

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

April 14, 2024

II Easter, Luke 24:36b-48

“Alleluia! Christ is risen!”
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

50 years ago this month, Doubleday published Stephen King’s¹ first novel, *Carrie*.² Inevitably now read with a 16mm, mental still of Sissy Spacek at that cruel prom,³ the 1974 tale of a telekinetic teenager launched the impossibly prolific career of its author and mainstreamed monster comics and fanzines. Even so, Stephen King expresses ambivalence about his classification in the culture. He explains, “I was ... typed a horror writer, a tag I have never confirmed or denied, simply because it’s irrelevant to what I do. It does, however, give [stores] a handy place to shelve my books.”

Broadly, bookstores file our scriptural canon under “Religion” – though in the Deep South of my growing-up, the sign might have declared, “Christian Books,” while here in New England it likely reads, “Theology and Philosophy.” However, the academy has reached no tidy consensus on our Gospels’ literary category: “Some see similarities to Greco-Roman literature – ancient biography, Greek tragedy, [or] popular novellas ... [Others] an ‘apocalypse revealing the secrets of the end-time, an enigmatic parable, [or] a Midrashic commentary on the Hebrew Bible ... [Others still] suggest [the Evangelists] created a new type of literature [– a narrative account] of the ‘good news’ of what God has done and will do through Jesus of Nazareth. Whatever [they] intended, [they have] surely produced [stories] that [make] a claim upon [their] readers.”⁴

For King, genre has proven “irrelevant to what [he does],” for his writing’s warp and woof merely provide a container for conveying the strongest forces of the human condition: fear, rage, despair, love, joy, hope. That is, he did not set out to write scary stories, but to “make a claim upon his readers,” choosing his characters (and his characters choosing him) before he selected their aisle at Blockbuster.⁵

Likewise, whatever our Evangelists intended, today *we* read from a ghost story.

Yes, I mean the lesson appointed for this Sunday – one that witnesses the nascent Church’s struggle to understand Resurrection;⁶ one that testifies to their wrestling the emotions prompted by a Jesus who has come back from the grave;⁷ one that directs their proclamation of the Passion⁸ – all these things, yet, I mean more than *only* this scene, too.

Here, Luke’s community responds to the unsatisfying, original conclusion of Mark, that first Gospel which left its readers suspended between a glad morn of Cadbury eggs and pastel dresses,

and a Jack-Torrance⁹ Jesus dragging an axe to Galilee. While, thankfully, our tradition has preferred the fonder Easter, the Gospel itself does not make that decision for us; for all its grace and goodness, from outset to ending we can encounter Mark as a horror movie:

Beginning with a supernatural oracle,¹⁰ the heavens tear open,¹¹ and a spirit enters a man during the riverside ceremonies of a shaman.¹² The drive-in feature¹³ continues with this possessed peasant exorcising demons,¹⁴ bewitching the natural world,¹⁵ and conjuring glowing apparitions of the long dead¹⁶ – all while an imperial hierarchy *in league with evil itself* terrorizes its citizenry.¹⁷ We witness decapitation¹⁸ and the undead,¹⁹ soothsaying²⁰ and sacrilege,²¹ and the film rolls to credits with a jump-scare: a missing corpse²² and a phantom²³ speaking zombie madness²⁴ to mourners who, “say nothing to anyone for they were afraid”²⁵ – and then it’s over.

I do not demean our canon as pulp fiction. Rather, I underline how the Jesus accounts *also* serve as a container for conveying those strongest forces – fear, rage, despair, love, joy, hope – not only of the human condition, generally, but of *our* condition, *personally*.²⁶ See, before we choose the Gospels’ Netflix tab,²⁷ their stories choose us – stitch us into their world, and their world into ours ... worlds that can frighten and trouble even the most faithful among us.

Jesus asks, “Why are you frightened, and why do you raise doubts in your hearts?”²⁸

Despite the Resurrection tale they have just heard²⁹ and the reassurance of Jesus’ own words,³⁰ Gethsemane guilt and Calvary grief haunt the disciples. As in last week’s Thomas story from the Gospel of John,³¹ Jesus offers his pierced hands and feet as corporeal evidence of his identity – as if those gory wounds and reminders of their terror would somehow be a comfort!³² In response, the disciples “in their joy ... were disbelieving and still wondering,”³³ or, in the simpler sentence structure of the New International Version: the disciples “*still did not believe [because] of joy and amazement.*”³⁴

In *this* Easter story, the disciples’ grief and fear do not carry the meaningful suspense of their “unbelieving,” as at Jesus’ arrest and crucifixion. Rather, today the disciples’ *joy* bears that drama. See, the world’s mercilessness has so disordered their expectations, their glad amazement inspires *disbelief*.³⁵ That is, the very idea that God would show these sorrowed believers mercy – that love could overcome loss feels too good to risk believing, lest the disciples hex themselves with some further curse.

So, too, we encounter *this* Easter during a season that frightens and troubles even the most faithful among us:

Maybe we begin this recent horror story on January 6, 2020, when insurrectionists stormed the U.S. Capitol,³⁶ and we tie a line from that moment and thread it through the March arrival of a global pandemic, and to the televised murder of George Floyd on May

20. And we can keep going, tying to February 24, 2022, when Russia launched the first European ground war in nearly 100 years; knotting at April 15, 2023, and the beginning of the war in Sudan; at October 7, and Hamas' murderous terror in Israel and, then, at Israel's devastation of the Palestinian people during these months since. Just yesterday – swooning back and forth from those worlds so far away to our worship home and annual Symposium – we tied that line to our witness of the ongoing harms of racism in our city and in its institutions, to the inequities of daily life in our country. Until last night,³⁷ when that line pulled even tighter still, and we slept with air-raid sirens sounding and explosions dotting the Jerusalem sky – a nightmare scene that felt at once a million miles from the Marathon's finish line, yet as near as our next breath.

From outset to ending, *these* dread circumstances can deceive us into dismissing the loving triumphs of the Resurrection – blind us to all but our fear and rage and despair. Under the spell of anger and anxiety, we smother all shoots of joy – we confront the world's horrors *on the world's terms*; we tie ourselves to Good Friday, rather than to Easter Sunday.

In response to these fears, Jesus does not ridicule our vulnerabilities; does not counter with winning points; does not trade up to new friends. Instead, Jesus comes alongside the disciples with his unrelenting, inexhaustible love, asking, “Have you anything here to eat?”³⁸

As at Emmaus, Jesus chooses a supper table to announce the world's reconciliation – not another argument, not another violence, not another war – a common space for those he loves to share a common meal, a common experience. Once more choosing mercy before might, he re-presents the grace and goodness of the scriptures, enjoys a piece of broiled fish, and declares, “You are witnesses of these things.”³⁹

For us who witness so much in these days, our Christian scriptures do not decide for us, will not believe on our behalf; **we must choose whether the Gospels will become for us another ghost story or the Good News of God.**

. even if we understand ourselves weeping at the foot of the cross – powerless and overwhelmed – we must dare belief in an Easter of God's mercy;

. even if we fear ourselves complicit in Pilate's power – seen and unseen, known and unknown – we must dare believe in an Easter of God's redemption;

. even if we understand ourselves threatened with the cross itself, we must dare belief in an Easter of God's Love.

Daring belief in even *this* Easter, on even *this* Sunday, we bind ourselves to the empty tomb – we join Jesus' Resurrection as companions, rather than competitors; by reconciliation, rather than wrath; with devotion, rather than destruction. And invoking the most powerful of human forces – love and joy and hope – we seek the welfare of all and the suffering of none.

With glad amazement we declare, “Alleluia! Christ is risen!”
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!
Amen.

¹ Though I have raised Stephen King in a formation series and now a sermon, I am not a *Weird Tales* or *Fangoria* guy. Broadly, I file the horror genre under “elective stress,” and, given that life has enough *actual* stressors, I mostly avoid it.

² King, Stephen. *Carrie*. Random House, 1974. After the newspaper clipping, the first bars: “Nobody was really surprised when it happened, not really, not at the subconscious level where savage things grow ... [She] had been going to school with some of them since the first grade, and this had been building since that time, building slowly and immutably, in accordance with all the laws that govern human nature, building with all the steadiness of a chain reaction approaching critical mass ... What none of them knew, of course, was that Carrie White was telekinetic.”

³ “[Carrie](#).” Directed by Brian DePalma, performances by Sissy Spacek and Piper Laurie, MGM-UA, 1976.

⁴ Rhodes, David, Joanna Dewey, and Donald Michie. *Mark As Story*. Fortress Press, 2012, pp.2-3.

⁵ Yes, purposefully choosing an anachronistic cultural reference – those of a certain age will certainly remember the unsettling “Horror” aisle and the VHS titles that lined its shelves.

⁶ Luke 24:36a. “While they were talking about this ...”

⁷ Luke 24:37. “They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost.”

⁸ Luke 24:47b. “... to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.”

⁹ “[You are the caretaker, sir. You’ve always been the caretaker.](#)”

¹⁰ Mark 1:2-3 (Exodus 23:20, Isaiah 40:3).

¹¹ Mark 1:10a.

¹² Mark 1:10b.

¹³ Another anachronism, for people of a different, certain age.

¹⁴ Mark 1:21-28, among several examples.

¹⁵ Mark 4:35-41, among several examples.

¹⁶ Mark 9:4.

¹⁷ Mark 15.

¹⁸ Mark 6:14-29.

¹⁹ Mark 5:35-43, though I read the story as a tale of hysterical distraction – the girl was very ill, but not dead; while her family and the crowds wrung their hands, Jesus paid her the attention she needed to be “restored to life.”

²⁰ Mark 13:1-13.

²¹ Mark 13:14-37.

²² Mark 16:1-8, though the Gospel does not specifically report the absence of Jesus’ body.

²³ Mark 16:5.

²⁴ Mark 16:6-7.

²⁵ Mark 16:8.

²⁶ Returning to Mark’s supernatural, opening salvo: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus the anointed one, the son of God, was just as it is written in Isaiah the prophet.” Narratively, this initial appeal brings the *reader’s* past into Mark’s story, muddying the border between the characters’ experiences and the readers’ experiences. The fulfillment claim accomplishes something like the television and film disclaimer, “Based on true events.” In the same way that the roads and cities, people and parables root Mark’s Gospel in its historical moment and geographic setting, King threads into his stories popular-culture details relevant at the time he writes. To stick with *The Shining* for a beat longer, the novel references many 1970s television shows and commercials, including not only the children’s programs Danny enjoys – *Sesame Street*, *The Electric Co.*, and the *Bugs Bunny* cartoons, from which his parents plucked his nickname – but also *Emergency*, *The Avengers*, and *Secret Agent Man*, evening action-dramas Danny watches (granting us a peek into the Wendy’s and Jack’s parenting). Like Mark’s charting of Jesus’ ministry along a familiar map further absorbs the Gospel’s readers into its world – and its world into theirs – King might as well write: Dear reader, monsters live among you. They repair their rooves with the same asphalt paper you pull off the shelf at your town’s hardware store; their victims have the same LPs you have on your turntable; and, even more unnerving, they watch the same television programs you do ... *at the same time you are watching them now!*”

²⁷ Look at me, illustrating like it’s 1999.

²⁸ Luke 24:38.

²⁹ Luke 24:33-36a. Cleopas and his companion sharing their experience along the Emmaus road and at supper.

³⁰ Luke 24:36b.

³¹ Luke 20:19-31, read every year on the Second Sunday of Easter.

³² Luke 24:39-40.

³³ Luke 24:41a (NRSV, as with the rest of the translations unless noted otherwise).

³⁴ Luke 24:41a (NIV). The KJV offers another perspective: “And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, ‘Have ye here any meat?’”

³⁵ I am reminded of Brene Brown’s idea of “foreboding joy.”

³⁶ All of this is way more heavy-handed than my usual way – I intend to connect the stories by contrasting the style I used in the quick retelling of the Gospel as a horror movie; in other words, our recent experience has been so terrible, it needs no artful color to read it to be as scary as it is.

³⁷ Sometimes the sermon has to change at the last minute. Connected as the Iranian attack was (and is), it felt like the world could also feel its escalation of violence and the threat of wider-scale war.

³⁸ Luke 24:41b.

³⁹ Luke 24:45-48.