



From the Pulpit: April 9, 2023
Easter Sunday

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Mark 14:43–52; 16:1–8

The Unnamed, XIV: The ‘Gen Z’ Guy

Since New Year’s Day, Christine, Squire, and I have been preaching this sermon series called *The Unnamed*. It’s about the important but unnamed characters in the biblical narrative. This is the 14th and last sermon in this sermon series, *The ‘Gen Z’ Guy*.

Immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived, and with him there was a crowd with swords and clubs. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, “The one I will kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.” So when he came, he went up to him at once and said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him. Then they laid hands on him and arrested him. All of them deserted him and fled.

A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth he is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

“They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.”

For those of you who read a little Sophocles or Plato at prep school, I want to teach you a Greek word. It’s *neaniskos*, and it means ‘young man’ or ‘youth.’ It’s a rare word in biblical Greek. It appears only 11 times in the entire New Testament. It comes up

twice in the Gospel of Mark. I just read them both for you.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas marks Jesus with a kiss, the soldiers arrest him, and all his friends instantly vanish like sophomores with Solo cups when the cops show up at the frat party, and then Mark tells us

about this young man, this *neaniskos*, who’s wearing nothing but a bathrobe he’d filched from the Ritz Carlton when he was on spring break. When the cops grab him, he slips their grip but leaves his bathrobe behind and scampers off like a stalker into the night and is never heard from again.

Who is this guy and what is he doing in the story? Nobody knows. Even Mark’s fellow evangelists didn’t know what Mark was trying to accomplish.

Marks was the first Gospel, of course. Matthew and Luke, the later Synoptic Gospels, came along a few years later, and at almost every point in the Passion narrative, Matthew and Luke copy Mark word for word. They are shameless plagiarists—word for word.

But they leave this story out because they had no idea why Mark put it in here. Two thousand years of biblical scholarship and still nobody has been able figure out why Mark tells us about this college sophomore in the altogether.

It's like an abandoned subplot about a minor character like Cousin Greg from *Succession* that you might slip into your television series or movie or book to make it more interesting but then you forget about that minor character and that subplot and just leave it hanging.

I said this young man, this *neaniskos*, is never heard from again. Or is he? The only other time St. Mark uses this Greek word *neaniskos* is at the open tomb on that first Easter morning at dawn.

When the women arrive at the cemetery to pay their respects with a wheelbarrow full of lavender and sage and frankincense and myrrh, they find that the ginormous 3,000-pound boulder at the cave's entrance has been rolled away, so naturally they scamper in to take a look.

Grave robbers, they think. But no. When they get inside, there's a young man sitting there. A college sophomore. A *neaniskos*. He says, "Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus. He's not here. He's gone to Galilee. Go find him." It's the only other time the word *neaniskos* shows up in Mark's Gospel.

Mark tells us that this college sophomore, this young man, this *neaniskos*, is wearing a white robe. Mark, you see, is something of a fashionisto. He loves to talk about clothes. He's like those reporters from *Entertainment Tonight* on the red carpet at the Academy Awards: "Who are you wearing?" Like that bathrobe the young man leaves behind at Gethsemane.

Might be the same guy. At Gethsemane and at the empty tomb. Why otherwise would Mark use this rare Greek word in both places?

In Matthew and Luke, it's angels who tell the women about Jesus's resurrection—gleaming vanny envoys from the great blue beyond.

In Mark, it's just a college sophomore, a young man in a white jacket, white shirt, white pants, white tie, and white shoes dressed like he's on his way to pick up a fetching coed for the spring gala.

Three days before this, he'd ditched Jesus like he was radioactive and left his filched bathrobe behind, and now he's become the herald of resurrection.

"Did you notice that Jesus is completely missing from Mark's Easter story? Just a dislodged boulder, discarded graveclothes, an empty grave, and a college sophomore."

Resurrection is more modest in Mark than in the other Gospels. There's no angels, there's no earthquake, there's not even a Risen Lord. Did you notice that Jesus is completely missing from Mark's Easter story? Just a dislodged boulder, discarded graveclothes, an empty grave, and a college sophomore.

He's just the Gen Z guy. Today, we use the phrase 'Gen Z' to refer to people born between 1997 and 2010, which means that the youngest are 13 and the oldest are 26. They are digital natives; 95% have smartphones that they typically got on their 12th birthday. They spend six

hours a day on their phones, mostly on YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat.

They know nothing about rotary phones, landlines, network TV, cable, cassette tapes, eight-track tapes, or CD's. Weirdly, they do know about LP's, the oldest of the media I just mentioned.

What's happened in their lifetimes? 9/11, the Great Recession, climate change, Covid-19, George Floyd, and wars in Afghanistan and Ukraine. Their outlook is a little cloudier than older generations, and their future less certain. But they do not give up. They are our future. Don't believe any of the negative stereotypes you hear about them.

And it's just there that resurrection is heralded: "Don't be afraid. He's not here. He's already walked a hundred miles to Galilee. Go find him." It might be a more modest resurrection than we'd hoped. Not brilliant, gleaming angels from beyond Alpha Centauri, just a *neaniskos*, just a young man, just a college sophomore.

We still lose our long loves. We still hear the harrowing diagnosis. We still have to go through chemotherapy. We still suffer broken hearts and broken homes. But Jesus goes before.

Twenty years ago Mary Karr wrote a beautiful poem in *The New Yorker*, called "A Blessing from My Sixteen-Year-Old Son."¹ It meant a lot to me because my own son was 16 at the time. Mary Karr's son, like mine, is 6'3", with implausible blue eyes. She calls him a "muscled obelisk." I love that phrase—a "muscled obelisk."

She talks about how he's growing up and away from her, a mystery that grows more cryptic every day. "A girl with a navel ring might make his cellphone go 'Brrr'." They are "creatures strange as dragons or eels." He wants to date a girl with tattoos, because she'll become a woman willing to do stuff she'll regret.

He gets into an accident with his Mom's car. The policeman gives him a ride home. When he gets there, he asks, "Mom, did you and Dad screw up this much?" She says, "Don't blame us. You're your own idiot now." He smiles.

The cop tells her that the girl whose Chevy he hit was not hurt, but she was a wreck, tears and sobs. When the police arrive at the accident scene, they see this young man in the glare of the headlights, holding this girl in his arms and draping his own coat over her shaking shoulders.

"My fault," he instantly admits. "Nice kid," says the cop to his mother. A Blessing from my 16-year-old son.

Sometimes a modest resurrection is the most we can hope for. But it happens whenever we are able to make death work backwards. That's the way Aslan puts it in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, after he rises from the dead and breaks the stone table. "Death," he says, "has begun to work backwards."²

"Sometimes a modest resurrection is the most we can hope for. But it happens whenever we are able to make death work backwards."

Next Sunday, *The Phantom of the Opera* will close on Broadway. It is the longest-running play in Broadway history. It opened on January 26, 1988; 35 years, 14,000 performances.

Thelma Pollard is the makeup supervisor for the show. She's been with it since opening night, 14,000 times. Well, she skips the matinees and surely she gets vacation. But for 35 years, six times a week, she turns a man into a monster. With her cosmetic artistry, and some latex, foam, and foundation, she gives the Phantom the repulsive disfigurement that terrifies young children and fascinates older ones. She's been through 30 different Phantom actors.

Do you know what Thelma Pollard does in her spare time? She takes her foundation, her lipstick, her mascara, and her hairbrushes to hospitals and helps injured people and cancer patients look their best. She turns disfigurement into wholeness, or at least its facsimile. "It's the opposite of my *Phantom* work," she says.³

It's a small thing, I know, but have you ever lost your hair and your complexion because of chemotherapy? It's a small thing, but how can you and I begin to make death work backwards?

²C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: MacMillan, 1950), p. 133.

³*Reader's Digest*, November, 2006, p. 111.

¹Mary Karr, "A Blessing from My Sixteen-Year's Son," *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2004.

—The Prayers of the People— The Reverend Christine V. Hides

Can you see it? A giant slab of rock tossed carelessly aside like a poker chip, the fractured seals, the yawning mouth of an open tomb, Christ the Crucified King shattering death's door? Can you hear it? "The laughter of things beyond the tears of things, the meeting of darkness and light, and the final victory of light, the joy beyond the walls of this world, more poignant than grief."⁴

⁴Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1977), pp. 87–88, 91.

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Risen Christ,

We lift our alleluias to you who frees us from darkness and lights our path to life eternal. We have once again arrived to find an empty tomb and divine grace filling the human made chasms.

Alleluia! We sing with all creation, every blade of grass emerging from the spring soil, every daffodil and crocus unfurling from the ground, every bird warbling their morning song. Awakening anew to hope, we lift our alleluia, again and again.

Eternal God, with your gift of faith that quells our doubts, we trust in your steadfast presence with the hungry and the hurting, the hoping and the hopeless, the grieved and the grieving, the worried and weary, the questioning and the uncertain.

Aware of the burdens of our lives, the troubles that surround us, and the wars of this world, we seek your deep peace and keep watch for your blossoming hope which unravels human suffering.

Blessed are you O Christ,
Who came to heal and to teach,
To embody "a love ethic that includes the enemy"
(Wonhee Anne Joh)
To transform lives,
And to bring forth your reign of justice and peace.
Alleluia! We say, again and again.

By your Spirit, make us to be Easter people the whole year through. Let our praises join those of the first women, and every generation who has seen the power of the resurrection in the Risen Christ.

Surround us and guide us every day that you, the Lord, have made as we join our voices in prayer: Our Father...Amen.