to get that stone rolled away...

Who was that young man? Didn’t he look familiar?...

But then someone says, *What if he’s telling the truth? Jesus said he’d be raised and we didn’t know but...maybe this is this what he meant? What if he really is waiting for us?*

Well, this one thing I know...I ain’t gettin’ fooled again!

No other faith in all the world is as foolish as ours. Easter is foolishness. Son of God crucified? Raised from the dead? Have you ever seen anyone raised from the dead? I've never seen anyone raised from the dead. Tombs fill up. Cemetery plots expand. Every year on All Saints' Day we read more names of those who've died. There is no list for those who've been resurrected.

The great Baptist preacher, John Claypool, came back from the cemetery one day. He'd just been to see the grave of his child, Laura Lue, who'd died of leukemia. Standing at the door of his colleague's office, he told him, "I felt like getting down on my knees and digging up the grave."

Easter? What is it that convinces us, as we stand over our loved one's graves, that we have *not* been had?

But Paul says, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." In fact, Paul says foolishness is God's preferred mode of communication. "God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe."

In several conversations over the past year, I've heard younger people in our congregation tell me some version of the following: "When I'm at work with my colleagues, or when I'm with my friends, and they find out I still go to church, they give me this strange look." *You go to church?* As if it's the most foolish thing they've ever heard. "You believe that stuff?" They study me like I'm an exhibit in a museum.

I have some pastoral advice for those of you who face such encounters. Next time, stare at them and say, "It's because I've been *had*." Tell them you've been had by a God whose foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and a God whose weakness is stronger than human strength. Tell them you've been had by a God charmed to hide behind the evidence. That you've been had by a trickster God who speaks in parables and riddles. A pickpocket God who steals your mind and your heart and your strength and your soul when you least expect it, only to hand them back to you redeemed. Tell them you've been had by a God who sneaks up from behind to pounce on you, wrestle you to the ground, strike you in the hip-socket, and leave you with a holy limp. Tell 'em you've been had by a Creator whose favorite medium is fools and foolishness.

To be had by terror and amazement, as these women fleeing the tomb, is to be seized, to be possessed by this God whose love for us makes a fool out of death. A God who sneaks up on death and snatches its sting. O Death, have you noticed? You've been had!

Simone Weil, the philosopher and mystic, was no fool. You cannot find a more beautiful mind in the 20th century or any other. Camus described her as "the only great spirit of our times." But she was reciting a poem once—George Herbert's "Love (III)"—and when she was finished, as she told her friends, "Christ himself came down and took possession of me."

Now I speak to you as your pastor, a fool by comparison, but a fool for Christ, an imbecile for the Lord. I want to tell you this Easter Sunday that I know what it means to be had. To be

seized. To be *possessed*. I can't explain it to you. Sometimes I'm writing a sermon, and a warmth washes over me, as if the Risen Christ himself has poured some warm invisible oil on the crown of my head and it trickles down my face and lands in my chest and my heart pumps this strange elixir through my whole body. Sometimes it happens when I am looking in the faces of my wife or my children. They are suddenly illuminated, and though I see their faces every day, I see them anew. Sometimes it happens in an encounter with a stranger who reminds me that God is so infinitely beguiling. Sometimes it happens when the choir is singing. Or when I'm singing from the hymnal, and something takes hold of me and I cannot sing for the catch in my throat. And I pretend and mouth the words just in case the camera is watching. Sometimes it happens when I'm standing right here. I don't know where it comes from or where it goes. You know it, too. Maybe you wouldn't describe it the same way. But you know it, too, what it means to be had by the Risen Christ. I know fools when I see them.

The women flee, seized by, possessed by, *had* by—GRIPPED BY—terror and amazement. This Easter morning there could be, in no wise, a more fitting response...

