

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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With today's gospel, we're wrapping up a largely chronological study of Mark. We're not done exploring Mark yet, but we're going to take a break until September. Next week we'll celebrate the feast of Mary Magdalene followed by a 5-week series on John's "bread of life" discourse. So, it's sort of odd that this eight-week series on Mark ends with a passage that isn't about Jesus. If you strolled in here today and didn't know any better, this gospel reading might lead you to believe that Christianity is all about John. After all, today's story sounds a lot like Jesus'.

Like Jesus, John was preaching, teaching, and telling the truth to those who believed they could say, do, and treat people however they liked. Like Jesus, John was arrested and put in prison. Like Jesus, John was initially protected by a powerful ruler. But, like Jesus, John was executed because of a ruler's own self-interest in keeping power and to control. Like Jesus, John is killed to appease the wishes of others. (Do you see where this is going?) Like Jesus, John's followers took his dead body and laid it in a tomb. Like Jesus, John was believed to have been raised from the dead. Like Jesus, John's resurrection compelled others to continue God's work. You see, John's story sounds a lot like Jesus' story.

But, if we were to take extra-biblical sources like other historians of Jesus' time like Josephus into account, what we've find is that John was more popular during his lifetime than Jesus was during his. So, perhaps, today's

story is revealing to us that *like John*, Jesus was a preacher and teacher. That *like John*, Jesus was arrested. That *like John*, Jesus was protected by a ruler until others convinced that ruler to execute Jesus for more control. That like John, Jesus was taken by his disciples and laid in a tomb. That like John, Jesus was resurrected and encouraged others to do what he was doing before he died.

This odd story, through the lens of our Christian faith, calls to mind two takeaways. First, this story reminds us that God's vision for the world and the world's way of engaging are so very different. Just yesterday, in Butler, PA, you may have seen on the news that a 20-year-old crawled on top of a building and shot bullets toward the Republican presumptive presidential nominee, Donald Trump. Now, I want to be clear that as your pastor I would never endorse or encourage voting for a specific political candidate in my official role as pastor. However, you all have called me to encourage you and this congregation to "participate responsibly in society" as our congregation's governing documents state. In the example lived out by Christ in the scriptures, it is abundantly clear that violence is not of God. In fact, in today's reading we see how it was power and control that led to John's beheading. It was power and control that led to Jesus' execution. Jesus did not respond with violence toward violence. John did not resort to violence either. With this in mind, we all need to take a hard look at the ways our words and actions have helped create an environment where words like insurrection and assassination are commonplace in our society. We all need to look toward God's vision of service, compromise, justice, peace, and love.

All of that leads me to my second takeaway from today's reading. That is that maybe this story's purpose is to remind us that what Jesus did was continuing what God was already doing in the world. That Jesus was not introducing something new, but continuing to fully live out God's vision.

You see, Rev. Dr. Mark Davis notes that, "We often think the death and resurrection of Jesus is a unique story. But, if this kind of story is floating around ... [in such a way that Herod presumes that Jesus is John resurrected] ... then the notion that a dead person can rise from the dead and empower other persons to do what the dead person once did was not unique to Jesus. That is how Mark understands the death and resurrection of Jesus. But, it is also how Mark understands the manner of resurrection in general. That would make the resurrection of Jesus not "unique" in the sense of "this is something no one ever imagined might happen!" It means something more like, 'Resurrection – which we all know means rising from the dead to empower others to do what oneself was doing before death – happened to this one.' Jesus becomes the one who fits into the existing category of resurrection, rather than resurrection being a predicate of who Jesus is."¹

And besides perhaps blowing your mind that the idea of resurrection was commonplace and that it wasn't something begun with Jesus, all of that is important because it's the crux of our faith. In fact, that's one of the things I love most about the Easter Vigil that we celebrate each year. For, after we gather outside around the new fire and proclaim Christ's resurrection around

¹ <https://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/>

the paschal candle, then we hear stories of resurrection from the Hebrew Scriptures. We are reminded that our God has been in the business of resurrection since the very beginning. Resurrection was when God first spoke to make order from chaos. And when the Israelites escaped the rule of the Egyptians through the sea – that was resurrection. And when Elijah stood in a valley of dry bones that were brought back to life – that was resurrection. Noah’s family and the flood - resurrection. Jonah and the whale – resurrection. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fiery furnace – resurrection. (If you’ve been to a Vigil you’ll know why I did that.) But here’s the point, resurrection was not only a one-time thing. Resurrection was a thing before Jesus walked the earth, just like we heard about in today’s reading with John, and resurrection is a thing that continues on after Jesus. You see, our God is in the business of resurrection. Our God is one that brings new life in unexpected places. No matter the vanity of political leaders, God’s message cannot be beheaded for it’ll continue to live on in John’s disciples and in Jesus’ ministry. No matter rulers’, like Pilot, or crowds of Religious Leaders who will do anything to keep power, God’s message cannot be crucified for it will live on in the disciples and all of us. And the reality is that each of us will die. I hope not on a cross or by beheading, but nevertheless, we will die. And the promise of today’s gospel is that we will be resurrected and will live on by sharing of God’s will through those we’ve impacted.

So, as we sit with today’s gospel, we first give thanks to God for the gift of resurrection throughout all of history and into the future. Then, we can imagine how we might be the resurrected Christ among us. What might it be like to denounce political violence, reminding each other across political

divisions of God's love and grace? What might it be like to speak truth, like John and Jesus, no matter the result, or to give generously to for our community? What might it be like to see God's resurrection among us, living through us, and living for all eternity? That is what our faith is about – resurrection and love. Thanks be to God. Amen.