

Unfinished Business
Mark 16: 1-8
Easter Sunday 2016

Rev. Tom VandeStadt
Congregational Church of Austin, UCC

Three women approach the tomb to prepare Jesus' dead body for a proper burial. When they arrive, they discover the tomb's entrance is wide open. Someone has rolled away the giant stone that sealed it shut. Within the tomb, a mysterious young man dressed in white tells them, "Jesus, the crucified, is raised. He's not here. Go and say to the disciples and to Peter, 'He's going ahead of you into Galilee, there you'll see him again, as he told you.'"

What an intriguing ending. The way Mark ends his Gospel, we never encounter the resurrected Christ, as we do in the other Gospels. We're simply told he's left. He's on his way to Galilee. Typical of the rushed pace of Mark's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus doesn't waste any time. He's got stuff to do. He's in a hurry to get started. He's already on his way, and the disciples have to catch up.

In fact, I detect a little undercurrent of criticism here. If Jesus is on his way to Galilee, why are the disciples still in Jerusalem? Jesus said he'd see them in Galilee, so why haven't they already left? Jesus was dead for a few days, so the disciples had a head start. *They* should be waiting for Jesus. Why is it *Jesus* who has to wait for *them* in Galilee, where he told them he'd see them?

Once again, the disciples in Mark's Gospel don't quite make the grade.

Anyway, what's so special about Galilee? Why was the resurrected Jesus in such a hurry to return to Galilee? And why does he want his disciples to meet him there?

It's quite simple. To return to Galilee is to return to the very beginning of the Gospel. To return to Galilee is to loop back around again, to start the story all over again.

Galilee is where Jesus first preaches the good news.

Galilee is where Jesus first heals.

Galilee is where Jesus calls his first disciples.

Galilee is where the authorities first begin to plot against Jesus.

Galilee is where the story first begins, and where it will begin again.

Jesus Christ lives, he's returned to Galilee, to the beginning, to re-commence the whole discipleship drama all over again. Tell the disciples to meet him there.

How do the three women respond?

They flee from the tomb, trembling and astonished. They don't say anything to anyone, because they're afraid.

Trembling and astonished. That's understandable. The empty tomb is astonishing. Who wouldn't be unhinged upon entering an empty tomb where a dead body has recently been raised to life?

But afraid—of what are they afraid? What do they really fear?

Perhaps what they really fear is not a resurrected body so much as the idea of returning to Galilee and resuming the whole discipleship drama with Jesus all over again.

Knowing everything they know about the first go-round—Jesus rubbing shoulders with outcasts, Jesus touching the unclean, Jesus crossing the Sea of Galilee in dangerous

storms, Jesus creating controversy, Jesus provoking the authorities to crucify him—knowing everything they know about the first go-round, do they really want to return to Galilee and do it all over again? Do they think it'll be any different this time?

No! In fact, it'll probably be even more dangerous. They may end up on the cross this time.

They thought the crucifixion of Jesus signaled the completion of this whole discipleship journey. They thought following Jesus came to a decisive end when his body, dead as a doornail, was removed from the cross and placed in a tomb behind a big stone. They thought all they had to do now is mourn the loss of Jesus, remember him as their former teacher, and venerate him as a martyr. Which was relatively safe, as long as they kept their heads low and remembered him quietly amongst themselves.

But Jesus' death doesn't signal the end of their discipleship. It signals a whole new beginning of discipleship. Because he's back. And he's telling the disciples to reconvene where it started last time. So they can do it again.

But do they really want to do it again?

Isn't this a questions we ask ourselves? Knowing all I know about what *following* Jesus as his disciple entails, do I really want to follow him? Isn't it time-consuming, demanding, and risky? Couldn't it be *me* on the cross this time around?

Biblical scholar Norman Peterson observes that with his abrupt ending, Mark "leaves unfinished business for the reader to complete."

Ched Myers argues that Mark poses a direct challenge to us, the reader: will we flee in fear, or will we return to Galilee?

Return to Galilee. It's more than the risen Christ's instruction to his original disciples—return to a specific geographical location. It's a metaphor.

Return to Galilee. It means choosing to continue following Jesus Christ, given all we already know about him.

Return to Galilee. It means choosing to rub shoulders with outcasts once again. Choosing to touch the unclean once again. Choosing to create controversy once again. Choosing to challenge and provoke unjust and unrighteous power once again.

Return to Galilee. It means we don't simply mourn Jesus, remember Jesus, and venerate Jesus. We continue to follow him, all over again, because his call is perennial. Because he's not dead, gone, and silent. Because he's always up ahead of us, calling out, "what are you waiting for, let's go! We've got work to do. All of us, you and me, we've got 'unfinished business' to complete."

Unfinished business. That's a great description of Jesus Christ's work, the disciple's work, and the church's work. Unfinished business.

Until the kingdom of God is fulfilled, we have unfinished business.

Until every single person is well-nourished, well cared for, and has a safe home in which to live, we have unfinished business.

Until every oppressed person is liberated, and every exploited person knows justice, we have unfinished business.

Until all people respect one another, care for one another, and live with one another in peace, we have unfinished business.

Unfinished business. It seems so overwhelming. Doesn't it?

Look at the state of the world today, there's so much unfinished business. The task of completing it seems impossible. Yet Christ calls us to do *our* part. And so we do

return to Galilee. Which is to say, we get to work right here, on the corner of 23rd and San Antonio St., in Austin, Texas. As Christ's disciples, we strive to be faithful followers by doing our part to complete the unfinished business.

We ourselves cannot complete the unfinished business. And it sure looks like it will not be completed in our lifetime. Nevertheless, we do *our* part. And we do it as best we can. Because we know that Christ's work of transforming the world, though it depends on us, transcends us. Because we know that Christ is not bound by death—his death or our death. He lives, and he transcends our brief lifetime here. His work of transforming the world precedes our lifetime, and it extends beyond our lifetime. Yet his work depends on what we do during our lifetime. So we return to Galilee again, and again, and again. Plugging away at completing the unfinished business.

I want to finish up by reflecting for a moment on some work we're doing now to help complete the unfinished business. We've recently begun a new ministry: responding to the disturbing rise of Islamophobia in our nation. I'd like to say a few words about Islamophobia, and our church's response to it.

Islamophobia is a big topic, but I think we can break it down to three component and inter-related parts. There are anti-Muslim attitudes expressed through words and deeds at the level of people's everyday lives. There's the anti-Muslim rhetoric we routinely hear from some politicians. And there's what some analysts call the "Islamophobia industry," which consists of well-funded organizations and individuals that manufacture anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies, and disseminate them through the media, law enforcement, state legislatures, and the politicians they advise.

Islamophobia has ebbed and flowed, risen and fallen, since the attack on the World Trade Center in 2001. In the past two years, there's been a noticeable ratcheting up of Islamophobia in the United States, and it has a discernable impact on the daily lives of Muslims living in our nation.

At the level of everyday life, more Muslim students at both the grade school and college level are being harassed, bullied, and intimidated. According to the Council on American Islamic Relations, 55% of Muslim students in California have been bullied.

There's an increase in the number of Muslim women taking self-defense courses, because of the uptick in harassment, intimidation, and threats of violence against them.

There's a growing incidence of people committing hate crimes against Muslims. People are beating Muslims in parking lots, throwing stones through the windows of their homes, threatening to burn down mosques, shooting at mosques, protesting with weapons outside of mosques, assaulting Muslim taxi drivers, sending death threats to Muslim religious and community leaders, and killing Muslims for being Muslim.

This isn't to say the general public is now overwhelmingly anti-Muslim. That's not the case. But there's a growing segment of our nation's population that fears Muslims, or hates Muslims, and believes it's acceptable, or necessary, or patriotic to single out Muslims for suspicion, surveillance, intimidation, and violent punishment.

This brings us to the rhetoric of our politicians. Islamophobic rhetoric and posturing has become a staple in our nation's political discourse, especially within the Republican Party, at the local, state, and national levels. It's difficult to tell sometimes whether a politician sincerely shares this fear and hatred of Muslims, or whether a politician is more cynically throwing fuel on the fire with anti-Muslim rhetoric, and then exploiting voters' enflamed fears and hatreds to advance their careers. I think it's often a

combination of both.

At any rate, the Islamophobic rhetoric that we hear from Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and others is poisoning our culture with fear and hatred by continuously painting a highly distorted picture of what Islam is and who Muslims are. And as a consequence, real-life Muslims are suffering the consequences.

As for the third component, the “Islamophobia industry,” the Center for American Progress published two reports, in 2011 and 2015, investigating the organizations, scholars, pundits, and activists that comprise a tightly-knit network that spreads misinformation and hateful propaganda about American Muslims and Islam. A rather small group of charitable foundations fund these organizations and individuals with millions of dollars. These organizations and individuals work closely with conservative media outlets, right-wing Christian organizations, grass-roots political groups, law enforcement, and politicians to disseminate anti-Muslim rhetoric, and to craft anti-Muslim policies and legislation. Their basic message is that Islam is inherently incompatible with America, that Muslims are actively seeking to undermine our nation, and Muslims thereby pose an existential threat to our nation. In short, Muslims are our enemy, and need to be treated as such.

Ted Cruz is very closely connected to this network. One of the organizations that forms the backbone of the “Islamophobia industry” is the Center for Security Policy. Cruz has appointed three of its members as his foreign policy advisors, including the head of the Center, Frank Gaffney.

Gaffney has made a number of outlandish and inflammatory statements about American Muslims, and he’s published highly distorted “research” that more responsible groups have discredited. The Southern Poverty Law Center has designated Gaffney’s Center a hate group.

Cruz has also appointed retired Lt. General William Boykin as one of his foreign policy advisors. Boykin has said that Islam should not be protected by the First Amendment, and mosques should not be permitted in the United States.

From anti-Muslim words and deeds in schools, parking lots, taxis, and Kerbey Lane right up the street, to the anti-Muslim political rhetoric that fills the airwaves and the legislative agendas of state houses across the country, to well-funded “think tanks” that produce academic sounding anti-Muslim ideology, policy proposals, and model legislation, these three inter-related components of Islamophobia feed off one another, and reinforce one another, to create a climate of fear and hatred.

It is to this that our church is responding, because Islamophobia is harmful to our Muslim neighbors, and it’s damaging to our community, nation, and world. Because Islamophobia is based on ignorance and misinformation at best, and intentional lies at worst. Because the unfinished business to which we’re called as Christ’s disciples is to seek greater understanding and deeper respect between people, not to drive wedges between them by spreading misinformation and lies that enflame even more fear and hatred.

Next Saturday, at 5:30 pm, we’ll be joined here by our Muslim friends and neighbors from the Nueces Street mosque, and by other Christians from neighboring churches, as we hang our banner that says, “We Stand With Our Muslim Neighbors.” And then we’ll walk together to the Nueces St. mosque to enjoy the hospitality of an open house and dinner. This will launch the beginning of our response to Islamophobia,

and we'll build on it from there.

I sincerely believe that when Christ calls on us, our church, to return to Galilee, this is the ministry to which he's calling us now. This is the unfinished business of transforming the world to which he's calling us to get to work.

So sisters and brothers, Christ is risen. Let's get to work!