FIRST
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Mark 16:1-8
Philippians 2:1-11
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This Mind Among You

In the end, there were only three of them left.

It's always, always the strategy of the powers to splinter people – not just to shatter their bones and splay their limbs, as the Empire's governor was in the habit of doing to individuals to make his point, but to pull people apart from each other, split them up and keep the seed alone so that it can't bear its fruit[1]. It always works best for the powers when we're divided – and no wedge works better than fear, although infusing the fear with anger can sometimes heighten the impact or hasten the effect.

In this case it came so close to working.

The fear had been rising in the streets all week. Something was going to happen, and you couldn't really know what it would be except that there was a lot of power sharpening its edges, on the one-hand, and on the other something else that was strong in its own way, but so differently: a kind of strength that comes when somehow you know beyond doubt that you're on the solid ground, when you know that there's nothing they can do with their muscles or their sharp edges to shake your certainty that there is something so much more true than all that realpolitik, something more gentle and more persuasive, something that makes even death look puny. Something was going to happen when the power of sharpened edges met the inner strength of truth, and your pulse couldn't help quickening as you felt it in the air of the city.

That night after they'd shared the final meal together, remembered the ancient story of the escape to freedom and felt the integrity thick in the room, felt the confluence of love and fear, those two most elemental things, coalescing at the lump in their throats – that night, after they'd all eaten together (the men whom history named and the women whom history didn't name), and after he'd stopped their hearts by kneeling before each of them, taken their weary feet one by one in his gentle hands and washed them[2] – that night, when they retreated into whatever small safety was left among the shadows of the garden, even he seemed to be afraid. When he asked them to stay with him, to pray with him – then it must have begun to seem certain that the fear would win, that the splintering would be complete. Twice, came his voice from the shadows, pleading with them to stay awake with him[3] – as though he knew already how the power was going to do its work.

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[1] John 12:24.
[2] John 13:1ff.
[3] Mark 14:32ff.

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But in the end the splitting, splintering, shattering happened: it reduced them all to just a handful of terribly vulnerable solitudes. By the time the power caught up with the strongest one, that burly fisherman with his brash, impetuous loyalty, and shamed even him by the light of the fire in the courtyard until he was spooked by just the sound of a rooster in the distance[4] – by then, it seemed like there was nothing to do except save yourself, alone. And so the last of them scattered at the sound of the pounding of the hammer, the moans, the last gasps. And then the heavy quiet of the whole long Sabbath day settled on each of them, wherever they were, alone, hour by desolate hour until, by the time it was over, there were just three of them left, and it had almost worked.

Almost.

Very early in the morning after that long Sabbath day was finally over, the three of them took inventory of what they still had: their grief, first of all, each her own grief and all their grief together which, when they pooled it, felt like an ocean – and what remained of the strength from that last meal, which turned out to be a lot and had now coalesced into the steadfast, loving duty to tend to the ruined limbs of the one who had knelt to tend so tenderly to theirs – and their few supplies, the spices and ointments for their burial custom. These things they had among them, these things they held together, and it was enough for them to decide to brave the hushed dawn-grey streets to make their way to the place where they knew what to expect. Just three of them – all that was left.

Well, you know what they heard when they got there: how it stopped their hearts again. And you know what happened, how it scared them not quite to death (though that's what they thought at first), but in the end scared them to life – because even though the official record says that they told no one, clearly they told *some*one or we wouldn't be here. Even if we don't know how it happened, we know *that* it happened: that they stayed together – that the power failed in its work, that the strength of the truth on which they stood held them high enough to keep at least their hearts above the rising tide of fear. The sharp edge of the power struck the shepherd, and the sheep scattered, as scripture had predicted[5] – all but three, who pooled what they had and went out in the strength of it and held on to each other, even in their fear.

Scripture says that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."[6] We tend to think of faith as a virtuous quality of personal character – an attribute that an individual can cultivate, like other kinds of strength – a way of looking at the world that depends on the particular pair of eyes that are doing the looking, or the experience of the particular life that happens to enable someone to entertain the possibility that there might be more going on than meets the eye. We think of faith as a noun that exists always in relation to a singular owner: a thing that a person has, or doesn't have, or wishes she had, or that he has sometimes, or had once and hopes to have again…

But what if faith were less proprietary than that – and more, sort of, plural – like air, or rain? What if faith were a thing that, if it can be had, is had by an "us," not an "I"? What if "faith" were a way of naming how *people* are when they stay together: the way they live, the choices they make, the things they undertake? What if faith is something that you pool, something that coalesces? What if the best way to hold it is to hold it together? It's such a slippery thing to hold when it's just you doing the holding; but when you hold it together, then it's always in the room somewhere, always more of it than you probably know how to imagine by yourself – always greater than the sum of its scattered parts.

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[4] Mark 14:66ff.
[5] Zechariah 13:7; cf. Matthew 26:31.
[6] Hebrews 11:1.

Oh, maybe at first, on that first day of the week after that long, silent Sabbath, faith seemed like something that you either had or you didn't – like when you looked inside the tomb and could see with your own eyes that it was empty, and *either* you knew that what you were seeing was the victory of the sharp edges of power, *or* you knew that what you were seeing was the victory of the truth over all other kinds of power. You looked, and either you had it, or you didn't.

But I think, over time, faith starts to become a way of seeing with more eyes than just your own. Over time it starts to become more like a name for precisely the opposite of what the power had been trying to do in splintering them, pulling them apart. Over time faith began to seem like a way of being together – beginning with the three of them on their mournful errand to the place of death, and continuing with the three of them in their electrified running away from the place of death, running down into history and not stopping until they arrived here, at this address on this very day, breathing hard, with such a story to tell us, such a story for us to start holding together.

"If then there is any encouragement in Christ," wrote Paul the apostle, just a decade or two later, breathless himself probably, as it always must have seemed he was, running around the Mediterranean basin and down through history as he did – "if there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy," he wrote to the ones who lived together in Philippi, to help them take inventory of what they had and to pool it and try to make something that could stand up to the terrible powers that were still, even a decade or two later, trying to splinter them all and pull it all apart – "if there is any encouragement in Christ," he wrote… And of course you knew immediately, knowing him, that it wasn't in question at all: there *was* (and is) *every* encouragement in Christ, *every* consolation in love, *every* sharing in the Spirit, all kinds of compassion and sympathy… Since we're taking inventory of what we've got, pooling what we've got, and since we've got all those things, Paul wrote, "make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Don't let them pull you apart, don't implode into yourself, your own doubts and fears and caveats. *Have this mind among you,* wrote Paul to the Philippians, probably from prison himself, and with the sharp edges of the power still flashing around them – still saying that, if they pooled what they had, they'd find that they had so much that, even in prison and maybe awaiting his own execution, *it would complete his joy.*

> Have this mind among you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

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Back in the tomb that turned out to be empty, when it was still just the three of them, refusing to be pulled apart, pooling what they had – back at the place where they expected to find a solitary, splintered body alone by itself, they found instead a stranger who said, *Go and find something else to do with your grief – because I'm telling you that he's alive, and you're not going to find him here; you're going to find him among you, in the midst of you, when you go back to the places where you first knew him. You hold him, now, together. He holds you together. Go and tell other people what you've heard – you'll be surprised how doing that will make it clear to you how much you have, how much you contain. He's already a good bit ahead of you. Go and find him.*[7]

It must have been terrifying for them. There surely are terrifying things in this world, and one of them is that things you thought were finished and done aren't finished after all, and that they have implications for how you spend the rest of whatever time you've got. The three of them went running – and ended up here. So we'll huddle with them and see what we've got among us – because we refuse to let the power pull us apart. We are *not* letting go of compassion and sympathy, *not* going to be frightened away from the consolation of love, *not* going to stop sharing in the Spirit. We're going to pool those things, and they're going to be what we've got to build faith around.

And if it turns out that there are times when faith is a hard thing for you to hold – well, then, I'll hold it for you until you can pick it up again, because that's how it works. And if there are times when faith deserts me, when I feel bereft and left alone, well, then, maybe you'll come and hold on to me, and we'll see what we've got between us, because that's how it works. The miracle of Easter, maybe, is not so much that someone who we thought was dead turns out not to be as dead as we thought, or not dead in the way we thought. The miracle of Easter, I think, is that he must be here because, look! – he is holding us together, we are holding each other, together, we are holding him together, and there is more faith here among us than any of us can account for by ourselves.

This mind among you, Paul calls it. We think of a mind as something each of us has, alone. But what if for us it's also something we inhabit together? What if what the stranger is urging us to do is not to stand alone in whatever we've got that might pass for the
"mind" of faith – but to pool it and run with it and know that it will be enough?

My dear friends of this church, you've been through so much, and you aspire to so much. Is there any doubt that that you *have* this mind among you – that the sum of your faith is greater and more luminous than all the wonderfully variegated parts of it, and that Jesus is out ahead of you, counting on you to follow and make God's love visible to people who are starving to see it?

My dear colleagues on the staff of this church, you aspire to so much, and you each look at our work with your particular eyes, and bring treasure from your various corners of the Enneagram and the richness of your own distinct life experiences. Is there any doubt that you *have* this mind among you, that you work in this mind together?

Is there any doubt, my dear citizens of the world, that to have this mind among us – this mind for wearing masks to pool our wellness, this mind for putting our guns away to pool our safety, this mind for opening our polling places so as to pool our freedom, this mind for looking with humility at one another so as to finally see the richness and beauty of what we have in the vast and beautiful sum of all the parts of the human family – that to have this mind among us is to have more, together, than we could possibly ever think that we have alone, by ourselves?

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[7] I owe a debt to Peter W. Marty for this paraphrase of Mark 16:6-7, which leans heavily on Dr. Marty's beautiful reflection on the Markan Easter story, published in *The Christian Century* 3/24/21 (vol. 138, No. 6), p. 22.

The three of them who were once all that was left have run all this way, breathless, to tell us that, if we're looking for Jesus in the place where the power stuffs the splintered fragments, the trophies of its work of keeping us apart, well, *that is not where he is, any more*.

No, God has highly exalted him and given him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father and Mother of us all.

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