

## ***“Being Alive Means Speaking Up”***

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman  
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury*

***April 5, 2015***

***Easter Sunday***

*Isaiah 25:6-9; Mark 16:1-8*

It takes a lot of courage not to tell a well-known story the way you are supposed to tell it. The enormously successful play ***Wicked*** is based on the premise that the Wicked Witch of the West and the Witch of the North were not the diametric opposites that they are portrayed in ***The Wizard of Oz***. It takes a lot of mental gymnastics to understand the plot of the play (at least for someone like me who finds Mark Twain a challenge to follow), much less be captivated by these unique characters that have been understood in a certain way for decades, and now we are to see them in a new light.

Mark must have known when he wrote his gospel that there were elements of Jesus’ story floating around that would have enhanced what he had to say, and given the story a more dramatic beginning and flamboyant ending, but he did not go for that. The first of the gospel writers, Mark wrote a simple gospel that is a series of stories that seek to portray some basic assumptions: Jesus was the Messiah, but it was not something that Jesus wanted to be told about himself, and often the people who were expected to share the good news remained silent, while those who were to remain silent blabbed all over the place.

Now that is hardly news, is it? We all have experienced situations where people are eager to share even though they have not been asked to offer their opinion, and those who are expected to bring a message get tongue tied or simply forget.

Weddings are one place where that happens. A friend is asked to be the emcee and is known for his frivolity and sharp wit, not to mention clear speaking voice, and then he figures there is nothing to this gig so he prepares little, and it shows. Or a younger sibling of the bride or groom, not expected to do anything but seat guests and keep his tuxedo on for the ceremony, ends up accepting the invitation to say a few words and does not know when to take a breath, much less when to stop. Yet he steals the show.

Mark starts his gospel with the arrival of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. Unlike Matthew and Luke who write after him, he does not offer anything about Jesus' birth or early life; unlike John, he does not present a philosophical-theological rendering of the importance of Jesus. He gets down to telling a story.

And the story ends with the death and burial of Jesus, and women finding an empty tomb. No appearances, no miracles, no "aha" moments. At least that is the ending in most ancient manuscripts of Mark's gospel – it ends where the reading for today ended.

The women flee in silence, because they are afraid. Or so Mark says.

Now these woman may be silent, but there is no certainty that they were afraid. Confused, perhaps; shocked and surprised, most definitely. But their silence is more to do with not knowing what this all means, and not knowing how to share what they are experiencing.

The first time I witnessed the Du Maurier Cavalcade of Lights at Ontario Place, a fireworks display around the time of July 1<sup>st</sup> where the fireworks were choreographed to classical music, the reaction was spell-binding, and I was left speechless. No words could communicate the show and its impact. Was I spellbound, full of

wonder, amazed? For sure. But fearful? Hardly.

Gaze at the dancing lighting of the Aurora Borealis, and are you left speechless? Yes – but afraid? Fearful? Surely not – in awe for sure.

The women who came to anoint Jesus were speechless. They were told to share the good news of Jesus, but they could not. They dropped the opportunity and ran.

Who are the ones who tell everybody about Jesus in Mark's gospel? Those Jesus heals, and those he then tells to share this with no one.

There is a pattern with the gospel of Mark – those closest to Jesus, the women and men disciples, remain silent in the face of whatever miracle they have witnessed. Those who do not know Jesus except through his teachings and healings want to tell everybody.

The gospels operate like the tabloid journals of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Most close friends and students and neighbours do not want to spill the goings on of their friends and neighbours, but others who learn juicy bits of information have no hesitation to share them. Those magazines at the checkout counter in our grocery stores count on it.

Nursing staff in the operating room do not go about telling what happens on a day by day basis, but someone made well through surgery is going to share their experience with anyone who will listen.

Easter is one of those unusual holidays in that we are not sure exactly what took place, and we are not sure we can explain it if we tried. Those with the most to share remained silent.

And when you are not sure what to say, the best thing to do is remain silent.

We live in a culture where silence is frowned upon. Why, last week I was watching Heather Hiscox on CBC news in the morning and there was silence on the TV screen for about 10 seconds. It was deafening! Something seriously went wrong in their broadcast, and no-doubt heads would roll. Ten seconds! Yes, we have trouble with silence for we want everything to be filled with meaning messages that provide answers, and just plain noise.

“A little girl watched intently as a large black ant walked slowly across the wooden floorboards of the back porch, crawled up along the edge of the doorjamb, and began to climb the vertical plane of the door. The ant strayed in its path, now to the right and then again slightly to the left, but it seemed to the girl that the ant was heading to the doorknob. The ascent would be long and arduous, and eventually, when the ant arrived at that destination, it would have no possible way to open that door and enter the house. But I, the girl thought, can easily get up from where I am sitting, turn the knob, open the door, and walk in. The ant would have no idea how I managed this marvelous feat, because an ant can never do such a thing, much less figure out how I did it.

The girl, who could not have been more than seven or eight, thought about this long and hard. “I am so much more than this ant. What I can do, the ant cannot even imagine. If the ant observed me as I got up and walked over to the door, put my hand on the doorknob, opened the door and stepped inside, it would surely wonder at my marvelous powers. From the ant’s point of view I would be accomplishing a miracle.

Then the girl realized that what she was to the ant, God must be to her. As the ant cannot understand the great mysteries of how humans can act and do, so humans are unable to understand the great mysteries of God – to understand what God does, much less why.”

Maybe that girl's insight helps us to unpack Easter. We may never understand the why and the how of Easter, as if it matters.

Followers of Jesus who were discouraged and saddened had their spirits bolstered, and a plague of death was transformed into the celebration of life. Do we need to know more?

June Singer is that little girl spoken of above. In a book entitled ***Seeing Through the Visible World***, completed when June was in her 70's, she states that her experience of watching that ant that day was her first real spiritual experience. Oh yes, her parents taught her about God, and she had lessons of the faith, but this was the first time that she really understood what God is all about, or at least the gulf between human and divine.

How do I know what happened that first Easter, and where Jesus' body ended up, and how he appeared to so many disciples and followers in the days after his death by crucifixion? Simply put, I do not know. ***June Singer tells me I do not need to know.***

But I do know this. Disciples who were deflated were empowered to share the good news that Jesus shared in his lifetime. Women who felt their world had come crashing to an end once again went out to serve and care for others.

People who were enemies found moments of grace and opportunities for connection.

Easter is the prototypical day of a Christian -- a day when we are to experience, and to share, one basic truth, not "Better days are ahead," but "A better day has arrived – right here, right now."

May it always be so for those of us who seek to be an Easter people.