

April 3, 2021  
Easter Vigil  
Mark 16:1-8  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
Zoom Worship During the Coronavirus Pandemic  
Pastor Amanda Warner

### Sharks in the Water

We were coming back from a trip to South Carolina and we were going a slightly different way than we usually do. We usually take 90 to 84 and then 84 to 81 which connects to route 77 in Virginia, which takes us straight to central South Carolina and the roads that Britton grew up driving, that take us to his parents' home.

But on this trip, on the way back, we decided to take a slightly different route. We followed 77 back north to 81, but then, in Pennsylvania, we decided to get on 78 and head north through Allentown, Pennsylvania.

It was while we were traveling on this relatively unknown, to us, highway at night, that it happened. It was in a place where many roads were joining together, tributaries pouring into the river that was the highway, when we saw the lights of a police car start flashing behind a car far down the road ahead of us. The driver was being pulled over.

A couple minutes later we saw it happen again. Another police car flashed its lights behind another car and another car was pulled over.

The first unmarked police car pulled back into the traffic and disappeared, until the lights started flashing and another driver was pulled over.

We saw it happen over and over again. There were more than just two police cars on the road, but of course the drivers who were just getting onto the highway didn't know they were there.

By this time, Britton, who is always a careful and mostly law-abiding driver, had become a textbook driver. Because we knew what many of the other drivers did not. There were sharks in the water.

That was what it was like, they were picking off drivers one by one, those who were going too fast or changing lanes without signaling, only to find lights in their review mirrors and to find themselves pulling over to the side of the road to get their ticket.

I had never seen anything like it before and I've never seen anything like it since.

But last night, at our Good Friday service, it felt a little bit the same. Like there were sharks in the water.

Some of you were there last night when we were Zoom bombed, when people who were strangers to Emmanuel joined our Good Friday service after it had begun with the intent of disrupting the service with a series of vulgar and disturbing statements, until all we could do was end the meeting and send out a link to another one.

Zoom allows the hosts of a meeting to remove people and not allow them back in if they are being disruptive and, of course, that's the first thing that we tried to do. But these were clearly experienced agitators, who knew how to use Zoom to their advantage. We couldn't find them fast enough in the list of people attending the Good Friday service to get them out and there were more of them trying to come in even after we ended the Zoom meeting.

It was quite a stressful experience, and it felt like there were sharks in the water, in the water of our worship, our stillness, our sorrow, the holiness and the meditation of that most holy night.

I was grateful to our congregation for their desire to worship, which caused them to come back once a new link was emailed out so that we could finish the Good Friday service.

But once the whole thing was over, I admit, I was angry that people would come into what has become our sacred space to disrupt us, to mock our worship, and to heckle God. I was a little bit worried about future worship services, what if it happens again?

But mostly I was just sad. Sad that people would do something like that, sad that it's so hard for us as human beings just to live and let live and to respect each other. Sad that during a hard time there are people out there who would find it funny or gratifying to make things harder for others, to take away their comfort and their peace.

It was on my mind all night. It was on my mind today, although less so, as I prepared for tonight's Easter Vigil. But as I sat with today's readings and with the Easter reading from the gospel of Mark, it occurred to me how much we take for granted in these days.

None of the readings that we hear on this night, are about people having a good or relaxing time; none of them are about people who are able to live their lives or worship their God in comfort and peace. And we don't hear all that we could, tonight we are hearing six out of a possible fourteen readings that are assigned for the Easter Vigil. And all of them, are about people who are in situations of struggle, of worry, of stress.

They are stories about people experiencing natural disasters, people experiencing the oppression and violence of other human beings, people who have watched the downfall of their nation, people being asked to bring their enemies salvation. All of them are about people who are being asked to trust God in what might seem like impossible situations.

Noah was told to build an ark, to be a part of a huge conservation effort, to trust that someday that rain would stop and the waters would recede.

The Hebrew people left the only home that they knew in Egypt, where they had been enslaved, and had to step out into the wilderness, freed from slavery, but

threatened by their oppressors who came from behind to reclaim them and threatened by the waters of the unknown that rose before them and threatened to swallow them. All they could do was trust and move forward.

Ezekiel had lived through the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple and he lived in exile in Babylon. He was asked to look upon the bones of his slain people, his slain nation, and was asked if those bones could live, could rise up, could breathe again, could become a nation again. Doubt says no. Everything that we know about life says no. But could faith say yes?

And then there's Jonah. Jonah who was told by God to go and preach a word of warning to his people's enemies. Jonah tried to run to the other side of what was to him the known world so that he wouldn't have to do it, not because he was afraid that his enemies might hurt him if he showed up in their city, but because he was afraid that they might repent and that God would show them mercy. His struggle was that he did trust, that he did believe that his God was a "gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Jonah 4:2)

And finally, we have the story of the first Easter. Imagine what this day, this Saturday, this Sabbath was like for the first disciples and for the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee. This Holy Saturday, when everything that they had hoped, everything that they had believed in, had been stripped away from them arrested, questioned, tortured and beaten, and finally killed on a Roman cross.

No great miracle had happened to save Jesus. He had died and been laid in a borrowed tomb.

Peter, of course, knew that he was recognizable. He had tried to deny it, but there were people in the city who had seen him with Jesus, who had known that he was one of his followers. Perhaps the others were recognizable as well, or worried that they might be.

So, they stayed together, locked away and they worried and wondered. What was going to happen next? What were they going to do now?

I remember so clearly how it felt. Those first weeks after we were locked down, after our building was closed, after we made our move to Zoom worship. That feeling of being bereft that feeling of having lost so much that means so much to us, being deprived of our sacred ground, being separated from each other, not being able to mourn our dead, not being about to gather around the altar and receive holy communion.

But we made a new space, claimed new ground, and found that it could be holy too.

A strange place, a virtual world a little bit harder sometimes to get to when internet connections are unreliable and when we have to use unfamiliar technology to get to it, but still, we found each other here and more importantly, we found that God was with us here too, with us in this new space where we have been driven by disease, God was here with us, blessing us with fellowship, feeding us with the word, meeting us in the treasures of our faith, in songs, in liturgy, in pictures, in community that continued give us reasons to hope, even in the hardest of times.

And then there were sharks in the water, and that holy ground, that sacred space was violated.

And that hurt. But it is not unexpected. The people of God have never been left to go about their business undisturbed.

Just ask Noah, whose life was turned upside down by an encounter with God, and then by a disaster of epic proportions.

Just ask the Hebrew people, set free from slavery, but then pursued to the water's edge.

Just ask Ezekiel and all of the exiles who sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept as they remembered their homeland, as they remembered Zion.

Just ask Jonah, less afraid of God's wrath than he was of God's mercy.

Just ask the women who we see in tonight's gospel reading, creeping in the early morning light, just as dawn was breaking, through the streets of Jerusalem to the place where they had seen Jesus buried, so that they could prepare him for burial.

They had to be afraid as they moved through the quiet streets. Afraid that they might be seen, might be stopped, that someone might recognize them as followers of one of the men who had been crucified before the Sabbath began.

They also had the very practical worry of how they were going to do what they were going to do. Who would roll the stone away?

They were going to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body, but they weren't even sure that they would be able to get to it.

But then when they got there, they found all new reasons to be afraid. The stone had been rolled away. And there was someone in the tomb, but it wasn't Jesus.

It was a young man, dressed in white, with an amazing message for them. The situation was alarming for the women, whose nerves already had to be stretched to the breaking point. But the young man said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you' (Mark 16:6b-7)

They heard the message, but then they ran. The text says that they "went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them" and then it says that "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (Mark 16:8)

You would think that the good news of Jesus' resurrection, of Jesus' miraculous life would have been good news to these women, who were already afraid, but at first it just made them newly afraid. Afraid, but for a different reason.

I'm sure that they were afraid long before they found that empty tomb. They must have been afraid when Jesus was arrested, when he was taken away from them. They must have been afraid when Jesus was crucified when they watched from a distance and saw his suffering and heard his final of abandonment, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me."

They must have been afraid all through the next day that first Sabbath without Jesus, when they and the disciples had sat together perhaps in grief stunned silence, perhaps in faltering attempts to make a plan, to figure out what was next.

We've already talked about the fear that must have accompanied them on their walk to Jesus' tomb.

And they left the tomb, they left the messenger of resurrection, in terror, and they said nothing to anyway, because they were afraid, but for a whole new reason.

They had found out that their friend, their rabbi, their messiah, was alive, was more than they had hoped that he would be, but still they were afraid. They had seen the worst that the world could do, but now they were confronted with what God could do, not to bring sorrow, not to bring suffering, but to bring life, to bring hope, to bring connection. They had no idea how to live in a world where God was not just a promise, a hope, a story, but rather, a living breathing presence, who would meet them in their homes and around their tables, who would be with them in their joys and their sorrows, who would send them to take new roads, who would call women to speak of his power, and who would call men to feed and tend and nurture.

The news that the women received that the tomb was the news of a world turned upside, by one amazing, terrifying, transforming message. He is not here. He is risen.

We like those women, like those first disciples, live in a world where there is much to fear. If we didn't know that before this year, we know it now. If we didn't know it before last night, we know it now.

Perhaps we have been privileged to imagine in the calm patterns of our faith lives, the safety of our sanctuaries, the relative simplicity of the sacrifices that we've been invited to make to make for our faith, that the good news of resurrection does not have the power to turn the world or our lives upside down. Perhaps we've managed to make it this far, imagining that a sin-soaked world would not fight back against the resurrection power of a God that calls life out of death.

We know that it does. We know that it will. We know our call to speak life to the powers of death, peace to the powers of violence, generosity the powers of scarcity and greed, will meet with opposition. There are sharks in the water.

But you know what. We are here tonight because those women, who ran away terrified, those women, who said nothing to anyone because they were afraid, sooner or later must have said something to someone. Because we have heard. We know.

It's not that they stopped being afraid. It's not that being God's people, the people of the story and the promise and the hope and message and the new life started being safe. It's that the good news that they had to share turned out to be greater than their fear, the fear of ridicule, the fear of persecution, even the fear of death. It is good news that is stronger than any earthly power that has ever tried to contain it. It is the good news that we celebrate tonight, good news that cannot be stopped. Good news that Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.