

**Genesis 3:1-10**

**Psalm 32**

**Mark 16:1-8**

### **Peace after light**

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Another week, another car bomb. Another week, more women and children killed by husbands and fathers. Another week, a few more lives lost on the road through carelessness, a handful of drug overdoses. So it seems to go. For the most part these things wash over us – perhaps we don't even notice them – for they are so familiar. We are accustomed to the presence of death.

Our own lives, of course – our own failures or excesses – are generally much less dramatic than all this. Yet here too we are constantly assimilating what is wrong in ourselves and others, constantly normalising the effects of human frailty and failure, becoming (as I suggested on Good Friday) increasingly dextrous with death.

Traditionally, at least in religious thinking, human failings have fallen under the general category of “sin”. Sin has been understood from the trivial end of the spectrum as “naughtiness” through to the oppressive end, where it is the effect of a fundamentally lost and depraved human character. Given these extremes, it is not surprising that both in and out of the church the idea of sin is either playfully mocked or radically rejected as characterising the human condition.

But in a way which beautifully undercuts these caricatures of sin, theologian Rowan Williams remarks: “Our failures are all about our wanting to be somewhere else”.<sup>1</sup> Sinful failure is a matter of decisions we make about our willingness to be true to where we are and to do the things which are demanded of us here; our problem is our inability simply to be “present”. And so, for example, marital infidelity might be said to be about a desire to be “somewhere else”, an unwillingness to deal with the demands of what it means to be here, with this person and what he or she needs or can give. Not investing what is required in order for a job to be completed well – procrastinating on the inevitable or just doing shoddy work – reflects a desire for different tasks, for different demands made on our time, something more “fitting” to what we think we are or deserve. Comforting ourselves with more food than we need, or more possessions than we need reflects a desire to be somewhere else, a dissatisfaction with what life has delivered us and where we find ourselves placed.

What is important here is not so much the particular failings but the justifications we offer: I was not well-placed, I was in the wrong place, to have done otherwise. With this we normalise what is wrong in us. Williams proposes that in this we effectively strike a bargain in life by which we settle for a shrunken and inadequate world, what he calls “peace before light” (p.133). This is a peace in which what has gone wrong is not overcome. It is, rather domesticated, assimilated. We simply escape into a seemingly safe space which denies something about ourselves or about the world which we know to be true but which we have failed to realise, to give its full due, for ourselves. It is a

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ on trial: how the gospel unsettles our judgement*. (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003), p.133.

kind of peace, in the sense that we are still standing, in the sense that we *survive*. Yet it is not an illuminated or free life.

Another week, another car bombing, another domestic murder, another crucifixion. So it seems to go.

Those who experienced it directly could also assimilate the crucifixion of Jesus. Such things happen. His death doesn't look any different from the deaths of thousands who have gotten on the wrong side of the power of state and temple. And the responses of his friends, their desertion of Jesus in particular, can also be assimilated, rationalised. They too wanted to be "somewhere else". This is the sadness of the little footnote to the scene in Gethsemane where Jesus is arrested: "all of them deserted him and fled" (Mark 14.50). Only Peter returns to linger at the edge of the story as the religious authorities interrogate Jesus. Yet even Peter, in his denials, shows that he finally wants to be somewhere else, wants not to have to bear the burden of truth in testimony here, now.

We can imagine the confused self-justifications of those who had been so close to Jesus and so bravely imagined that they would stick with him: I *had* to do it. I couldn't stop them. It was only enough that I could save *myself*. And now it is *done*. It is *passed*. I *can't* change it. I *will* live with it, I *will* find a way to live with myself. Peace without light. Life without truth.

Or at least it is sort of a life. There is tragedy in the way we grow accustomed to living with the corpses of missed opportunities, things taken from us or things we have denied ourselves because we have not been able to be where we are, because we have missed the moment out of a desire to be somewhere else.

Of course, such a life with the dead kind of "works". Or it works in its own dreary way until one of those corpses moves – until one of those lost possibilities refuses to confirm our version of how we have come to be where we are, why we are justified in our failures, why we had reason to be afraid, why it was necessary to deny what we truly believe, who we truly love.

If that which we have somehow managed to put to death for ourselves refuses to remain dead but is returned to us then a new possibility emerges: peace *after* light. This light would be a piercing one, cutting through all shades of grey, causing us to squint, to shade our eyes. To borrow language from Mark's gospel this morning, this is a light which would cause us to flee from the tomb, "for fear and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid".

Why is this something to keep quiet?

Terror, amazement, fear: these are recurring themes in Mark's gospel, for he is the evangelist of the disorienting presence of the free God. That Jesus is raised is no mere happy ending, no mere promise of life after death. It is light which causes us to cover our eyes as Adam and Eve once tried to cover their nakedness. The problem there was not that they were naked, but that they knew themselves to be naked, where troubled by it and wanted to be otherwise but couldn't do anything other than gather together a few withering leaves. There is a light which is too bright, which exposes too many things. Rowan Williams again: in the resurrection "our untruths are laid bare to us and we lose the consolations of having a clear image of ourselves and how we stand before God" (136). Leaves will not cover us long, and a life in grey is more an anticipation of the darkness of death than it is a foretaste of the rich palette of heaven.

Out of ourselves the response to what has gone wrong can only be the sad mopping up at the end of the day, going down to the tomb to anoint the remains of a shattered hope, signing off the best we can on our part in the whole catastrophe. Fig leaves. Even if not adequate, at least we are used to them.

But what if the corpse moves? What *is* a resurrection, not as some barren “nature miracle” but for those not only saddened by a loss but straitened by it, flattened, reduced, even shamed by what has happened? For such as these, a resurrection is the falling away of the fig leaves.

Now, that is a prospect which would probably strike terror into the hearts of most of us, although not for the reasons which matter here! Finding ourselves naked and in well-dressed company would be for most of us simply a matter of embarrassment.

Embarrassment is easily overcome – “Let us agree never to speak of this again!”

In the scriptures, however, nakedness is a sign of shame. “I heard the sound of you in the garden”, said Adam, “and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself.” The women at the tomb are filled with fear, and flee. We can only conclude that this is because the news of the resurrection renders something in *them* “naked”.<sup>2</sup> And they must cover up, and this they effect by running away, telling no one what has happened.

While embarrassment is easily overcome, shame requires a miracle. For shame is a matter of being exposed as having been wrong, false, disloyal, weak, unreliable, without justice. It is about being shown also to have sought to justify ourselves in this by giving ourselves excuses: it had to be done, I could not help myself, it could not have been otherwise, I just can’t think about it. Now life must go on, it cannot be otherwise. Peace before light. Just leave me alone in my loss.

The miracle required is that it be the case both that we are exposed as having been wrong and yet are set right – that we be rendered innocent though found guilty – peace, most unexpectedly, after light: reconciliation after the truth is revealed.

What it means to be wrong – to be shown to have miscalculated, to have misread, misunderstood, to be revealed not simply to be naked but to have tried to cover things up or simply to forget – this brings a response like that of those women in Mark’s account: fear, flight and apprehensive silence. “How can we tell anyone of *this*? ” The news “he has been raised” comes as God’s disorienting judgement upon *our* judgement. But it comes finally in order to *relieve* us of the burden of judging and of stitching together poor coverings for ourselves. Fig leaves are not enough. Now even Christ himself will become our seamless and enduring garment – Christ who died, and we with him; Christ who is raised, and we with him.

Christ’s victory is to have passed through death. This is the death which was the cessation of his heart’s beating but also the death which is death’s grip on us, our familiarity with, and reconciliation to death as something we “have to” deal out, we have to strike a deal with.

In this he is victorious, made lord of the living and the dead, reigning and ruling that death’s hold on us be broken and we be freed for a true life, once fractured but now healed.

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting in passing here the puzzling little verse, Mark 14.51, which describes the escape, naked, of a young man from the scene of Jesus’ arrest. Some scholars wonder if the “young man” is a reference to Mark the Evangelist himself.

“He is not here, where you left him, where you laid down your hopes and dreams, where you buried your very selves. He is going ahead of you to Galilee, back to where it all began – there you will see him. There you may begin again. Christ is risen, that you might be.”

For the Easter gospel of peace even in the light – life which death no longer has in its grip – thanks be to God. Amen.

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