

WBC Easter Sunday 2006
16 April

The Door of Hope

A sermon by Geoff Wraight

(adapted from an article by Jim Wallis in *Sojourners Magazine* April 1988)

Mark 16:1-8

It is hard to imagine what these three women must have felt as they are confronted with the reality and mystery of the resurrected Christ. This incredible news is announced first not to the male disciples of Jesus but to these three faithful women.

In so many of the gospel stories that are familiar to us, women were behind the scenes—always there, always present, always faithful—but always behind the scenes and often not mentioned by the men who were the principal actors.

On that first Easter morning, these three women were there on the scene at great risk to themselves. They were at the grave of a convicted political criminal who had just been crucified. Guards were posted at the tomb who could easily report the identities of any followers or supporters of this one whom they had killed and whose movement they now hoped to crush.

The risk of the women is made even more dramatic by the realization that the rest of the disciples were all laying low. The men were hiding, paralysed by grief and fear.

In history it has often been the women who – when things were at their worst, when the violence of military-ruled countries was most grotesque, when the suffering was so horrible—came out time and time again and stood alone before the military and before the world, testifying for their loved ones, and for the truth.

In recent decades in Central America, and Argentina, as well as Northern Ireland. When violence and disappearances are at their worst, when everyone else flees or is in hiding, very often it is the women who stand up, offering themselves, becoming completely vulnerable as they open themselves to the risk of death. The courage and defiance is their strength and their power.

So here in the resurrection event we have the pivotal moment in all history. The male disciples have fled and are hiding, and only the women are left. And though they come with some amount of fear, the story tells us, they come out of love and faith. They were faithful to Jesus throughout his life, and in his death (they are standing in sight of the crucifixion), and now even after his death. Out of their love for him, they are going to minister to him even at the tomb.

For their loving perseverance and courage, these women are rewarded with the honour of being entrusted with the most important and best news in the history of the world. These

women, and many women who have come after them, can rightly be called history's **midwives of hope**.

And this resurrection morning of Easter, they become for us the primary example in the story of what we too are called to be—midwives of hope.

What does it mean to be a midwife of hope? The word hope is so often used in ways that are either too mystical or not serious, —or so religious that the meaning escapes us and has no real bearing on the reality in which we have to live.

Hope becomes a feeling, or a mood, or an inspired moment that is lived somehow above the painful and the dull agonies of history. We're down here living in it all, and someone says, "Well, you have to have hope." And immediately we think, "I'm supposed to feel something I'm not feeling—to get into a mood that isn't natural to me. I need to rise above this daily reality somehow and be hopeful."

But the more I reflect on this word "hope," the more I am convinced that it is critical that we see hope in a different, and a more biblical, way.

You see, hope is not simply a feeling, or a mood, or a rhetorical flourish. Hope is the very dynamic of history. Hope is the engine of change. Hope is the energy of transformation. Hope is the door from one reality to another.

Things that seem possible, reasonable, understandable, even logical in hindsight—things that we can deal with, things that don't seem extraordinary to us now —often seemed quite impossible, unreasonable, nonsensical, and illogical when we were looking ahead to them. The changes, the possibilities, the opportunities, the surprises that no one or very few would even have imagined, just become history after they've occurred. What looked before as though it could never happen is now easy to understand.

In hindsight we can see how everything fell into place, and that it was quite natural, quite reasonable that it would happen. It was a matter of time. It was inevitable, at least it seems that way in hindsight. Inevitable in hindsight and impossible in foresight.

Between impossibility and possibility, there is a door—the door of hope. And the possibility of a transformation of history lies through that door.

The news from the women at the tomb was the greatest hope that the world has ever known. And yet we read in another account that when the disciples were told of what the women experienced they called it, "Nonsense."

On one side of the door, it is nonsense. On the other side of the door, it is the best news the world has ever heard. And the door in between is hope.

Hope unbelieved is always considered nonsense. But hope believed is history in the process of being changed.

The 'nonsense' of the resurrection became the hope that shook the Roman Empire and established the Christian movement. The nonsense of slave songs in Egypt and Mississippi

became the hope that let the oppressed go free. The nonsense of a bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, in the south of the USA became the hope that transformed a nation.

The nonsense of women's meetings became the hope that brought suffrage and a mighty movement that demanded equality with men. The nonsense of the uneducated, the unsophisticated, the rabble, the ordinary christians became the hope that created industrial unions, farmers cooperatives, free education, and a myriad of popular organizations that challenge and sometimes defeat monopolies of wealth and power.

The nonsense of oppressed people were the prayers that became the hope that brought down apartheid in South Africa and Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines. And the nonsense talk of young people often becomes the hope that challenges and even halts the devastation of war. I will never forget the slogan that a teenager was holding not far from where we were we marched down Swanston Street on 14 Feb 2003 with over 100,000 others in one of the biggest peace marches ever seen in the city of Melbourne, it simply read "War is so last century!"

Though we are yet to see an end to senseless wars, In each case the gains, the victories, the transformations seemed impossible at first, and only become possible by stepping through the door of hope. And for us, for Christians, the resurrection of Jesus unlocks the door of hope and makes every kind of change possible.

That's why Christians and religious people have often been the first ones to walk through the door of hope. Because to walk through that door of hope, first you have to see it. And then you have to believe that there is something on the other side of the door.

The problem is, not everyone can see the door. And most people can't imagine anything on the other side. It is also true that those who walk through the door must also be prepared to suffer and even to die, because the door of hope always leads from one reality to another.

History tells us again and again that we can't move from one reality to another without cost. It's never easy. It's not without pain or suffering. And it's always hardest for the first few who walk through the door.

After the first few go through the door of hope, then others can follow more easily. And that is how historical transformation takes place. After a while, it becomes easier to walk through, until finally it's history, and everyone forgets how hard it was. We also often forget the people for whom it was hardest, the people who first walked through the door.

In the ending of Mark's Gospel the struggle it was for those first women to walk through the door of hope is very stark and confronting (as is most of Mark).

"The women bolted out of the tomb and fled as fast as they could, shaking with fear and their heads spinning. They were so frightened that they didn't breathe a word of it to anyone." But of course we know that they did eventually and probably tentatively..

This is also how personal transformation takes place. We can't imagine ourselves different than we are today or healed of that which binds and afflicts us. We can't imagine ourselves

forgiven or free from fear. We can't imagine our own salvation. But when we walk through that door of hope, and we look back at where we have been and where we are now, we see evidence of the grace of God.

THE Resurrection is a door of hope, and Jesus showed us that the resurrection comes by way of a cross. Suffering and hope are always joined in human history. The cost of moving from one reality to another—in our personal lives and in history—is always great. But it is the only way to walk through the door of hope.

History depends on those who are willing to walk through that door, those who are willing to live and to act and even to die in hope for the sake of the future they know by faith is there. Those such as the women at the tomb who, because they were there, because they were willing to walk through that door, were given the news of the resurrection.

This is the amazing thing that often doesn't sink in because we have heard it so many times before... They were given the news of the resurrection because they opened the door for all the rest of us!

On this Easter morning we stand on the knowledge of the resurrection. We stand on the faith of those who have been given the news of the resurrection before us, as they have walked through the doors of hope time and time again.

Because of that faith, because of their legacy, we can stand here and say that it is not nonsense to believe that we can be healed of all of our hurts and fears and pain.

It is not nonsense to believe that disintegrated relationships and families can be restored and reconciled.

It was not nonsense to believe that peace would come to Central America, and that justice and freedom would come to South Africa.

It was not nonsense to believe that one Vincent Lingiari's long and persistent campaign to win the right for his Gurindji people to live on their traditional land would result in Gough Whitlam's words at the 1975 ceremony "Vincent Lingiari, I solemnly hand to you these deeds as proof, in Australian law, that these lands belong to the Gurindji people and I put into your hands part of the earth itself as a sign that this land will be the possession of you and your children forever."

It is not nonsense to believe that third world health and life expectancy of our indigenous people will become a thing of the past. It is not nonsense to believe that the drugs and alcohol and depression that destroy many of the youth of this city will not do so forever.

It is not nonsense to believe that the people of Dafur in Sudan, that the Karen villagers in the south western hills of Burma or the Chin people living in fear up the road from the latest military base, will one day live in peace and be able to walk free of fear and violence.

It is not nonsense to believe that nuclear weapons are not necessary, and that war is not inevitable. It is not nonsense to believe that a child's race and class and sex will not always

determine their future share of happiness and well-being. It is not nonsense to believe those who have been divided from each other can, and will, one day sit down together at the welcome table of God's love and God's grace.

These are not nonsense thoughts. With the Easter eyes of resurrection faith, we can see the door through which we too can walk, through which we are invited. Walking through that door, we also will be given the news of the resurrection.

And with this hope, we can know the power of forgiveness, and our lives made whole. We can look into the faces of our children and believe there is a future for them.

Jim Wallis, in his recent book, "God's Politics – why the Right is wrong and the Left just don't get it", speaks of a new movement emerging both within and without the mainline church, mainly among younger people who are hungry for a spirituality of hope and are willing to give their hearts and minds to work for justice and peace.

He argues that the formation of faith in these young people - a faith that has spiritual integrity and expressed in compassion and justice – is the most important issue of the church faces today.

He says the time is ripe for a new movement crash through the cynicism and fear that are driving our politics today.

“Neither religious nor secular fundamentalism can save us, but a new spiritual revival that ignites deep social conscience could transform our society. Movements do change history, and the strongest ones are those with a spiritual foundation. Most important of all is the spiritual power of hope, which may be the only thing that can finally overcome our too characteristic cynicism. Hope versus cynicism is the key moral and political choice of our time.” (God's Politics, p. 7)

With this resurrection hope we can envision an Australia governed by a hopeful vision rather than a fear of security. An Australia that can wholly and publically own both the pride and the shame of our nation's beginnings. An Australia that puts the values of the common good before those of individual wealth and prosperity. An Australia that becomes a true friend of its allies and is able to say openly that we think you are wrong in taking this path to war..

An Australia that welcomes all asylum seekers and listens with compassion and fairness to their stories not matter how they got here.

With this hope we can plan and sow and build and create visions and dreams.

And with this hope we can find the faith and the courage to bear the cost of such possibilities.

"Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is *not here; he has risen!*" Amen.

