

THE GALILEE DIRECTIVE—OUT TO THE MARGINS

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The author David Mitchell, in his book Cloud Atlas, writes that “there isn’t a journey you take that doesn’t change you some.”

As we gather this afternoon for this BACCALAUREATE Service, a service filled up with robes and regality, it is my humble hope that you might be willing to go on a journey with me—a journey that might change you some on the eve of your graduation.

Ever since I left this institution 1986, diploma in hand, I have dedicated my life to helping people encounter Christ, not simply in the past, but in the present moment—alive and active in their lives and in the world. And this is why I chose this Easter text from Mark for my reflection—for what does it mean for us today when a young boy says to the tomb-visitors who have come looking for their dead companion, “Jesus the Nazarene—the one you are looking for—is not here in this place—for he is going out ahead of you into Galilee—and it is there you will see him anew?”

So—to get at this statement we must begin our journey not here in THIS place, in this time, but rather in 1st century Galilee! For you see, Galilee was no resurrection resort. Galilee wasn’t the first place you would rush off to for a respite, much less head off to if you had just been recently raised up from the dead! No! Galilee was a broken place, a

rough place—a territory filled up with the faces of those who had suffered the indignity and disinheritance of Roman occupation and rule. Galilee was a place of survival, and struggle, and political subordination—and the folks who inhabited this region were people whose socio-economic plight was both tangible and tragic!

The name Galilee was derived from the Hebrew phrase by which the area had been known since the time of King Solomon—galil hagoyim—which literally meant “encircled by Gentiles”. Galilee’s Hebrew name was a fitting one, for Gentile populations surrounded the region—thus Galilee’s borders were never quite secure enough, and its Jewishness was never quite certain. Was it any wonder then that Galileans were thought by most to be without class or credentials—rapists, criminals, thieves—all inhabitants of a region from which, it was believed, nothing good or honorable could EVER come! Galilee was nothing more than a human blot on the grand Roman landscape—in need of a wall to keep the poor and the broken from infiltrating and infecting Rome’s grip on the region!

And yet, from Mark’s account, it is in this Galilee, this treacherous territory, where Jesus carried out the majority of his ministry. As the author tells us at the onset of his Gospel, it was from Nazareth of Galilee that Jesus came to be baptized into his radical and restorative ministry by John. It was in Galilee that Jesus proclaimed and practiced the good news of grace—sitting at table with the hurt and the hopeless, restoring folk back into whole and healed community, proclaiming that the last would soon be first and

the first would soon be last! It was in Galilee that Jesus called forth his first disciples, and healed the sick, and wrangled with the Pharisees, and questioned Rome's oppressive power. And it was toward this rugged territory that Jesus pointed at the conclusion of his final meal alive—for, as Mark writes, Jesus said to his followers, "The shepherd will be struck down and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you into Galilee!

And so, it was that Galilee, this central site of Jesus' ministry, was not just some quiet pastoral scene where gentle Jesus meek and mild taught his noble truths! No! Galilee was a place that was incredibly hard, and harsh, and hurting. It was a place filled up with the ostracized and the condemned, and the hated. It was a place of disdain, and disease, and domination. By anyone's standards, it was a place to get away *from* and not a place to go *to*! It was a place to escape and not a place to engage!

This is why I find it fascinating that Galilee was the very place Jesus said he would be found even after the finality of the cross! I find it intriguing that Galilee was the very region in which Jesus said he would be present even after the terror of the tomb! How amazing, then, that Galilee was the very territory that Jesus said he would reside in even in the face of oppressive and de-pressive Roman rule.

Here in Mark's gospel, the first Gospel written down, there is no glowing apparition of Jesus! No Savior-sighting! No roadside companion who vanishes into thin air! No ghost-

like gardener looming among the lilies for the women to take hold of and touch! No—the women are simply given directions—Jesus’ new zip-code, so to speak—and it is Galilee! For it is there, they are told, there amidst the hurt and the hate of that region, there amidst the squalor of that territory, that the resurrective presence of Jesus’ life and the restorative power of his ministry would be found by them anew!

Now that should have sounded like good news to Jesus’ lost followers, right? But get this! Upon hearing this Divine directional news, the women did not follow on to this territory but rather they fled from the tomb. They turned away for trembling and fear held them. And they said nothing to no one—NOT A WORD—for they were afraid!”

They said nothing to no one—NOT ONE WORD!

THIS is how Mark chooses to end his Gospel—with Christ’s scattered followers too afraid to even come to his grave and the women too terrified to even speak of his gone-on-out-ahead-of-them presence. Mark’s original ending appears to leave us with nothing more than a collapse of spirit truncated by terror. It seems to end, NOT with some kind of flourish of faith but rather with a blatant failure of nerve!

They said nothing to no one—NOT A WORD—for they were terrified!

And maybe, just maybe, if I am truly honest with myself, I can see that I too am not so different . . . for I know far too

well how to deal with a dead Jesus—honoring him with perfumes and spices, commemorating his life with flowers and lilies, dressing up in my Sunday robes as I entomb his memory within the confines of a Sunday morning service

Yet let me tell you something I have come to realize after 30 years in ministry out in the world, out on the margins—and it is this: A lifeless Jesus is far easier to contain and restrain than an active one! A dead Jesus can be safely approached with all of our decency and good order (or lack thereof) intact! But a LIVING Jesus can radically explode into our present reality and wreak havoc with our safe and well-ordered lives. Indeed, the message of the cross is simple when we observe Jesus held upon it and immobile—but it becomes much more complex when Jesus is absent of his tomb, on the loose, gone out ahead of us into rough and rugged places with the full expectation that we will follow him TO, and join with him IN, such locales!

Far more terrifying than the pain of the crucifixion is the prospect of a resurrection that comes with expectations of US!

Far more terrifying than an empty tomb is the revelation that we might just have to get up and out of this comfortable and contained university community if we are to truly encounter Christ's risen and radical presence before us.

Far more terrifying than Jesus going out ahead of us into treacherous territories is the directive that WE TOO must venture out and into our own cultural and global Galilees if

we are to find Christ's resurrective presence active and alive before our very eyes!

“Do not be amazed!”, Mark tells us! A dead Jesus entombed by our safe Christologies and held fast by our stringent perspectives is now absent from the grave! For Jesus' living presence is alive and loose in our world! Jesus' living presence is free from our restraints. Jesus' living presence has gone out ahead of us into Galilee, out to the margins, and it is THERE that WE must go as well!

Don't miss Mark's point! Don't turn away from it like the empty tomb-visitors did in fear—for Jesus goes ahead of us this day into the town of Laurinburg outside these doors, where for many folks the power of education is elusive, where the struggle to put healthy food on the table is often stymied by an inability to earn a living wage, and where political back-biting by some now seems to get in the way of healing the divisions between the poor and the prosperous. The one we are called out to follow, Mark tells us, is not entombed in THIS place—for he goes out ahead of us to be present with people just like these while calling us to join with him, heart-to-heart, in the resurrective presence of his life and the restorative equity of his ministry

Jesus goes out ahead of us into Galilee this day, into the streets and by-ways of Fayetteville, North Carolina where it is now a civil offense to give money or food to those in need on public right-of-ways—a blatant attempt to banish so-called beggars from the public's view while overriding the protections of free speech among those in greatest need!

The one we are called out to follow, Mark tells us, is not entombed in THIS place—for he goes out ahead of us to be present with folks such as these while calling us to join with him, soul-to-soul, in the resurrective presence of his life and the restorative justice of his ministry

Jesus goes out ahead of us into Galilee this day—into all of the Ferguson's of our land where people of color are, too often, not prayed over but rather preyed upon by the municipalities where they reside; where parents fear for the lives of their children when they encounter police, or private policies or the painful practices of racial profiling! The one we are called out to join, Mark tells us, is not entombed in THIS place—for he goes out ahead of us to be with people just like this—challenging us to join with him, side-by-side, in the resurrective presence of his life and the restorative justice of his ministry!

Jesus goes out ahead of us into Galilee this day, into overcrowded and under-funded veteran's hospitals all across our land, where, since 2001, more service men and women have died by their own hands than at the hands of the elusive enemies they were tasked to confront; where too many wards are filled up with not only shattered bodies but shattered souls; where too many families are blown apart by emotional bombs that are hard to uncover and defuse. The one we are called out to join is not entombed in THIS place—for he goes out ahead of us to be with people just like this—challenging us to join with him, shoulder-to-shoulder, in the resurrective promise of his life and the restorative power of his ministry!

Jesus goes out ahead of us into Galilee this day, into the harsh terrain of refugee camps—where globally more than 40 million people continually toil to not only eat but to exist, where innocent Syrian citizens have discovered too quickly that our War on Terror is, for them, nothing more than the terror of war, and where the torture of innocent Syrian children by modern day methods of crucifixion continues to be dismissed and denied by most of the global community! The one we are called out to follow, Mark tells us, is not entombed in THIS place—for he goes out ahead of us to be with people just like this—calling us to join with him, arm-in-arm, in the resurrective power of his life and the responsive justice of ministry.

Hearing such a word, listening to such directions, Mark tells us that “going quickly, the women fled from the tomb! And with trembling and fear, they said nothing to no one about this—NOT A WORD—for they were terrified and afraid!”

But what will YOU say as you leave this campus?

Where will YOU go so as to find Christ’s presence loose and alive in the world?

What journey will YOU now take, degree in hand, so as to change not only you but the world you will inhabit? And as you answer these questions, never forget, and never fear, that Jesus goes out ahead of each you into the Galilees you will find and, hopefully confront—for it is THERE that he awaits the power and the promise of YOUR presence!

Be on your way—and as it has done for me, may such a journey change you some so that you might change the lives of others!

Thanks be to God! AMEN