

Eric Dupee

4/17/22, Easter, Mark 16:1-8      “When They Looked Up”

I started playing organized basketball at the age of 9. At that age, I was shorter than most of my peers, so I was a point guard. I was the little guy who dribbled the ball up the court and directed the offense. In order to be a good point guard, you have to be able to see the whole floor. It's not easy. As a nine-year-old, when you're just learning to dribble, the tendency is to look down at the ball.

When your head is down, you can't see your teammates. You can't see where to pass the ball. You miss opportunities to attack the defense. I have this memory of people always telling me to look up. My coach, on the sideline, always shouted, “Look up!” My teammates would yell, “Look up!” My own mom, sitting in the bleachers, would scream, “Look up!”

Writer Ann Lamott recently came out with a reflection on turning 68-years-old in which she talks about the value of looking up. She wrote, “Remember, you can trap bees on the bottom of Mason jars with a bit of honey and without a lid, because they don't look up. They just walk around bitterly bumping into the glass walls.” She says, “That's SO me.”

I'm guessing a lot of us can relate to that. In life, we tend to look down. We even have phrases for it. When we focus on the business at hand, we might say, “I'm keeping my nose to the grindstone.” That's a “head down” posture. We might hang our heads in shame.

Our heads tend to hang low when we're discouraged. Watching any sport, you can always tell which team is winning by looking at the players on the bench. On the winning side, heads are up. The losing team tends to hang their heads.

I was thinking about all the discouragement many of us have felt over the last two years: travel plans canceled, being separated from loved ones, grandparents unable to visit their grandchildren, kids unable to socialize in the normal ways. I know I hung my head in discouragement many times.

I want to suggest the Easter story, as it's described in all four Gospels, begins as a "looking down" event. Mark describes Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome making their way to the tomb, bringing spices in order to anoint Jesus' body. As I picture the scene, I don't imagine there was much conversation between them. For one thing, it was "very early on the first day of the week." It was just after sunrise.

In addition, their friend, whom they came to love, died an excruciating death three days before. On that morning, they were on their way to perform a solemn and what I would think would be an emotionally challenging task, that of anointing a corpse. In fact, they didn't even know how they would access the body.

As they walked, they asked, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb." Mark makes a point to describe the stone as "very large." It was to discourage anyone from tampering with the body. It would prevent animals from entering the tomb, but I want to suggest the stone also represented something deeper, something theological.

The life and ministry of Jesus took place at a time when the Roman Empire dominated Jewish life. The cross was their tool to squash Jewish dissent. The Roman occupying army was the most powerful force in the world. The Jewish people could not remove them from their territory on their own. Therefore, they longed for a Savior. When Jesus entered Jerusalem on a donkey, the crowd waved palm branches and shouted, "Hosanna!" Save us!

By the end of the week, Rome seemed to remain an immovable force and Jesus died the way anyone who resisted the Empire might. So, when the women came to the tomb on that first Easter morning, they did not approach with high hopes, but with heads down. They were simply trying to be faithful in an ordinary task.

The stone covering the entrance of the tomb was a barrier between them and Jesus. They couldn't remove it by themselves. Because of that stone, Jesus was no longer accessible to them. The stone symbolized the end of their journey of discipleship. But there they were, in the early morning dawn, with heads hung low, slowly making their way to the tomb.

Then, Mark describes a moment when everything changes. "When they looked up, they saw that the stone...had already been rolled away." Did you catch that? When they looked up, they discovered something completely unexpected. At first, they didn't quite

know what to make of it, but when they looked up, they could tell something out of the ordinary was going on. A power beyond their own had already removed the barrier between them and Jesus.

I know it may seem like an incidental detail that the women looked up and saw the stone had been removed. But I look at it this way. Some of you like to hike in nature as I do. That's an activity in which you're required to look down much of the time. The ground is uneven. You have to watch your step.

However, if you're always looking down, you can miss the best things about a hike. You might miss a spot in the trail where you get a spectacular view. You can walk right past amazing trees and rock formations without even knowing it. Even though hiking requires a consistent focus on the ground, I've learned to remind myself to stop and look up. I ask myself what am I missing at this particular moment, because I'm fixated on the ground?

I think life is very similar. A lot of life is spent looking down. We have to "put our nose to the grindstone" a lot of the time. A lot of life is about meeting obligations and tending to responsibilities. And, if we're honest, we would have to admit we all live in a certain amount of denial of our own problems and the problems of the world.

What do we say to someone who is obviously in denial about something? "Get your head out of the sand." That's the ultimate "head down" posture. Ostrich's don't actually hide their heads in the sand, but that doesn't matter. The point is that our image for being in denial is not just to close our eyes or lower our heads, but to bury them.

On that first Easter, new life, new possibilities and a new future took hold and it didn't happen in the holy Temple, in the emperor's palace or on the field of battle. It happened in a graveyard, among a handful of ordinary women performing a mundane task.

On more than one occasion, Jesus told them he would rise and go ahead of them to Galilee. Yet they still came to the tomb expecting to anoint a corpse. Don't get me wrong. I give them credit. The men didn't even bother getting out of bed. The women were told, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

In other words, looking up and seeing the stone rolled away was just the start. They were told to KEEP their heads up. Go back to Galilee and look for Jesus. How can you see

something that's been raised up, unless you look up? Because Christ was raised, it was time to raise their sights! They came to the tomb with their heads down, but they left with their heads up.

If Easter is nothing else, it is at least a reminder to look up. The point about looking up on the basketball court is that you can actually see what's going on. You can see the reality of your situation. It's also about the fact that you have teammates. You're not in it alone. There's help out there. If you just look up, you can find it.

I believe the same is true in the spiritual life. It's important to look up, because God does not leave us to face our troubles alone. God CAN roll away the stones in our lives and remove the barriers to our fulfillment. If we look up, we might catch the new thing God is doing in our lives.

In fact, Ann Lamott believes looking up can change things. In describing the bees in a Mason jar, she wrote, "All they have to do is look up and fly away." She said, "In 68 years, I have never seen a boring sky. I have never felt blasé about the moon, or birdsong, or paper whites."

The psalmist wrote, "I lift up my eyes to the hills - from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth."

When I was just learning to dribble a basketball, it was pretty annoying to always hear someone from the sidelines yelling, "Look up!" I wanted to say, "You look up! You get out here and beat this full-court press."

However, after all these years, I'm glad I have that in my head. These days, I need reminders to look up. I need reminders to expect God to do a new thing. I need to question my assumptions about what is possible and what is not possible.

In fact, if I could follow each of you around during the day, I'd remind you to look up. When you begin to despair your situation, I'd say, "Look up!" God is closer to you than your own hands and feet. When your hope starts to wane, I'd say, "Look up!" with God all things are possible. When you felt overwhelmed by life, I'd say, "Look up!" the last word belongs to God.

There is no barrier between us and Jesus that God cannot move. No empire is so strong, no rock is so heavy, no force in the universe is so permanent, not even death itself, is any match for the power of God.

The good news of Easter morning is that God has already rolled away the stone. All we have to do is look up.