

**March 31, 2024**  
**“Yes, and ...”**  
**Isaiah 26:6-9 / Mark 16:1-8**  
**Pastor Tim**

Call me an opportunist, but I like to save my good stories for Easter!

To be honest, I don't think of myself as a good storyteller – not like my grandmother, my mom's mom (my sister and I, and our cousins, called her Gammy or Gam). Or my mom, for that matter. Both could be forgiven for working in some embellishment from time to time.

I also don't feel I have many good stories of my own. At least that I can remember. I've always had a hard time keeping all the relevant details in my head. I get the order of things mixed up. It's the same reason why I'm not a good joke-teller – I'm that guy who inevitably mangles the punchline, or inadvertently leaves out the critical detail that makes the punchline funny.

I have just one joke, and that joke is not appropriate for church.

But the story is, and I think it's a pretty good one. Here goes. True story. No embellishments.

Picture a hot summer day in Philly. This was before Gabe was born. Before Amy and I were married, though we were dating – so almost 20 years ago now. I had just finished teaching a GED class in Kensington, and decided to walk to pick up our weekly share from the original Greensgrow Farms location not too far away. I got my bag of goodies and headed to the bus stop – needing to take a bus to the El, the El to the trolley, and the trolley to get home.

I mentioned that it was hot. I didn't have anything to drink so I looked in the bag and picked out a peach. As close as I could get to quench my thirst. When I finished it, I looked around for a trash can to throw the pit away – but there wasn't one. So I figured I'd just throw it down the sewer.

Only it bounced off the curb, so I kicked it the rest of the way. Now I was wearing a pair of Birkenstock sandals that day ... you can see where this is going. When I kicked the peach pit, sure enough, my sandal went right down the sewer with it! I heard it splash.

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no!

You can imagine my disbelief at what had just happened. I immediately got down on my knees to see if there was any way I could reach it, but that wasn't happening. I got up and just stood there. I didn't know what to do. And as ridiculous as it sounds now, in that moment, just a moment, in a fit of completely irrational panic, I literally could not imagine how I was gonna get home with one sandal and one bare foot.

I had a cell phone but not a smart one at that time. I thought about calling Amy, but it was the middle of the day so she was at work – and I knew she was in the field with her hospice job, nowhere near Kensington. I couldn't think of anyone else to call for a ride. So I pulled myself together, though still dreading the journey ahead of me.

While I waited for the bus I “practiced” standing and walking with the share bag more or less hiding my bare foot, which meant I had to stay a little hunched over so it would reach.

The bus finally came, I got on. And, you know, bus floors – and really, the floors of any means of public transportation – aren't known for their cleanliness. I cringed walking down the aisle to my seat, the closest one I could find. A short ride to the El station and I had to cross Kensington Avenue, up the stairs and then cross over to get to the westbound platform. Avoiding trash and broken glass along the way.

The same cringing as I awkwardly made my way through the turnstile, and then onto the subway car when it finally arrived. A longer ride to 30<sup>th</sup> Street Station – and those of you who know SEPTA know that means up more stairs and across the main station, to go down another set of stairs to catch the trolley. All hunched over, in lock step with my share bag.

After the trolley ride I had just a few blocks to walk before I finally made my way home. Turns out it wasn't such a big deal, certainly not what I first imagined when I first heard that splash.

And for the record, I have not owned a pair of Birkenstocks since.

A good story, right?!

A couple of weeks ago I was driving, on my way into Calvary, and caught part of Marty Moscoane's weekly radio show, *The Connection*, on WHY? – our local public media station, for those not familiar.

For those who are, maybe you heard it too?

The show was about improv – improvisation, that age-old art form we mostly associate with quick-thinking comedy, EVERYTHING made up on the spot, though obviously used more broadly in theatrical and musical contexts.

More specifically, the show was about the benefits of improv and what it can teach us about life. The benefits of a “yes, and” approach – the foundational rule-of-thumb in improv that invites the improviser to “accept” what another improviser has offered (YES) and then expand on that line of thinking (AND).

Tina Fey, she of Philly-area comedy fame, describes it this way in her book, *Bossypants*:

*Tina Fey's Rules of Improvisation That Will Change Your Life and Reduce Belly Fat: The first rule of improvisation is AGREE. Always agree and SAY YES. ... Now, obviously in real life you're not always going to agree with everything everyone says. But the Rule of Agreement reminds you to 'respect what your partner has created' and to at least start from an open-minded place. Start with a YES and see where that takes you.*

Improv is not really about agreement, per se; it's about staying open, with your partners, to possibility. She continues: “The second rule of improvisation is not only to say yes, but YES, AND. ... To me, YES, AND means don't be afraid to contribute. It's your responsibility to contribute. ... There are no mistakes, only opportunities.”

YES, AND ...

So among the life skills improv can help cultivate, none of which will surprise you: Listening. Being more present to ourselves and others – paying closer attention. Being more open and willing to take risks. Self-awareness. Spontaneity. Flexibility. Cooperation. Creativity. Resilience. Graciousness.

More and more research backs this up – from brain-scan studies affirming that improv activates brain centers and improves brain connectivity, to psychological studies affirming that improv increases all of the above, along with confidence and more, while also decreasing stress, anxiety and “uncertainty intolerance.”

Uncertainty intolerance.

Now there's a five-dollar psychology term for you. The phrase is new to me, but it's clear enough. I daresay most of us, all of us (?), are not particularly COMFORTABLE with uncertainty in our lives. Or in the world.

No doubt we move through our lives with varying levels, varying degrees, of tolerance to it. And as the guests on the radio show pointed out, how tolerant or intolerant we are to uncertainty plays a significant role in how we view and engage each other and the world around us. How well we embrace, or don't, complexity and nuance. How gracious we are, or are not, with each other and the world around us.

Improv's life question is this: How do we respond – psychologically, physically, spiritually – when we don't know what happens next? Of course, the truth is we don't know what happens next. Not really.

I mean, we like to pretend we do. We control whatever we can, as best we can. We relish our routines, make plans, keep calendars. But none of that changes the fact that life is inherently uncertain.

The Proverbs remind us not to boast about tomorrow, “for you do not know what a day may bring.” And Jesus says as much himself: “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Indeed.

Which brings us to the Resurrection account from Mark's gospel, as Amy just read for us. This is, after all, a sermon about Resurrection! Right?

Now I gotta tell you, Mark's account is my favorite. Why?

Because of how it ends. Did you hear it? Did you notice it? It ends with the word, “afraid.”

Verse 8 again: "So they" (and they, here, referring to the women who were the first witnesses to the empty tomb), they "went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

AFRAID.

And understand that AFRAID is not just the last word of Mark's Resurrection narrative; it's the last word of the entire gospel does!]

Fear literally gets the last word. There are no post-Resurrection appearances as in the other gospels. There's nothing else after AFRAID.

Now, to be clear, if you open up a Bible you will find more verses that follow – one a "shorter" ending of Mark, and the other – an additional 11 verses, a "longer" ending of Mark. But neither are found in the earliest manuscripts, and so neither are the actual ending.

They got tacked on later, and we can understand why.

"Afraid" is a particularly "uncertain" note on which to end. This is no joyous Easter celebration, and apparently the ensuing editors of Mark's gospel could not tolerate the uncertainty.

But that's why I love this ending so much. It's real. It is painfully honest.

Jesus is no longer in the tomb. No one knows what happened, only that – as the angelic messenger of God puts it to the women who had come to anoint Jesus' body: "He has been raised; he is not here."

We don't know what happened. We CAN'T, in fact, historically speaking, know that the Resurrection literally happened. So believe what you will but, in the end, I don't believe it matters because – as scholars from the former "Jesus Seminar" often suggested in their quest to understand the "historical Jesus": "Whether or not it (that is, the Resurrection) actually happened, it is nonetheless true."

And the core truth of the Resurrection, of Easter, as Anne Lamott suggests, "is that love is more powerful than death." Even death. Because where there is love, even in the face of the kind of betrayal and denial and rejection and hatred and violence and injustice Jesus experienced on his way to the cross of Roman, state-sanctioned crucifixion, there is always the promise of life and life made new.

The love that Jesus embodied in life and in death, and the experience by his followers of the resurrected Jesus, the risen Christ, all direct us to that truth.

It turns out, friends, that our God is a God of improvisation. The God of endless love is necessarily the God of endless possibility and opportunity.

The cross, YES, AND ... the empty tomb.

Oppression and injustice, YES, AND ... liberation.

Death, YES, AND ... new life. Life even where and when and how we least expect to find it. That is the truth of Resurrection and Easter.

Now I also don't believe the question of whether or not the Resurrection literally happened matters because what matters, ultimately, is what happens next in the story. That is, AFTER "afraid."

Back to the startling and unsettling uncertainty of Mark's gospel, what happens next? What happens next?

The beauty and challenge of that cliff-hanging question, in this Easter story, is that, while you and I are admittedly not in full control of the answer, and certainly not as much as we like to think we are, the ongoing Resurrection narrative CANNOT continue without us. We ARE the rest of the story.

In this way, it may be helpful to think of yourselves, ourselves, as partners and co-creators with God in the ongoing improvisation of our lives and of the world around us. The God of "yes, and", of eternal love and life and possibility. The God who, according to Isaiah from our other reading this morning, "will swallow up death forever."

Improv partners with Jesus, who reminded us in life and in death to say YES to, to “agree” and acknowledge our fear, pay attention to it, listen to it, be present to it, so that it does not rule our hearts and our lives, AND, AND open our hearts and our lives to respond to our fear with love.

For Jesus, where we go FROM “afraid” is always TO love. Love is always meant to be our next improvisational play because love, again, is more powerful even than death.

Resurrection was hard to believe for the disciples, for Jesus' early followers, because nothing, NOTHING, had turned out the way they hoped or expected. They were left without Jesus as they had known him, and at least for a time, with terrifying uncertainty and, well, a high degree of “uncertainty intolerance.”

They were not prepared to say YES to anything at that point. And in fact, after many of them had responded with resounding “Yes, ands ...” when Jesus first called them to drop everything to follow them, they had succumbed to a litany of “No, buts ...” by the end:

No, but you can't feed that many.

No, but you can't welcome these children.

No, but let us stay up here on the mountain.

No, but you can't suffer and die.

No, but you can't wash my feet.

No, but I do not know this man you're talking about.

And even after the cross and the empty tomb, from John's gospel: No, but let me see the nail marks in his hands.

The world needs more “Yes, ands” to continue the resurrection story.

The painting on the bulletin cover this morning is from Lisle Gwynn Garrity – a self-described pastorist, part pastor, part artist.

It's called “The Promise” – inspired by Mark's Resurrection account. I encourage you to take a look at it now. Here's what she says about it:

*In this painting, I imagine what the women see in the moment before they turn to flee from the tomb. Instead of the dry, cracked desert, I imagine instead that they see the story of creation happening again before them. As the horizon breaks open, I imagine light and wind sweeping over a deep sea, giving shape to what was once a formless void. I imagine the heavens blooming like an iris, giving birth to glimmers of radiance. I imagine darkness that still lingers—for in these shadows, there is sacredness too. I imagine the winding path they followed to get to the tomb, previously lit only by starlight, now illuminated with promise.*

*“They may be overridden with fear and trembling, but their story does not end here. There is a way forward. In this liminal space, once again, God proclaims that their fear—this new, uncertain way—is still held within the promise of resurrection.*

Friends, our stories do not end here either. The story we tell together with our lives does not end with “afraid” unless we let it. Unless we shut down the improv.

BECAUSE the Easter truth IS that love is more powerful than death, our Easter invitation, our Easter challenge, is to risk “Yes, and”-ing our way, like Jesus, from fear to love. Always to love.

And in the spirit of improv, to increase our tolerance for and resilience to uncertainty – and see where that takes us. To open ourselves up to the joy and creativity and cooperation and graciousness of endless possibilities and opportunities for life to be made new, RECREATED, again and again and again.

And if you will, to make our individual and collective ways home, in spite of the obstacles, with or without sandals.

Let me close now with a poem Amy shared with me this week, from Rosemerry Wahtola Trommer. It's called, “Like the Peony” – a timely spring metaphor to drive home the good news of Easter:

*Like the peony that opens  
and opens and opens,  
this is how I want to meet life—  
surviving the cold  
then returning to bloom  
again. Again.  
That vibrant. That many-petaled.  
Embarrassingly fulsome,  
as if life just can't*

get enough of itself.  
I know how winter ravages.  
Sounds like a metaphor?  
Truth is life cuts you to the ground  
and you lose all but the roots.  
Sometimes those, too.  
How is it, then, comes  
the chance to bloom again,  
to be less master of life,  
and more servant  
to the life that pushes through.  
I want to be fluent in blooming.  
I want to trust the possibility  
of sweet spring perfume  
as much as I trust  
the inevitability of frost.  
I am so grateful for beauty,  
albeit brief,  
for the chance to be naked,  
tender, soft.

Winter and frost, YES, AND sweet spring perfume.  
To be more servant to the life that pushes through.  
To be fluent in blooming.

May it be so.