

## Listen! To God 3-1-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Isaiah 6:1-11** In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke.

And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: "Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out." Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

And he said, "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand.' Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds, and turn and be healed." Then I said, "How long, O Lord?"

**I Kings 19:11-13** He said, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah?"

A great wind, an earthquake, a fire... but God was not in the wind, nor the earthquake, nor the fire. Rather, God was in the sound of silence... in the calm after the storm... a still, small voice. Let's try something. Close your eyes, and for the next 30 seconds, listen, just listen. Notice what you hear. What are the sounds? What do you hear in the silence? I'll keep the time and tell you when the 30 seconds are up. (SILENCE)

How did it feel to be in silence? Was it comfortable or awkward? Most of us probably don't experience much silence in our lives. Doesn't it seem as though noise is everywhere these days. There is just always a steady flow of noise pollution: TV, iPods, radio, conversation. We are seldom still enough to hear the subtle sounds around us. We are constantly bombarded with sound and maybe have forgotten how to handle silence. It may seem foreign or unnatural and makes us nervous. In fact, we'll do just about anything to cover it up, won't we. We become addicted to noise. The constant blaring of the TV is for many an electronic companion in whose presence we take

comfort; muzak fills the elevator; we jump in the car and switch on the radio to fill the uncomfortable void; even a lapse in social conversation is viewed with alarm, and someone has to rescue the moment by talking. Even a few moments of silence in worship can seem unnatural and uncomfortable. We are so used to sound filling the space.

Often we use noise to cover up our feelings, thinking, and seeing. Just like Elijah, we allow our own personal whirlwinds and those of our society to drown out our honest thoughts, mask our true feelings, and obscure the voice of God. So what if we decided to stop the noise. What if we decided to close our mouths. After all, we can't hear God if we're constantly talking, so what if we committed ourselves to spending more time in prayer and silence. Even then, we will likely fill the silence by talking to God, petitioning, thanking, praising, pleading, - maybe good things; the stuff of prayer as we are used to practicing it, but it is not listening. We close our lips and the internal chatter begins! We are speaking to God with our minds, but we are not quietly listening.

Okay, so let's say we not only decide to turn down the volume on our lives, but also in our thoughts. We want to stop the internal chatter and really listen to God. Have you ever tried that? You try to empty your mind and listen, but then your own thoughts creep in and you start remembering things you need to do and conversations you've had and yet another chorus of clanging voices are now competing for our attention! "I Wonder if I should have said that to Sally?" " What will I do if mom has to go to a nursing home?" " Did I leave the iron plugged in?" "I wonder what John meant when he said that to me?" "What were those things I needed at the store?" Given the noise inside our head, our chances of really hearing the voice of God aren't very good. And yet, "the still, small voice" is speaking; trying to be heard, trying to get through all the noise and congestion.

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, wrote, "Silence is the first language of God; all else is a poor translation." We encounter God in worship and Bible study and prayer and fellowship and acts of service and compassion, but it is in the silence that we truly come to know God.

It is in setting aside our need to talk or act or plan or worry and just sitting in God's presence that we begin to hear, truly hear. When we are ready to *listen*, we turn toward God in a way that seems to say, "I want to know you; however you want to speak to me, God, all the doors of my heart are open; you're as close as my breath - just help me to know it, to listen to it, and to hear."

The still small voice is speaking. Can you hear it? Deep inside, we long to connect with God, to satisfy our hungry hearts with God's presence and an abiding and growing relationship with the one who called us into being; the one who gave us breath; the one from whom we come and to whom we return. Deep inside, we long to connect with the source of life. And God will answer our longing... if we will only listen.

Many of us are like Elijah, straining to hear the voice of God over the whirlwinds and earthquakes and fires of our lives. But the truth is, life seems to constantly intrude on that process. Our best intentions get derailed by deadlines and busyness. Unfortunately, we can't move to a monastery. So our task is to house our own portable sanctuary in

the hallowed center of who we are—that place where we become so familiar with the sound of that still small voice; the sound of silence, that we can hear it in the *midst* of the whirlwind, in the very ebb and flow of our daily lives.

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. And this Lenten season, we will be focusing on listening. Lent is a season to be reflective. It is a time when we think about giving something up in order to align ourselves more fully with God. Well, maybe this Lent we can be more intentional about creating times and spaces when we give up noise - both external and internal - that we might be able to hear the still small voice of God speaking to us.

There is a poster on the wall at the Ames Family Martial Arts Center. It says, "How to listen in 3 easy steps. Focus your eyes. Focus your mind. Focus your body." Maybe that is instructive to us as we listen to God. As we seek the sound of silence it is probably best to either close our eyes or to focus on one point that is not distracting in any way. As we try to listen to God, we must quiet our mind and let go

of worries and various thoughts that go through our heads and our own agendas, and quiet our bodies as well; putting ourselves in a position of readiness to receive a word from God. Focus your eyes. Focus your mind. Focus your body. These are part of the Christian practice of centering prayer. Centering prayer is one way for a person to empty themselves of all the noise and distractions and listen. If you would like to experience this form of prayer, Darla Ewalt leads a group in centering prayer on Thursday evenings at 5:15 in the Bell Tower room.

Listening to God is an important part of the Christian life. God desires to speak to us and deep down we long to hear from God. William Barclay once said, "Prayer is not a way of making use of God; prayer is a way of offering ourselves to God in order that God should be able to make use of us. It may be that one of our great faults in prayer is that we talk too much and listen too little. When prayer is at its highest, we wait in silence for God's voice to us."

Silence is like scouring sand. When you are quiet, the silence blows against your mind and etches away everything unimportant.

What is left is what is real; what is important; what is calling you from where you are to where you can go with God's help and guidance.

Let's try listening again. Once more I will time just 30 seconds.

This time, as you listen, see if you can begin to hear the still small voice of God. SILENCE

In the hymnal on page 232, Twentieth century church leader, Walter Rauschenbush is quoted, "In the great quiet of God, my troubles are but pebbles on the road, my joys are like the everlasting hills. So it is when I step through the gate of prayer from time into eternity. When I am in the consciousness of God, my brothers and sisters are not far-off and forgotten, but close and strangely dear. They shine, as if a light were glowing within them. Even those who frown on me and love me not seem part of the great scheme of God."

Listen! God is saying, "be still and know that I am God." As we begin our Lenten journey, may we quiet ourselves and truly listen for that still, small voice of God. Amen.

**Listen! - to Jesus 3-8-09**  
By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Mark 9:2-9** <sup>2</sup>Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, <sup>3</sup>and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. <sup>4</sup>And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. <sup>5</sup>Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." <sup>6</sup>He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. <sup>7</sup>Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" <sup>8</sup>Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them any more, but only Jesus. <sup>9</sup>As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.

Some time ago I was in a conversation with a person - not from this congregation - about a controversial topic. This man, as a way of providing support for his point of view, quoted Jesus. After all, Jesus is important, and we in the church take him pretty seriously. So, of course, a person would want to cite Jesus. There was just one problem.

Jesus never said what this man quoted Jesus as saying. In recent years I've noticed an increase in the number of people who talk about Jesus and what Jesus says or desires or wants, but too many haven't really listened to Jesus. They use him, they worship him, but they don't listen to him.

This failure to listen to Jesus among Christians has created an interesting, but sad phenomena. In our society today, people, all kinds of people, like Jesus, but more and more, people don't like the church. They see a disconnect between the church and Jesus. A recent survey among people age 16 to 29 found that while they like Jesus, when they hear the word "Christian" 9 out of 12 of the first words they think of are negative. That may be a sign that we need to listen to Jesus more.

Today's scripture is about listening. The problem, as Peter and James and John found out, is that sometimes we don't want to listen because we might have to reconsider our point of view. We might have some of our assumptions and preconceived notions dismantled. And

none of us like that very well. Listening might make us uncomfortable, it might just cause us to change, and it may require action.

That's kind of what happened with the disciples in our story from scripture. They had been hanging out with Jesus for some time... They probably thought they had him figured out. And then things start to get unfamiliar. Just before Jesus ascends the mountain with Peter, James and John, and is transfigured before their eyes, a little exchange happens between Jesus and his disciples. They're on the road, and suddenly Jesus asks them -Who do people say that I am? The disciples start answering - Some say you're John the Baptist. Others think you're Elijah. And others say you're one of the prophets. "Well who do you say that I am?" he asks. Peter speaks up. "You're the Messiah." Which is to say the Christ - the anointed one of God - the long awaited King who would finally restore Israel like in the days of King David. And Jesus says - shhh. Don't tell anyone. Which was to say, in effect, Peter, you got it right - but it's not yet time for that to be announced.

But then Jesus starts saying he's going to undergo great suffering, he's going to be rejected and killed. And Peter, who's thinking - now wait a minute. I just said you're the Messiah. And you implied that's the right answer. And everyone knows the Messiah is going to deliver Israel from these Imperialist Romans and set up the Kingdom of Israel like it was back in the day... back in the good old days of glory - a thousand years ago. So what's this talk about suffering and rejection. That's not part of the deal. That's not what I was taught in Sabbath school.

So Peter took Jesus aside and started to rebuke him - to correct him. And now Peter, who had just gotten an A plus for the right answer, get's an F for the wrong understanding. And not only that - listen to what Jesus says to Peter. "Get behind me, Satan." For you're setting your mind not on divine things but on human things. You see, you can have the right answer and get it all wrong! That's why listening

is so important. We humans, and the disciples were no exception, tend to focus our attention on the sign rather than what the sign points to.

Jesus took Peter and James and John up the mountain with him. There Jesus took on a new look - shining and radiant with the glory of God. It was amazing! The disciples were in awe and wanted to stay there in the glow of the moment. They wanted to build a shrine to the moment and fix it in time. And isn't that so often what we want to do in those mountaintop moments in life. We want to fix it in time and set up a memorial or an altar. But God intervened. The point of this was not to create some new holy site. The point was to help them understand that Jesus was indeed connected to God's plan and purpose; that Jesus was the Messiah as foretold by the prophets. So God tells these three, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!"

Listen to him... don't just go on your assumptions, listen! Don't bow down to a picture or an object or say you believe in Jesus, or talk about Jesus, listen to Jesus! You can't hang on to the mountaintop

moments because following Jesus is a living, moving, breathing, active thing. It cannot be fixed in time or space. I read a story about someone who recognized famous 20<sup>th</sup> century painter, Pablo Picasso, on a train. The man asked Picasso why he did not paint people "the way they really are." Picasso asked what he meant by that expression - "the way they really are." The man opened his wallet and took out a snapshot of his wife, saying, "That's my wife." To which Picasso responded, "Isn't she rather small and flat?" Sometimes we substitute our symbols for the real thing... that to which the symbol is meant to point.

Okay, so the disciples had this mountaintop experience. They heard the voice of God telling them to listen to Jesus! Surely that changed their lives and their perspective, right? Well, the disciples in the Gospel of Mark aren't the quickest at understanding. No sooner had they come back down the mountain than they proved they hadn't been listening to Jesus. After this mountaintop experience, after

spending day after day in the presence of Jesus, James and John begin arguing among themselves who is the greatest. Jesus realizes what is going on and tells the disciples, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

And not long after that, again, James and John come up to Jesus and say - We've got a favor to ask of you, Jesus. When you come into your glory - and you're sitting there on that mighty throne - can we be right there beside you - one at your right hand and one at your left? Once again, Jesus tells them... "if you wish to be great, you must become a servant, for I have come not be served but to serve others and give my life for the sake of many."

Like the disciples in Jesus' day, we, too, may think we know who Jesus is and what he is all about. Like the disciples, we, too, probably get it wrong much of the time. Our assumptions and ideas that we have collected through the years may keep us from truly hearing Jesus. Some of those assumptions deny Jesus' way of the cross when we, like

Peter, think it should be all dazzle and power, or like James and John want the places of honor. How does the cross fit in with that?

As we listen to Christ and let Christ be at the center of our lives, we are transformed into the image of God within us. As we listen to Christ, we see that God's way is not glamour and glory, but self-giving love. Listen to Jesus - the Beloved Child of God. Let the transforming light of Christ shine within you leading you forward in God's way of love that gives and serves and heals and renews all things. Amen.

## Listen! - to the Heart 3-15-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

### Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>31</sup>The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup>It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup>No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye. **Antoine de Saint-Exupery**

Few are those who see with their own eyes and feel with their own hearts. **Albert Einstein**

A loving heart is the truest wisdom. **Charles Dickens**

All that is worth cherishing begins in the heart, not the head. **Suzanne Chapin**

Within your heart, keep one still, secret spot where dreams may go. **Louise Driscoll**

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart. **Helen Keller**

A joyful heart is the inevitable result of a heart burning with love. **Mother Teresa**

Your vision will become clear only when you can look into your own heart. Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakens. **Carl Jung**

The heart of a fool is in his mouth, but the mouth of a wise man is in his heart. **Benjamin Franklin**

Keep your feet on the ground, but let your heart soar as high as it will. **A. W. Tozer**

Every great achievement is the victory of a flaming heart. **Ralph Waldo Emerson**

It is the heart that makes a man rich. He is rich according to what he is, not according to what he has. **Henry Ward Beecher**

What comes from the heart, goes to the heart. **Samuel Taylor Coleridge**

One of the hardest things in life is having words in your heart that you can't utter. **James Earl Jones**

Follow your heart, but be quiet for a while first. Ask questions, then feel the answer. Learn to trust your heart. **Anonymous**

There are many things in life that will catch your eye, but only a few will catch your heart...pursue those. **Michael Nolan**

The human heart feels things the eyes cannot see, and knows what the mind cannot understand. **Robert Valett**

My mind tells me to give up, but my heart won't let me. **Anonymous**

In prayer it is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart. **Mahatma Gandhi**

Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all. **Aristotle**

I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. **Jeremiah**

Sung Response: *Listen, listen, listen*

Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song,  
Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song,  
"I will never forget you, I will never forsake you,  
I will never forget you, I will never forsake you."

"What does your heart tell you?" That is what the speaker asked the nearly 180 participants gathered in St. Joseph, MO for a

conference on Congregational Transformation last weekend. "What does your heart tell you?" was the question asked as congregational teams pondered what God was calling them to do in these difficult and changing times in which we all live.

Do you know that the word "heart" is found more than 600 times in the Bible? Jesus said that the whole of the law and the prophets could be summarized by this, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind and your neighbor as yourself."

Jeremiah communicates that God will write the law on the hearts of the people. So what is implied by the word heart? One way to get at an understanding is to contrast it with head. A person can memorize scripture, they can recite the 10 commandments and name the books of the Bible in order, they can have knowledge of when and how the stories of the Bible were written down and know dates and places when and where events happened, and still not have it written on their hearts. As one writer puts it, "While reading the Bible is important in any Christian spiritual discipline, being "knowledgeable" about the Bible

alone does not make anyone a better Christian. It is when we acquire the "heart" knowledge and seek personal encounter with God that "knowing" becomes complete."

Heart, in the Bible, refers to the whole of a person, an integration of affections, intellect and volition. Heart brings together the rational and the emotional in order to genuinely know the truth of something. It is a way of knowing that is hard to explain because it is partly conscious and partly subconscious. Knowing with the heart takes all kinds of information and experiences and feelings and brings them together and results in wisdom. You see, you can have knowledge without understanding, and you can have understanding without wisdom. In order to have wisdom, you must have both knowledge and understanding and then a little more. Wisdom comes from the heart. And so we are invited to " Listen! - to the Heart."

Sung Response: *Listen, listen, listen*

Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song,  
Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song,  
"I will never forget you, I will never forsake you,  
I will never forget you, I will never forsake you."

There are many barriers to listening to the heart. The head can be one of them. If you only trust what you can quantify or measure or prove, you close yourself off from other aspects of life and love and meaning and possibility. The inability to imagine anything other than the way things are is also a barrier to listening to the heart. The heart sometimes tells us to think or do things that seem odd or illogical or risky. I have a friend who left a very successful, financially rewarding career to go into the ministry. Believe me, that was God writing on her heart and she listened! Financially, it was clearly a stupid move. Her income was probably cut 75%. And she has two children to put through college on a pastor's salary. I imagine those children are wondering about this heart wisdom.

There are others I know who left their home and country to go help people in need in Africa who are suffering from war and disease and hunger and poverty. There is a large case that could be made against taking such action, but the heart speaks with such authority it

is hard to ignore. I know of others who have taken in children that no one wanted. Battered and abused, fetal alcohol babies, crack babies, children with little hope whose problems are more than most of us could even imagine, and yet the heart calls and it doesn't give up. Despite great challenges and personal hardship, a person follows the voice of the heart.

What is your heart telling you? What has God written in your heart? What is the deep wisdom within you trying to say to you? Can you hear the call of your heart, or is there too much noise and busyness and distraction for you to even hear?

Lent is a time to quiet your mind and your life and make room for the beckoning of the heart. Lent is a time to step back and reflect and open yourself to what God might have in store for you. And you may as well listen because God doesn't give up. Remember the story of Jonah? He kept trying to run from God's call on his life and it landed him in the belly of a whale. If you find yourself restless and not quite knowing what's going on, it just may be God stirring your heart and calling you

to listen. Listen! - to the Heart. Will you join me in praying St.

Augustine's "Prayer of the Restless Heart." You'll find it on page 524.

"O Omnipotent God, who cares for each of us as if no one else existed and for all of us as if we were all but one! Blessed is the person who loves You. To You I entrust my whole being and all I have received from You. You made me for Yourself, and my heart is restless until it rests in you." Amen.

Sung Response: *Listen, listen, listen*

Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song,

Listen, listen, listen to my heart's song,

"I will never forget you, I will never forsake you,

I will never forget you, I will never forsake you."

## Listen! - to One Another 3-22-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Romans 1:8-15** <sup>8</sup>First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. <sup>9</sup>For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, <sup>10</sup>asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. <sup>11</sup>For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— <sup>12</sup>or rather so that we may be *mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine*. <sup>13</sup>I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup>I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish <sup>15</sup>—hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

If you wanted to have the most perfect example of the kind of communication that breaks down and destroys relationship, you could do no better than to watch The Jerry Springer Show. Have you ever seen that show? I have seen it only occasionally, and never an entire show, but I am struck like a deer looking into the headlights of the car that is about to hit it whenever I happen upon it. It is one of those daytime shows that deals with various issues people face in their lives,

like Dr. Phil and Oprah, but it does so in the style of a professional wrestling match. The first time I saw the show, the topic was - "I was raised by the Ku Klux Klan" and it featured several families who raised their children with the values of the KKK. There on television the children spewed out racial slurs and hate speech as the audience yelled and booed and got increasingly angry. Another topic I remember is - "My best friend is sleeping with my boyfriend". Here both the friend and the boyfriend are brought out on stage while the person who was betrayed yells and even gets physically aggressive with her wrongdoers.

There are things to be learned from this show. If you want to make sure that no one listens and no one is heard, if you want to make sure that everyone stays the same, that no one grows or gains any insight or creative ideas to address the situation, then make sure to set it up as a fight from the beginning. Make sure that there are clearly delineated sides and that one side is wrong and one side is right.

Doing that will ensure you are no better off after the encounter with the "others" than you were before, and you'll probably be worse. This kind of objectification of other people's pain and suffering can teach us a lot about what **not** to do if our goal is deeper, more healthy, more caring communication and relationship.

The unfortunate truth about our society and even the church in recent years is that we have too often participated in this kind of charade playing as we have become polarized on all kinds of issues social, political and theological. When I was a student minister in a large church many years ago, there was a scene like the Jerry Springer Show at a congregational business meeting when one of the church leaders was so angry at the Senior Minister I truly thought he was going to punch him. I know of other situations where church leaders have been called Satan because they weren't willing to condemn someone with whom they disagreed theologically. And we've all been exposed to the various media attempts to frame stories of differences

as good vs. evil or two sides in a fight to see who will win. When that is the framework out of which we operate, out of which relate, we become alienated from one another and begin to see friends as enemies, which tears at the fabric our faith communities as well as the communities in which we live and work and raise children and care for those who are aging. And even more, we are unable to make good decisions or solve problems because we become blind and deaf to anything but the mantra to which we've subscribed.

In the midst of the world crises we are facing - war, global financial collapse, terrorism, poverty, an AIDS epidemic, climate change, and many other things, there is beginning to emerge a new spirit that will help heal the brokenness. It is something that to us, as people of faith, *should* come as no surprise. People are beginning to see that in order to live peacefully together, in order to solve the world's problems, in order to have a bright, hope-filled future we need to realize that we are all interconnected and that each of us has a

perspective and ideas and skills that can contribute to building a healthy world if only we can listen and see through another's eyes.

Margaret J. Wheatley, writer of books on leadership in uncertain times, wrote, "I believe that this changing world requires much less certainty and far more curiosity. I'm not suggesting that we let go of our beliefs, only that we become curious about what someone else believes. As we open ourselves to the disturbing differences, sometimes we discover that another's way of interpreting the world actually is essential to our survival." (Finding Our Way p.211)

None of us have all the answers. None of us is complete by ourselves. God made us for community and it is in coming together, in sharing with one another, in speaking and listening that we become more whole, more healed, more able to be strong and wise in the face of the struggles and challenges of life. It is when we come together, each with our own gifts and graces as well as our weaknesses and blind spots that we are the body of Christ... the whole stronger than the sum

of the parts. But in order to realize the true gift of community, we must be able and willing to listen to one another building up the body of Christ in love as we grow deeper in our relationships.

Jesus said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." In listening to one another we become stronger in our faith. Listening draws us closer to one another and offers healing and possibility. As the Apostle Paul said, "that we may be *mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.*"

I think we are hungry for that kind of healthy relationship in our lives.

That may be one reason why there has been such a tremendous turn out for the women's gatherings that have happened recently. Women getting together, listening to one another's stories, being encouraged in one another's faith, learning to see the world through another's eyes which opens up our own lives in ways God can transform us and make us new. Tomorrow night the men will have such a listening opportunity as they gather at the home of Bob and Jean Watson.

This kind of listening is also going on in the community as people have come together, those new to Ames and to Iowa sitting and sharing with those who have been here 40 or 50 years. Each one in the room has a unique story that has shaped who they are and how they see the world. And in coming together and hearing one another's stories, healing and deepening relationship is possible. The city is taking this so seriously they are planning on buying a trailer and filling it with tables and chairs and all the things needed for block parties. There is a clear understanding that as people get to know one another and listen to one another, the tensions that exist will be released and everyone will benefit.

So how do we listen to one another? There are some rules of listening that need to be shared in order to facilitate building healthy, healing relationships. Again, we can learn from our own negative experiences. How many of you have had the experience of talking with someone and sharing your thoughts with them and the whole time it

was quite clear that they were only listening enough to grab a word they could then refute or disagree with. Or maybe you've tried to express something you've really struggled with only to have the person give you advise you didn't ask for or try to "solve" your "problem."

In an international gathering of women, there was time in a circle for each woman to share about themselves. A young, black South African woman began quietly to tell her story - a truly horrible story - her grandparents had been slaughtered in their village. Many of the other women, hearing of such pain, instinctively wanted to do something. They wanted to fix it or make it better. The young woman became aware of how they were closing in on her in their own need to solve her "problem." She put her hands up and said, "I don't need you to fix me. I just need you to listen to me." There was healing for her in simply being able to tell her story out loud and have it be received by another. Listening creates relationship. Listening moves us closer, it helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy.

Parker Palmer is an educator who has studied and written on how to create environments that allow our spirits to speak and to guide us. Palmer says in deep listening to another, there is "no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight." That takes practice. That takes setting aside my need to do something to or for you. That takes setting aside my agenda or my need to help you see the error of your ways. It takes an emptying of myself that yourself might shine and be heard. "No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight." That's a tall order. So, what else is there? Well, there's silence to allow thoughts to come in patient reverence. There's stating what you've heard the other say. There's asking questions so that I might more fully understand what you are saying. And, there's holy silence that leaves space for your spirit to be free to express itself without interruption, without fitting into my categories, in the context of trust and grace. And in that process I learn about you and you learn more about yourself and our connection grows deeper. And it's not about agreeing. It's about listening. It's about understanding. It's

about treasuring your story and how it has brought you to this place.

It's about you treasuring my story and seeing the world through my

eyes. And there Jesus is in the midst of us. May we take the time to

listen to one another. Amen.

“Listen! -- to the World”

Psalm 62:5-12, Mark 1:14-20

March 29, 2009, First Christian Church, Ames

Anjeanette Perkins

One Sunday back in January, I worshipped within sight of the Caribbean Sea, wearing sandals and short sleeves. The Jamaican shrubs and trees all around us were blooming in a rainbow of colors. Hummingbirds with long tails paused long enough for me to add another bird to my life-list, but not long enough to get a picture. Fish and fresh-squeezed orange juice were part of breakfast. During worship, we were actually a bit too warm as we prayed and sang together, swatting mosquitoes and sipping water.

Okay, okay, that’s probably enough about the setting now. January in Iowa was beautiful in its own way, too, right? Besides, the people of Jamaica are what I’m going to remember most about my visit. Listen.

I was in Jamaica for the first two weeks of January as part of a 14-member group from Christian Theological Seminary studying that beautiful country for what CTS calls a “cross-cultural experience.” We didn’t actually spend enough time at the beach to suit me, but the goal of our trip was to learn about Jamaica from the Jamaicans. We had lectures on economics and education, on health care, and even on Rastafari philosophy. We toured schools, churches, missions, and the museum of singer Bob Marley.

The tour I was most apprehensive about prior to the start of the trip was of the Spanish Town prison. This is a maximum-security prison which is also the only prison in the country that has a death row. Some of the things we learned and experienced during our prison tour took my breath away, but none of the things that shook me were things I had anticipated ahead of time.

In a country which still struggles to come to terms with its legacy of slavery, in which over 90% of the citizens today are of African descent, the oldest buildings in the Spanish Town prison were constructed in 1655 as a place where human beings were bought and sold like cattle. We walked by those very cellblocks, now overcrowded with inmates.

Then, in the prison superintendent’s office, we noticed on the large organizational chart posted on his wall that one level of staff in this prison and former slave market is called “overseer,” which, to many of us in my group, is a term uncomfortably associated with our own legacy of slavery in the US.

Later on, as we walked around the grounds of the prison, escorted by guards armed only with clubs, we passed a relatively large open field in the midst of the crowded and bustling yard which was surprisingly barren of people, of buildings, of signs. I couldn't hear the explanation of this space as we passed. But after we left the prison, one of my classmates told me that this part of the yard is where the executed are buried. If someone happens to die in prison of, say, disease, I am told, their bodies are returned to their families. However, all persons executed are buried in unmarked graves there within the walls of the prison, in the part of the yard I had wondered about, the part where none of the living prisoners went. The families of the executed cannot have their bodies.

Listen.

Our passage from the Gospel of Mark is one of the many call stories the gospels tell of Jesus' early ministry. In this one we have Mark's account of Jesus calling brothers Simon and Andrew and calling the sons of Zebedee, James and John.

These call stories happen right in the first chapter of Mark. This gospel is our shortest one, the writer is very succinct, action piles upon action with little transition or commentary. The book of Mark doesn't start with a birth story, like Matthew or Luke. Instead, Jesus is already an adult right from the beginning. In the first chapter we get John the Baptist preparing the way of the Lord as the prophet foretold, and then the baptism of Jesus and Jesus' temptation in the wilderness all this in the first 13 verses of Mark.

Our text today starts at verse 14, which begins the shift from John the Baptist's public ministry to Jesus' own public ministry. John is out of the picture, having been arrested, and now the one whose coming John proclaimed is himself proclaiming Good News in Galilee. He proclaims that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand.

What does this proclamation mean? The writer of Mark doesn't yet give more details on what Jesus teaches at this point. Instead, we get the call stories of those two sets of brothers next. Mark doesn't yet portray Jesus performing miracles or drawing large crowds for teaching, he isn't confronting the powers that be. The first public act of Jesus to which Mark gives any major space in chapter one is Jesus calling disciples to become his assistants in the proclamation of the good news.

Jesus says to Simon and Andrew, "follow me," and immediately they drop their nets and follow. Jesus said to James and John, "follow me" and they left their father and follow to become fishers of people. Now, back then fishing was a good living, Zebedee's outfit

even has hired hands, so these fishermen were leaving behind a decent livelihood. Not only that, back in the culture of ancient times, it was considered deviant or abnormal to leave one's extended family. It would have been shocking to the early listeners of these call stories to learn that the fishermen just up and left their kin. Jesus called Simon and Andrew, James and John, and completely disrupted and re-ordered their lives, economically, occupationally and socially. And these men responded to the call in order to proclaim the good news with Jesus.

Listen, Jesus proclaimed in Galilee over 2,000 years ago that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God was at hand. If that happened just in the past, we don't need to be here this morning. We don't need to live our lives differently than before we encountered Jesus. But we claim that we, like the disciples, have encountered Jesus, that Jesus has disrupted our lives with the good news. We witness to the in-breaking of the kingdom of God here and now.

So what is the good news here and now, in 2009 in Ames, Iowa? What is Jesus calling you to do? What is Jesus calling First Christian Church to do? What are we to witness to? What are you hearing as you listen?

I want to suggest one meaning of good news to you this morning and give credit the Jamaican government's Minister of National Security for the suggestion. This minister is head of corrections and we met with him in a big new office building over near downtown Kingston after our prison tour in Spanish Town.

This Government Minister told us a lot about how the correctional system was planning to increase its capacity to do rehabilitation with inmates. But, he told us, the government couldn't move too quickly on these rehabilitation efforts because most people in Jamaica just want the prisoners to rot in jail. You see, Jamaica has the second highest murder rate per capita in the world. It is a dangerous place. If the government tried too hard to rehabilitate people, he told us, the government wouldn't get re-elected. The voters just wouldn't stand for it. So perhaps, I thought, this explains why descendants of enslaved persons are still locked in slave markets, guarded by overseers.

This active dehumanization of prisoners reminded me of what a medical doctor told me in El Salvador. About 5 years ago I toured a government-funded charity hospital. This was on a study trip I took the year before some of us from First Christian worked on Habitat for Humanity houses in San Luis Talpa. At the charity hospital I toured in San Salvador, the doctor described for us the great need for supplies, equipment, for additional beds, and for increased funding. We even passed two-year old earthquake rubble still piled where it fell. Listen, she told us she desperately wanted to give the

same tour to Salvadoran politicians and journalists so they would understand the needs of their own medical system and the poor people it served. But she told us she couldn't get local decision-makers to come. She thought it was because they did not see the poor as human. Did that highly religious country remember Jesus' economic status?

Mark tells us about a Middle-eastern guy from a poor backwater part of the Roman empire announcing that the kingdom of God is at hand. What does the kingdom of God look like? Perhaps one of the policies of this kingdom, I want to suggest, is that all people are human. After all, the first humans were created in God's image. It is good news that we are human, you and I. It is good news is that the prisoners in Jamaica are human, even those on death row. It is good news is that poor people in El Salvador are human, even the ones that need medical care and can't afford it.

The tricky part of Jesus' ministry is that Jesus' call to discipleship is disruptive... perhaps one of the things Jesus disrupts is the luxury of dismissing any person as less than human.

But it's not easy to live once life is disrupted and re-ordered, even if it is Jesus who did the re-ordering. It's not easy, in the midst of this broken world, be followers of Jesus, to witness to the nearness of God's kingdom.

Listen, in Jamaica we were reminded of that challenge of witness by church members of Meadowbrook United Church, which is in a middle-class neighborhood of Kingston. They hosted us for dinner and theological discussion one night. Before we ate, our professors got us deep into interesting, but abstract, religious questions, when one of Meadowbrook's members interrupted to ask our professors to leave the abstract and get real. She asked us all whether or not Christians can justify violence in self-defense. Their pastor set her question in context for us. One of their members was murdered very recently, a young woman, a pharmacist, who took a taxi home after work at 10 p.m. one night and wasn't seen again until her body was found the next day.

We had to sit with her important question. What does it mean to live as though everyone is human when you live in the midst of the second highest murder rate in the world, where nearly 1,600 murders were reported in the last year in a country of less than 3 million. It certainly does not mean that no one goes to prison. But what does it mean that the person or people who murdered a member of your faith community, is also human? When a human being created in God's image breaks into your house, puts your family in danger, can you fight back violently and be a follower of Jesus?

My group, chock full of pastors, seminary professors and students training for ordained ministry, didn't have an answer that night in Jamaica, and I don't have one this morning, either.

To struggle with such questions in the light of the good news and the nearness of the kingdom of God -- questions arising from our own lives, our own communities, our own countries, is the stuff of life as a disciple. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor executed by the Nazis wrote that *"Discipleship is not limited to what you can comprehend."*

This non-answer, this incomprehension only makes sense if God is reliable. It is not easy to re-order our values and our lives in response to Jesus' call, it is not easy to have our life disrupted by the call to discipleship. In light of the unusual occurrence of three murders in Ames last year, it's not easy to think of those murders as human. But when we can proclaim, with the Psalmist ...that God *"alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress, my hope"* – we can struggle with the questions that have no easy answers, questions like how to live like all persons are human.

Listen, Jesus called his first disciples early, very early in his public ministry. He alone, even Jesus alone, was not alone responsible for proclaiming the good news during his life. It is our job together, not just Jesus, not just clergy, not just Jamaicans, not just adults, not just men, not just women, not just people with a lot of formal degrees, we are each called to proclaim the good news and witness to kingdom of God, a kingdom whose policies include the humanity of all.

We proclaim good news, we practice kingdom living, that's part of what it means to be a disciple. But *"the power belongs to God."* And God is reliable.

Hear the words of the Psalmist  
*"For God alone my soul waits in silence,  
 for my hope is from him.  
 He alone is my rock and my salvation,  
 my fortress; I shall not be shaken.  
 On God rests my deliverance and my honor;  
 my might rock, my refuge is in God.  
 God is a refuge for us."*

So follow.

## Listen! - to the Children 4-5-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Mark 11:1-11** When they were approaching Jerusalem, at Bethphage and Bethany, near the Mount of Olives, he sent two of his disciples <sup>2</sup>and said to them, "Go into the village ahead of you, and immediately as you enter it, you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden; untie it and bring it. <sup>3</sup>If anyone says to you, 'Why are you doing this?' just say this, 'The Lord needs it and will send it back here immediately.'" <sup>4</sup>They went away and found a colt tied near a door, outside in the street. As they were untying it, <sup>5</sup>some of the bystanders said to them, "What are you doing, untying the colt?" <sup>6</sup>They told them what Jesus had said; and they allowed them to take it. <sup>7</sup>Then they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks on it; and he sat on it. <sup>8</sup>Many people spread their cloaks on the road, and others spread leafy branches that they had cut in the fields. <sup>9</sup>Then those who went ahead and those who followed were shouting,

"Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

<sup>10</sup>Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

<sup>11</sup>Then he entered Jerusalem and went into the temple; and when he had looked around at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve

"Hosanna, loud hosanna the little children sang." Can you imagine the scene as Jesus rode into Jerusalem! If you grew up in the church, you probably have heard the story of this processional with shouting

and praising and waving palm branches as Jesus enters triumphantly. And we have imagined the children gathering around and jumping and shouting because everybody knows Jesus loves the children. "Hosanna, loud hosanna the little children sang."

What we haven't heard about as much is that Jesus entry into Jerusalem was going on at one side of town while a great procession of the Roman imperial army and the important government officials and military leaders was taking place on the other side of town. On one side there is Jesus humbly riding through the streets on a donkey. On the other side there are horses and chariots and swords and armor. On one side the power of God's love and on the other the power of the empire. And by the end of the week, it would appear as though the empire had the final say, that the empire was more powerful than God as Jesus took his last breath and cried out his last words.

"Hosanna, loud hosanna the little children sang.... The Lord of earth and heaven rode on in lowly state, nor scorned that little children should on his bidding wait." Everybody knows Jesus loves the children.

That this "king" would ride into the holy city, Jerusalem, on a donkey, with no army and no weapons did not fit people's expectation of what the Messiah of God would be like, but it did fit with how Jesus lived his life. It was perfectly in character with how, when Jesus' disciples tried to keep the children from bothering him, he responded by saying, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." (Lk. 18:16b,17)

At some level we understand that, don't we. There is innocence and openness and a grand idea of the way things should be that the children remind us of. That's probably why we like to share stories about what comes out of the mouths of our children and grandchildren. They can say the darndest and most profound things. And, like in the story of the Emperor's New Clothes, it often takes a child to help us see the truth of things that would be obvious to us if we only had eyes to see; if we were only a bit more like a little child. And so today, on

Palm Sunday, as we head into Holy Week, we listen to the children and see what they might say to us about following Jesus.

Do you know the story of Ruby Bridges? Ruby was a little girl whose family moved to New Orleans in 1957. Ruby's mother and father worked hard to earn a living and take care of their family. And every Sunday, Ruby's family went to church. From the time she was very, very young, Ruby heard the stories of Jesus and felt surrounded by God's love. In 1960, when Ruby was just 6 years old, she was chosen to be one of the first black children to go to a white elementary school. This was a very tense time in American history. Schools had been segregated and many white people were angry that black children would go to school with their children.

When Ruby arrived at Frantz Elementary school she had to be escorted by Federal Marshals with guns because the local and state police refused to help. As she approached the school, she was met by an angry crowd holding hateful signs and shouting at little Ruby and calling her names. Every day, for weeks and months, Ruby went to

school in that kind of atmosphere. The white people had stopped sending their children to school, so Ruby was in a class alone, just her and the teacher. The teacher was amazed at how well Ruby seemed to be doing in the midst of such a hostile environment.

One morning, Ruby's teacher happened to be looking out the window as Ruby approached the school. She saw Ruby suddenly stop - right in front of the howling mob. Ruby stood there facing all those men and women, and it appeared as though she was talking to them. The crowd seemed ready to kill that poor little girl. The marshals were frightened and tried to persuade Ruby to move along.

When Ruby finally got to class the teacher asked her what she said to the people in the mob. But Ruby said, "I didn't stop and talk with them." "I was praying for them." Every morning, Ruby had stopped a few blocks away from school to say a prayer for the people who hated her. This morning she forgot until she was already in the middle of the angry mob. This is the prayer Ruby prayed before and after school each day: *Please, God, try to forgive those people,*

*because even if they say those bad things, they don't know what they're doing. So You could forgive them, just like You did those folks a long time ago when they said terrible things about You.*

Ruby Bridges knew Jesus. She knew the stories of how the crowd shouted, "Crucify him!" and how he endured the jeers and violence of an angry mob, and how he asked God to forgive them. And that little child was able to face her own angry mob with a strength and a peace that passes all understanding unless, of course, you know the power of God's love to triumph over hate. Listen to the children.

Jesus went to the cross in large part because he, himself, was like a child. He was able to see what had become invisible to others, that God's love does rule - despite the evidence - that the children are important and that all people have value and worth and if you love God, you don't put yourself above others. Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of those in power and exposed the ways they were not better or more than or more deserving in God's eyes. And that made people angry.

And that is what turned the shouts of "Hosanna" to shouts of "Crucify him!"

As we begin this Holy Week journey; as we journey with Jesus to the cross, let us listen, to the voices and the poems and the prayers of the children who can sometimes really say it like it is... and bring to light what faith tells us.

There is another child whose voice I'd like to share. Have you even heard of Mattie Stepanek? Mattie was a poet, a peace activist, a best-selling author, a speaker, an amateur philosopher and theologian, and the National Goodwill Ambassador for the Muscular Dystrophy Association. He saw the truth of things and helped others see, too. Mattie died in June of 2004 at the age of 13. Just three years earlier, in September 2001, in the aftermath of tragedy, Mattie wrote the poem, "For our World" Listen to the words of this child.

We need to stop. Just stop.  
Stop for a moment...  
before anybody says or does anything that may hurt anyone else.  
We need to be silent.

Just silent. Silent for a moment...  
before we forever lose  
the blessing of songs that grow in our hearts.  
We need to notice. Just notice. Notice for a moment...  
before the future slips away into ashes and dust of humility.  
Stop, be silent, and notice...  
in so many ways, we are the same.  
Our differences are unique treasures.  
We have, we are, a mosaic of gifts to nurture, to offer, to accept.  
We need to be. Just be. Be for a moment...  
kind and gentle, innocent and trusting, like children and lambs,  
never judging or vengeful like the judging and vengeful.  
And now, let us pray, differently, yet together,  
before there is no earth, no life, no chance for peace.

Let us listen to the children. Amen.

## The Resurrection: God's Shock and Awe

Easter Sunrise - 4-12-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Mark 16:1-8** 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. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he 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. <sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>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.

*"Do not be alarmed...he has been raised... So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them."*

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Mary and the other women who arrived at the tomb that Sunday morning to attend to the dead body of their loved one, Jesus?! Can you imagine?

Imagine you were one of Jesus' followers who had accompanied him into Jerusalem - people lining the streets, waving branches and shouting, "Hosanna to the King!" "Hosanna to the one whom God sent to save the people!" Imagine you were one of Jesus' followers... you knew he was no ordinary guy. There was something extraordinary about this man. He had a presence and a power like no one you'd ever met. You witnessed Jesus' miracles, the healings, the teachings, the acts of love and compassion. You knew this Jesus was of God and had touched your life, giving you hope. You were no one special or powerful, and yet, around Jesus you knew you part of something grand - something important - something that changed your life like you could never have imagined! Something that would change the world! But just at the height of your joy, just as you thought others were finally realizing Jesus' power and authority, just when you were filled with a hope beyond hope, things started to turn.

The religious and political leaders could see what was going on and they didn't like it. They saw people putting their hope in this man,

Jesus. They heard the proclamations, "Hosanna to the King" and felt threatened. "Who is this man they call king? He is no king!" To them, Jesus was a troublemaker. They had quite a good system going before Jesus arrived on the scene. They were the ones who deserved the shouts of praise and adoration. They were the ones who represented a higher authority. The religious leaders invoking the name of God. The political leaders invoking the Roman Emperor. Who was this Jesus to get such a reception? By what authority did this Jesus offer forgiveness and heal and speak so confidently of God's ways? Who did he think he was messing around with the social and religious customs - healing on the Sabbath, eating with sinners and prostitutes, associating with the unclean. How dare Jesus brainwash people into thinking they were loved by God and that they didn't have to earn God's love or win God's favor. How dare Jesus question the way things are.

To some, like Mary and the other disciples, the shouts of "Hosanna to the King!" were a sign of hope and God's coming kingdom, but to others, it was a threat to their power and privilege. And so,

Jesus' triumphal entry was followed by a plot to get rid of Jesus and the tragic drama of Holy Week began.

The powers of this world are very smart. They know how to turn a crowd. They know how to use fear as a tool to defeat the enemy.

They know how to turn shouts of "Hosanna to the King!" into shouts of "Crucify him!" Fear is a powerful tool. It was easy to turn the crowd.

But what about Jesus' followers, how do you take away their hope and momentum? The fear factor must be raised. And what better way to raise fear than to bring charges against the leader and then publically torture and execute him. With one swift blow, the Jesus movement will be crushed. Jesus' followers will give up - surrender - and everything will return to normal again.

Do you remember the term "Shock and Awe" that was used as the United States was heading into war with Iraq? Shock and Awe was the name given to a military strategy. The idea was to display such force and power and might, that the enemy will be filled with fear and lose their resolve to fight, and simply surrender, give up, and hand over

power to you. That is not a new strategy. Those in power in the Roman Empire used that strategy to keep people in their place.

So, can you imagine how it was for Mary and the women as they watched these tragic events unfold. They saw Judas betray Jesus, they heard Peter deny Jesus, they remained at the cross as the other disciples fled - struck by fear. They watched as Jesus was nailed to a cross, as he breathed his last breath, as his body was taken down and placed in a tomb, and as a stone was rolled in front of the tomb's entrance. By all appearances, the power of fear and violence and death had won. The one they believed was the Messiah, the anointed one of God, sent to save the people was now dead and encased in a tomb.

So now Mary and the other women arrive at the tomb to perform an act of love and service, to put closure to a set of tragic events that they had watched unfold. They wonder who will push the stone away so they can tend to Jesus' dead body. Imagine their surprise to find that the stone had already been rolled away. Imagine their shock at realizing that Jesus' body was not in the tomb. Imagine their

amazement as a young man told them Jesus had been raised and that they would see him again.

That's the real "Shock and Awe." The resurrection, that's God's "Shock and Awe." Here is the display of true power and might - the power to bring life and hope out of death and despair. It is easy to destroy. It takes the power of God to bring forth life out of the destruction. Witnessing that awesome power of the Lord of Life can certainly bring fear and trembling as it did for Mary and the other women, but it also brings hope and joy in recognizing that the power of God is greater than all other power. The authorities thought that killing Jesus would put an end to the movement he began. Boy, were they wrong! They didn't understand just who they were messing with. They thought that by demonstrating their power to inflict pain and death they could hold on to their power. But instead, the God of Life brought forth such a display of power that the world would never be the same again.

The power of the resurrection is that God brings life, hope and love out of violence, a cross and death's tomb. The power of the resurrection is that God has the final say. The power of the resurrection is that God rules with love and grace and justice. It is an amazing power used to build God's kingdom on earth. The power of the resurrection is the power of self-giving, redeeming, leveling love and goodness. As one person put it, "Resurrection is real. It is a story that can be expressed in two words: life wins."

As we rejoice together in the power of the resurrection; as we stand in the aftermath of God's Shock and Awe," hear these words from a South American Easter song called *Cuando Se Va la Esperanza!*

Just when our hope was defeated, clear was the voice of the Spirit  
I will be with you and I will uplift you  
and give you the strength to endure.  
God is uplifting the people. God is the power within us.  
Hope is our music and freedom our song  
and together our voices will ring.

Christ is risen. Alleluia. Amen.

## Listen! To Life 4-12-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Mark 16:1-8** 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. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he 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. <sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>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.

"And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." You've got to be kidding, right? Mark's gospel doesn't end there. It can't. That's not how the story goes. Come on! As my husband, Tim, will tell you, I can't stand endings like this. Endings that leave you hanging. Lots of loose ends. Lots of questions and ambiguity. "And they said

nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That's not the story I remember on Easter growing up as a kid. What about Jesus' appearance, to Mary, to Peter... someone! The beginning of the gospel according to Mark begins, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," and ends, "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." Tell me, how is that good news?

This kind of cliffhanger ending is very unsettling, especially in church on Easter Sunday morning, especially when you know the story of Holy Week with the last supper and the betraying and denying and the flogging and mocking and the nailing to the cross and the dying. The tension is high, the suspense can be felt. We all need relief, a happy ending, a reason to come to church this morning in our Easter clothes and smiles and alleluias. But there it is. We are here faced

with a cliffhanger of an ending. "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

You may be thinking or saying to yourself, "But Mary Jane, there's twelve more verses. Why are you saying Mark's gospel ends with verse eight?" If you want, go ahead and open your Bible or one of the pew Bibles. Turn to Mark... the second book in the New Testament ... and go to the end. You will, indeed, find an extra twelve verses. The problem is, those were added later by people, like me, who hate cliffhanger endings. A hundred years or more later than Mark's gospel was written down, someone, actually, some ones, decided that Mark had made a mistake. Surely Mark had not intended to leave his gospel hanging like that... and so they made up alternative endings in order to have the kind of resolution to the story they thought it should have.

Okay, so here's the question. Why do you suppose Mark ended his gospel this way? Why did he see fit to end with, "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."?) I'm sure there are many reasons Mark chose to end in this way. And I'd like to propose one reason. I said I don't like cliffhangers, but when my children were young, they loved a series of books called, "Choose Your Own Adventure." That series was one of the most popular series of children's books in the 1980's and 90's. The books were structured so that you were actually the character propelling the story forward. You were a part of the story and you could choose how to respond. How you chose to respond would affect the outcome of the story. You could read the same story multiple times and have it come out differently each time. My kids loved these books so much they decided to write their own "Choose Your Own Adventure" books and had great fun creating different ways the story could go, including many endings.

I think this is why Mark ended his gospel the way he did. I think Mark wanted to make the reader part of the story and to have them enter into the story as the women exited and to choose your own

ending. The ending begs the question, if they ran away and said nothing to anyone, then how did the story continue? The ending of Mark's gospel makes the reader think and challenges the reader to make a different choice. You see, as a general rule, fear stops us from acting. Fear keeps us from seizing life; it keeps us from giving and loving with reckless abandon; it keeps us from claiming and proclaiming the resurrection. Fear causes us to be silent, to doubt what we see and believe. Fear causes us to shrink from abundant life and to settle for less. Fear draws us inward in a self-preserving way like embalming fluid as it replaces the life-force that is within us.

Mark leaves the Easter story in our hands. Not that we can change the fact that Jesus is alive, but Easter is not just something that happened a long time ago. There is a song that goes like this... "Every morning is Easter morning from now on. Every day resurrection day, the past is over and gone." The gospel according to Mark ends the story by bringing us along with the women to the tomb wondering how

on earth we will roll away the stone so we can care for the dead. But wait a minute! The stone has already been rolled back. And a man in white says to us "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here...go, tell, he is going ahead of you just as he told you." Now the story is in your hands. What will you do? Will you go and tell. Will you follow where Jesus leads? Will you celebrate the resurrection of Christ by listening to life and letting go of death. Will you allow life and love to rule your heart rather than fear and death?

In just a few minutes three young people will meet me in the baptistery. We've talked about baptism as a death and resurrection. As they go under the water, they will die to the old ways of selfishness and greed and pride and apathy - the ways of death and fear, and they will rise with Christ to the new ways of self-giving love and compassion and generosity and joy - the ways of abundant life. That doesn't mean mistakes won't be made. That doesn't mean life will be easy.

Resurrection, according to Mark is an on-going deal. Each day we go to the tomb and we must choose whether to live our lives afraid of death, afraid of the mystery, afraid of the unanswered questions and cliffhanger endings, or whether to live our lives listening to the rhythms and sounds and callings of life embracing and sharing love in all circumstances with a joy in our step and a song in our heart and in utter faith and confidence that at the end of the story, as in the beginning, is the love of God that called all things into being.

It's Easter, choose life! Listen to life! Embrace life! Share life with the one who is Life. Christ is risen! Do not be afraid. Go, tell, follow. Amen.