

The Sending Mark 16:14-20

Jesus is alive and...the Bible shares about a dozen resurrection appearances of Jesus. Mary Magdalene saw Jesus in near His Garden Tomb, mistaking Him for the gardener. Jesus appeared on the north side of the Sea of Galilee cooking fish. He walked with two followers of the Road to Emmaus. He took the disciples to the Mount of Olives. He appeared to Paul on the Road to Damascus and knocked him off his horse.

Mark's Gospel tells Jesus appeared to his eleven disciples (Judas was no more) in Jerusalem in the Upper Room in the southeast corner of the city. This was the place they shared the Passover meal and Jesus' Last Supper. This was also likely Mark's family home, the man who wrote this Gospel.

This house that contained the Upper Room was the first gathering place for the Church—the first Church building. And the New Testament takes us back here often. This place is where the disciples were gathered on the day called Pentecost. Peter came back to this house after an angel set him free from prison.

Mark tells us that the disciples were reclining at table-- just like they did at the Last Supper. Jesus who they saw crucified 48 hours earlier suddenly showed up—alive! And the very first thing He did was scold the eleven because they didn't believe the women who told them earlier He was alive. He called them 'hard-hearted.' The Greek Word for hardness of heart sounds a little like a medical condition, *sklerocardia*. The word is an idiom that literally means 'uncircumcised in ears and heart.' It hearkens back to handful of Old Testament passages where the people are to have a heart that seeks after God. Among those is Deuteronomy 30:6:

And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

Deuteronomy 30:6

Does it seem strange that Jesus' first act in meeting His disciples after He was resurrected would be to scold them for not believing that He could be resurrected from the dead? Jesus just completed the greatest act in the history of the cosmos! Why not celebrate? Why not take a victory lap? Or at least give Peter a high five? You talk about a great time to look in the camera and say, "I'm going to Disney World!"

Instead, Jesus issues a reprimand. Why?

Sklerocardia is that serious.

Sklerocardia not only causes death to our soul, but it kills our relationship with God and our witness for Jesus and even the Church. *Sklerocardia* resists the presence of God, rebukes the Holy Spirit's work in our life. *Sklerocardia* causes us to miss the miraculous work that Jesus is doing because it closes us off to possibilities to experience and share the new life Jesus promises. For that reason, *sklerocardia* is something that must be resisted and struggled against by Jesus' followers at all costs. That is why Jesus' first act was to call out His disciples out. Their hardness of heart caused them to not believe what happened, not trust what they heard and live in the shallow pool of their undersized expectations for God.

Now, you may be asking, "Do I have *sklerocardia*? How can I even know?" Most people who have *sklerocardia* don't even know they have it! What are its symptoms?

Zephaniah 1:12 reveals an occasion when God's people suffered from *sklerocardia* and the Lord would not let it stand:

At that time I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are complacent, those who say in their hearts, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.'

Sklerocardia has a couple of tell-tale signs. Zephaniah calls the first complacency, a satisfaction with the status quo, a tolerance for the way things are.

Now, this really goes against the grain because we tend to be addicted to the status quo, we tend to tolerate our present reality. Most people will even choose an unhappy present over a promising future that demands they change. Even after the disciples knew Jesus was alive, even after they walked with God in the flesh for 3 years and witnessed miracle after miracle—they tried to enter back into their old life. Jesus found them fishing in on the Sea of Galilee. Their hearts longed for the status quo. They were still complacent.

Why is the status quo bad? Why should the way things are dissatisfy us? The reason is because the Kingdom of God has not fully arrived. God loves this world—enough to give His only Son—but He is not satisfied. God is not complacent. And because He is not, we shouldn't be either. We are always reforming with God's Word as our standard.

The toughest boss I ever had initially caused me a lot of stress because he had high standards. Early on when I worked for him, I would hand a project over in the usual way I did things and it was filled errors and imperfections. Most bosses simply tolerated my half-hearted effort and said, "Thank you." He did not. The question he began to ask me was, "Will I need my red pen?" He wasn't seeking pretty good or a tolerable amount of errors. He wanted my work to fit his vision. He was the boss and

he was paying me to support his vision of his office. To continue to work there, I needed to support His vision and ensure his red pen stayed in the desk drawer.

God has an uncompromising vision for this world. There is even a Hebrew word for what God seeks. It is a word you likely know or have at least heard: *Shalom*. Some people use *shalom* as a greeting. Some people have a vague sense that *shalom* means peace. That only begins to scratch the surface. *Shalom* means the way things out to be. *Shalom* is the fullness of God's intent for this world—which means peace between humanity and God, peace between people and not just the absence of conflict but the active presence of love—loving our God with all our heart, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves.

Until we see shalom, we should not be satisfied with the status quo.

The second attitude that demonstrates *sklerocardia* is a disbelief that God will act, that He is at work in this world and involved in our everyday life—that God will neither do us good or do us ill. People who have a low view God possess a maniacal desire to prove that God has no involvement in this world at all. These folks don't believe miracles happen. They say there is a logical reason, something conforming to the law of nature, that Jesus fed 5,000. Jesus walking on water is an exaggeration or it was simply made up. If there is a god, people with *sklerocardia* are much more comfortable with a distant, disinterested, disengaged god—an absentee landlord. We don't have to be accountable to that kind of god because he is not really involved in our lives. They like this because a distant god means we are in charge. We are our own gods, little gods and captains of our own life because a distant divinity cares so little about us that he has no interest in how we live. He will do us neither good or ill, as Zephaniah says. There is no intimacy with God. We have pushed Him aside.

Sklerocardia just like physical heart disease is so bad for us and so bad for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, that God does not let it go. He loves us too much to allow our hearts to grow stone hard. That is why Zephaniah tells us God would search Jerusalem with a spotlight and discipline those whose hearts had grown hard—out of love—in the same way a good parent disciplines a child. And that is why Jesus, in His first words to His disciples after He was resurrected from the grave, defeated death and won redemption for the cosmos and the right to make all things new, was a tongue lashing. You think He would have been in a good mood and likely He was. But He still felt the need to let the disciples know, “Hey guys, you're blowing it! I was dead and now I am alive, just like I predicted and you didn't believe. And now you are hiding out in this building because you are afraid!”

When Jesus sees our *sklerocardia*, our complacency, when He sees that our intimacy with God has waned, He shakes things up. He rocks the foundations of our world and uses those events to reveal His character. The cross was an event like this. Despite Jesus' telling the disciples directly about it, they didn't see His crucifixion coming. They didn't anticipate it. But that's how it always works. We never see big

changes coming. We never expect the foundations of our life to be shaken to the core. We never anticipate that we are going to be tested.

Peter learned his lesson because about three decades later, the Holy Spirit inspired Him to write these words:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.

1 Peter 4:12-13

This is the message of the cross and the resurrection.

Jesus never allows our world to be rocked, to see the foundations of our life to be shaken, to be tested, to experience what some call a crucifixion, without also bringing a resurrection, new life, a greater understanding of His character and a greater trust in Him.

You see the disciples in their hardness of heart were still living like the crucifixion was the only thing that happened. They disciples because they were mired in *sklerocardia* were preparing to return to their old life, yearning for the status quo. They refused to believe that a new and better world come about through the cross.

What do you believe?

Our world is being rocked right now. Our foundations are shaken. We are being crucified. Just like 25 years ago today, when the world was rocked literally and figuratively. Most of you know far better than me about that day. And you also know what resurrection looks like. You also know that when God allows our world to be rocked, He sets it again on firm foundation---His Kingdom, His vision for this world, His love for us.

I was a seminary student living in New Jersey when the Murrah bombing happened. I still remember being shaken to the core. It was because I am from Midwest, born in Oklahoma and I just couldn't imagine any kind of terrorist attack happening here. I couldn't believe that kind of thing could happen in the Heartland. It is such an incredibly monstrous evil that it was hard to reconcile. The loss of innocent life was so tragic, so seemingly indiscriminate and random that it was hard to believe.

But from it you have already heard, there was a resurrection. God was not done. His last Word was not death but life. From death comes life—when our new life is in Jesus.

Jesus told the disciples there are two things we do, when following a crucifixion, we live in the power of the resurrection. Jesus told the disciples there are two things we do when we do not have *sklerocardia*.

First, we urgently share the Gospel:

Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Mark 16:15-16

Now we get the first part of this. “Go into the all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation,” we understand that. Our mission statement: GATHER, GROW and GO captures that. Our vision “New Life through Jesus for Edmond the world,” does too.

But is there an urgency for us about it? Do we approach it like it is a matter of eternal life and death?

For most Christians and most churches, it is not. There may be nowhere that our passion for the status quo, our need for comfort, predictability and routine comes into more conflict than in sharing the Gospel. Sharing the Gospel, going out requires a constant undoing of what is routine, what is expected, what is normal. Most organizations, most Churches just like most people tend toward stasis, we list toward normality.

Jesus knows this of course. And part of His great grace is shaking things up. The Jerusalem Church, the first Church, they Church that began meeting in the very space where the Last Supper was held and where Jesus appeared to the disciples, rebuking them and giving them this very instruction.

Within a few weeks after Jesus ascended into Heaven and the Holy Spirit descended into their souls, the church has grown from 120 members to over 5,000. They baptized women, men and children until they had dishpan hands. And over the next few months they continued to grow and increase, even establishing a ministry to care for widows and a bureaucracy to run things.

And then God allowed it all to be rocked and not just rocked, blown apart. One of their own, a man named Stephen, was stoned to death by the religious authorities—the same ones who crucified Jesus. Following that they stepped up the persecution against the Jerusalem Church. They began to go house dragging off converts and throwing them in prison. And the Church ran and scattered all over the world. But Acts 8:4 tells us:

Now those who were scattered went about preaching the Word.

Like Dandelion seeds the Holy Spirit blew them all over the Mediterranean, sharing the Gospel, making disciples—Samaria, Africa, Asia, Greece, Europe. There is evidence that Thomas, who doubted the resurrection most of all, traveled as far as India. Some say Paul went to Spain, at the very least he planned to go.

Would that have happened, would their passion for the Gospel been so great, would they have had as much urgency if the Jerusalem Church has continued to grow and thrive in place?

Human nature seems to say no. Our urgency for the Gospel is usually a by-product of our world being rocked, our foundations being shaken, being crucified and resurrected. Gospel urgency arises after we conquer fear, failure, brokenness and through it learn that Jesus is greater.

“Jesus is greater” is the message we must share and the world needs to hear. Right now, Jesus is giving us a once a in generation opportunity to overcome our *sklerocardia* and do just that. And it doesn’t take a lot of people---it only takes a few burdened with great urgency to spread the Gospel like a virus. Robert Coleman in the Master Plan of Evangelism put it like this:

A few people so dedicated in time will shake the world for God. Victory is never won by the multitudes.¹

Second, we go out in power.

And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Mark 16:17-18

Now some people interpret this passage literally—that is where the practice of snake handling comes from. I take it seriously, but I don’t read it literally! If I did, I would have all kinds of concerns and questions for Jesus. Handling snakes? No thank you. I would rather drink Code Red Mountain Dew, black coffee, bleach or any other kind of deadly poison than even touch a snake.

We have experienced the truth of some of this passage here at First Pres. We have laid hands on the sick and they have recovered. We have seen that miracle. Jesus wants us to go out trusting in the power of the Holy Spirit. He wants us to go out fearlessly into the broken world believing, anticipating, assuming that He who is

¹ Robert Coleman, The Master Plan of Evangelism (Fleming H. Revell: Grand Rapids, MI, 1998) p.32.

in us is greater than He who is in the world. He wants to be fearless—like He commanded Joshua.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9

We can be fearless, we can go out in power because the tomb is empty and Jesus is alive. We know that because sin and death could not touch Jesus, it cannot touch us.

In the Spring of 1995, I was an intern for a church in Princeton, New Jersey. It was the largest church I had ever attended and they always had a few seminary interns. Once a year they allowed an intern to preach—the Sunday after Easter—one of the lowest attended Sundays of the year. I was nervous because I had never preached before a church of that size. I was used to preaching for small country churches not big churches in one of the most well-educated cities in the world. The sanctuary was filled with Ivy League educated professors, Broadway entertainers, Wall Street Bankers and the like.

I was so nervous that I worked on the sermon for weeks ahead of time. I even let my Preaching professor read it. He gave it two thumbs up.

And then on Wednesday, the bombing happened. As many of you know and we have heard testified, Oklahoma City was rocked. The world was rocked. It was a crucifixion of our innocence as a nation. I called the Senior Pastor of that Church telling him he should preach this Sunday. And he replied with a smile in his voice, “No. I can’t think of a better Sunday for the intern, who will soon be gone, to preach.” I was shocked by that and then he said, “Just say whatever the Spirit prompts you to say and you can move on.”

And that was good because I had spent months working on what the Holy Spirit wanted me to say! And in it I had a cursory, courteous reference to this tragic event. Late Saturday afternoon, I was convicted that I had not listened to God and I was supposed to re-write the entire thing. I objected. There was no time. It shouldn’t be me preaching anyway. These sophisticated, intelligent, achievers would see right through me.

“Trust me,” God said, “My power is made perfect in weakness.”

I started a total re-write at 8 PM on a Saturday night.

“You better know what you’re doing, “I told Jesus.

12 hours later, I stood in the old sanctuary behind the oaken pulpit built into the floor, in a Church founded before the Civil War. The sermon asked where was God when the bomb went off and it said, “The cross tells us He was in the blast. The cross tells us He is with us. And the resurrection tells us He is alive and He is at work.”

The Holy Spirit moved powerfully that morning. God spoke. To this day it is one of my favorite sermons I have preached.

Now, I don’t say that to compare my story to anyone else. There are so many amazing heroes from the bombing. The point is God gives us each a task, a job, a role, an act to pursue living not by our own strength but in the power of the resurrection—courageously trusting that He who is in us is greater than anything we will face in this world. All we can do is live courageously, in the power of the resurrection, filled with the Holy Spirit where He has placed us.

Where has Jesus placed you?

It is so easy after Easter, maybe especially this Easter, to become complacent, to allow some *sklerocardia* to develop and live like God is not alive—or least alive and near. There is a reason why the Bible shares a dozen times that Jesus appeared alive to His disciples and in some pretty mundane places. So, we can expect Him to show up in our lives and meet us where we are—at home, in the grocery store, on-line, in the park, talking with a friend and even in our tragedies, our worst moments, when our world is rocked, the foundations are shaken and we too are crucified.

He is alive. And He sends us out to powerfully share an urgent Gospel.