

“What’s Required for Easter?”

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday

April 4, 2021

Westminster, Greenville

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On this Easter Sunday, I’ve got an assignment for you.  
I know, I know.  
Not what you were hoping to hear right out of the gates.

But the assignment is not hard.  
In fact, the first part of your assignment is very easy.

I want you to think of someone in your life who has given you  
MORE than enough.

Can you do that?

More than enough grace, more than enough wisdom, more than  
enough hope, more than enough love...put that person in your mind’s  
eye right now.

What made me think of this assignment was an interview I heard  
recently with the jazz great, Wynton Marsalis. Wynton Marsalis was  
asked about his father, Ellis Marsalis, who died one year ago this month.

Ellis Marsalis was a jazz pianist, an excellent musician, and  
Wynton grew up watching and listening to his dad play in a variety of  
clubs in New Orleans. And Wynton Marsalis recalls that when he was a  
young boy, he never really liked jazz. But he has a vivid memory of  
how that changed, a kind of turning point for him.

It was the time that his father was playing at a club, late at night.  
His father’s gig was scheduled close the club that night.

And it got to be late, 2am—and at that point, no one was left.

Well, actually, one other person was there—a man who had had too much to drink and wasn't paying any attention to the music that Ellis Marsalis was playing on the piano.

So young Wynton surveyed the scene and walked up to his dad.

“I went to my father,” Marsalis recalls, “and I said, ‘Man, let’s go.’”

And Ellis Marsalis looked at his son, and he said to Wynton:  
“This gig ends at 2:30.”

To which his son replied, “2:30? Let’s get out of here and close up.”

To which his father replied:

““Sit your behind down and listen to some music for a change!””

Reflecting on this moment, Wynton Marsalis remembers:

“For all those years being in clubs since I was 2 years old, THAT was the first time I really listened to [my father] playing. I looked around that club and I thought, ‘What makes a person do what this man is doing? Playing for no people, at 2 in the morning?’”

“That shaped my life.”<sup>1</sup>

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I love that story.

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<sup>1</sup> As heard on the podcast, “Why Am I Telling You This? with Bill Clinton,” February 4, 2021.

Because on the one hand, 11-year-old Wynton Marsalis had a really GOOD point.

Dad, don't waste your time playing for an empty room.  
What we've got going on here is **not enough**...

I get that.  
I get that way of thinking—it's not just an 11-year-old's way of seeing the world.

We've all felt that feeling, especially this past year.  
The *It's not enough* feeling...

Not enough predictability. Not enough normal routine.  
Not enough connection. Not enough calm.

For some, it's been even more serious.  
Not enough food. Not enough justice. Not enough security.  
It's been year filled with "not enough"...

But on the other hand, 11-year-old Wynton Marsalis couldn't see what his father could see.

There WAS someone there to hear his dad play that evening.  
It was Wynton Marsalis.  
And Wynton Marsalis' life was forever changed by the music his father played that night.

He didn't think it was enough.  
All these years later, it was MORE than enough...

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I raise the question of “not enough” and “more than enough” on this Easter Sunday because the Easter story in Mark’s Gospel—at first blush—doesn’t seem to be enough.

“So they [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

What kind of an Easter message is that??!

Now, I know—there are more verses after this.

But most scholars believe that verse 8, where we stopped today, is also where the ORIGINAL Gospel of Mark came to an end.

Mark stopped his Gospel with that sentence:

“...they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Huh?!

NO APPEARANCES by the risen Jesus?

No running to tell the disciples about the empty tomb?

Just fear. Silence.

End of Gospel.

How is that...enough?

It may not feel like the right way to end a Gospel, but it certainly feels like an honest description of how any one of us could have responded to the news at the empty tomb long ago.

In our day and age, it’s become far too easy for us to *domesticate* Easter—turn it into a holiday that’s light, and breezy, and something in which we know exactly what happens next.

But for those first women at the tomb,  
for the first disciples,

Easter was no breezy event.

It was a BAFFLING event!

In the splendid novel *Peace Like a River*, the narrator Reuben tells the story of his birth. How he wasn't breathing when he was born, and after 12 minutes, the doctor gave him up for dead.

But then Reuben's father walked into the room.

And Reuben's father commanded his son to start breathing in the name of the living God. To the doctor's astonishment, Reuben did just that. It was nothing short of a miracle.

Says Reuben:

"Let me say something about that word: miracle.

"For too long, it's been used to characterize...events that, though pleasant, are entirely normal. Peeping chicks at Easter time, spring generally, a clear sunrise after an overcast week—a miracle, people say, as if they've been educated from greeting cards.

"I'm sorry, but...real miracles bother people...  
they rebut every rule all we good citizens take comfort in.

"Lazarus obeying orders and climbing up out of the grave—now there's a miracle, and you can bet it upset a lot of folks who were standing around at the time...

***"People fear miracles,"*** Reuben concludes,  
***"because they fear being changed—***  
though ignoring them will change you also."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Leif Enger, *Peace Like a River*, New York: Grove Press, 2001.

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As Esau McCaulley recently wrote:

“The terrifying prospect of Easter is that God called these women to return to the very same world that crucified Jesus...

[and to return] with a very dangerous gift:  
 hope in the power of God,  
 the unending reservoir of forgiveness  
 and an abundance of love.

It would make them seem like fools.  
 Who could believe such a thing?”<sup>3</sup>

“...and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

I get the way those women responded.

Because what Easter tells us,  
 all evidence to the contrary,  
 is that *God’s love will always be MORE than enough.*

And that can be hard to trust.

No matter what comes our way, God’s love will be enough?

- For the teenager who is struggling right now, for the parents who are worried sick about their child—will God’s love be more than enough?
- For churches worried about whether members will return after the pandemic, for church members who have felt

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<sup>3</sup> Esau McCaulley, “The Unsettling Power of Easter,” *The New York Times*, April 2, 2021.

forgotten by their church in the midst of the pandemic—will God’s love be more than enough?

- For the family who has lost someone too soon this past year—is the love of God going to be more than enough?

It’s easy for any of us, when confronted with life’s hardships, to slip into ways of thinking and living and loving that DO NOT trust the love of God to be enough.

For example, I once heard about a church that was the pride of the town—and the highlight of every year was Easter Sunday, when the sanctuary was decorated with 500 lilies.

Sometimes it was a bank of lilies,  
sometimes they were in the shape of a cross.

People gave \$10 for each lily, and the insert to the bulletin on Easter listed the names of those who gave lilies in memory or honor of someone else.

Five hundred lilies. Ten dollars each. They were just beautiful.

In the 19th year of that tradition, THE WHOLE THING came apart.

One of the members of the congregation approached the chair of the Worship Committee after Easter, and said:

“I’m going to the hospital to visit a friend.  
Can I take one of the lilies to the room?”

And without really getting an answer to her question,  
she went up to the cross of lilies,

started to grab one, stared at it for a few moments...  
and then she turned around.

And with a look of SHOCK and HORROR on her face, she  
shouted so that her voice rang through the sanctuary:

***“THEY’RE PLASTIC!!”***

Well, word got out real quick.

There was much concern, and not JUST at the fact that the lilies  
were fake. More than one person was heard to comment, “Wait a  
minute. We’ve been giving ten dollars for each lily year after year after  
year—and if those are the same lilies used *YEAR after YEAR after  
YEAR...*

As you can imagine, committees were formed, both official and  
unofficial.

Someone came up with the figure:

19 years, 500 lilies, \$10 apiece...that’s \$95,000!

Where did all that money go??!!

So the senior minister held a town hall type of congregational  
meeting, in which he admitted that they were indeed the same lilies,  
used year after year after year...

His defense was along two lines:

The PRACTICAL defense, in response to the monetary concerns,  
was that those funds had gone to good use.



“We’ve been able to help people in need of food and shelter, to meet emergencies that weren’t budgeted for in our church...the money has gone to good use.”

His other line of defense was THEOLOGICAL.

“After all, the plastic lilies are more appropriate for Easter, because plastic lilies are ALWAYS BLOOMING. Plastic lilies...NEVER DIE!”<sup>4</sup>

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Lilies that never die?  
You can see the problem there, right?

That’s not Easter.  
In order to have Easter, there must a death.  
It’s the first requirement for Easter.  
Without a death, there is no resurrection.  
Without an old life, there is no new life.

Easter is not about pretending death is no big deal.

Easter is about God’s love conquering death, in  
OVERWHELMING fashion, telling us that when we are bereft of what  
we need most in this world,  
that whatever fear or grief we face today,  
the forces of death and darkness and evil and sin  
will NEVER get the final word...

This is, I think, why Mark ends his Gospel the way he does.

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for sharing this story years ago. It originally was told by Dr. Fred Craddock.

The women at the tomb leave in fear and silence...so how did the good news of Easter spread to you?

The only thing I can conclude is that the love and power of God **OVERCAME** their fear, and **UNLOCKED** their silence, and they became witnesses to what they had been told.

Far from being a “not enough” ending, Mark gave us a brilliant ending, because the end of Mark’s Gospel is a witness to two things:

- a) How any of us might respond with wavering and fearful faith when the powers of death and darkness strike...
- b) How God’s love and power and grace can overcome that wavering faith, can overcome **ANYTHING**.

So that even when **WE** are afraid,  
 even when we are confused,  
 even when we feel at our wits end...  
 God’s love is still at work in ways  
 we cannot always see clearly at the time.

Years ago, David Watson was the dynamic pastor in York, England. Large crowds filled the sanctuary week after week to hear David Watson. But in the prime of his life, Watson was diagnosed with cancer.

The people of his congregation prayed, he fought it.  
 In the end, the cancer took Watson’s life at a far too early age.

The Sunday following his death, a cherished friend was asked to lead worship. When this friend stood to speak, emotion overcame him as he thought of the absence of David, his recently deceased friend.

He broke down and wept, and the grief-stricken congregation did the same. Then someone in the pews thought about a phrase that David often used.

Sometimes when he was leading worship,  
 even in the middle of a message,  
 David Watson would shout, “Our Lord reigns!”

And so this member of Watson’s church, on the Sunday after David’s death, this member spoke—it was nothing planned ahead of time—he spoke quietly, and yet loud enough for others around to hear:

“Our Lord reigns.”

Then someone else picked it up.  
 Then another joined them.

Soon the packed sanctuary was filled with hundreds of voices, chanting together on their feet, “Our Lord reigns!” “Our Lord reigns!”

For minutes, this chant rocked the cavernous worship hall....<sup>5</sup>  
 It was a surprise, nothing that was a planned part of the service.

But from one voice—to hundreds of voices—the proclamation spread.

“Our Lord reigns!”

It was exactly what everyone in that room needed to hear.  
 It was, at that moment, more than enough.

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<sup>5</sup> I first heard this story in a funeral sermon by the Rev. Dr. Blair Monie at Preston Hollow Presbyterian Church, May, 2014. The story appears in *A Minister’s Treasury of Funeral & Memorial Messages*, by Jim Henry, Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003.

Which brings me back to our assignment.

Do you recall the person I asked you to consider at the beginning of this sermon?

The person in your life who gave you MORE THAN enough?  
Easter tells us that it wasn't just that person at work in your life.  
It was the risen Christ.  
Shaping you. Molding you. Loving you.

It was the risen Christ who, through the gift of that person, gave you more than enough, and helped get you to where you are today.

So here's the second part of your assignment this Easter.

Go give someone else more than enough.

When it comes to forgiveness and grace—  
go give the person who wounded you more than enough.

When it comes to hospitality and generosity—  
go give a neighbor, a stranger, more than enough.

When it comes to sharing the light and love of God in this world—  
go out and give every child of God more than enough...

I don't know what will happen when you do that.  
I do know the risen Christ will be at work in you.  
And you will be a witness.  
A witness to the glorious words that we heard this morning:

Christ is risen!  
Alleluia!

Amen.