

The Resurrection of Our Lord – Easter Day
 April 4, 2021
 First Lutheran Church
 St. Joseph, MO
 Pastor Keith Hohly

Grace and Peace to you this day in the name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Years ago, when our children were young, we would always take part of our summer vacation and visit grandparents back in Toledo, Ohio. One of the things we always did when visiting my parents was to spend one day at the zoo. We did it every year. The kids never asked *if* we were going to the zoo each year—they would always ask *when* we were going to the zoo. It was always part of the itinerary—and it's not that we minded. We always had a great time and even though we knew pretty much what we were going to encounter, we all had our favorite exhibits and enjoyed seeing them time and again.

Then there was the experience our son had one year. It was the summer after his first year of college which he spent as an intern at Ft. Matanzas National Park, just south of St. Augustine, Florida. One day he was swimming in the intercostal waterway—the waterway between the peninsula of the park and the mainland—just sort of floating around on his back—when he glanced over and saw an alligator swimming toward him. Now he had been told that alligators never went out into the intercostal, but there was this one coming right at him, and, as you might guess, it pretty much scared him out of his swimsuit. I wish I had been there to see how this happened, but as I remember him telling it, he started yelling and screaming, and thrashing his arms and legs and swimming as fast as he could, never once looking back until he got to shore. I don't know who was more scared, Ben or the alligator, because when he finally did get to shore and thought it safe to look back, that alligator was nowhere in sight.

So, here's the thing about these two stories. It's one thing to visit animals in a zoo, where they are safely behind fences or in cages, and you pretty much know what to expect when you see them. It's a whole different story, though, when you encounter them out in the wild. There you do not know what to expect, and there you feel anything but safe.

In his book *The Art of the Psychotherapist*, James Bugental makes a similar contrast between our different experiences of God. On the one hand, he says, there is the “zoo God.” The “zoo God” is the God that we expect and the God we usually visit at our convenience. The “zoo God” is quite tame, never takes us by surprise, and doesn't upset the comfortable routines of our lives.

But then there is the “wild God.” The “wild God” comes at times we do not expect and often at times that are unsolicited. The “wild God” may overturn everything around us. The “wild God” may come at us like an alligator: devouring our complacency, taking us places we may not want to go, causing us to feeling displaced and even afraid. The “wild God” is anything but tame. We don't know what this God might do next. The “wild God” is the God of mystery, and we are both drawn to the mystery as well as fearful of it. There may well be new opportunities for us in the mystery, but there may also be danger and peril. We enter into it without a road map, without a compass and even without protection. We feel unsafe and vulnerable, for mystery is something we do not comprehend—it comprehends us.

I think of Bugental's comparison on an Easter Sunday such as this when we hear Mark's account of the resurrection. We come to worship on Easter expecting certain things. We come expecting to hear that Jesus has risen. We come to hear that disciples are initially surprised and even afraid, but then Jesus appears and all seems to be well. But Mark's account is different. The tomb is empty, just like in the other gospels, but Jesus is nowhere to be found. There is only this young man, dressed in a white robe, who tells frightened women that

Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee. He instructs them to tell the others, but they do not. They run from the tomb in fear, and they didn't say anything to anyone.

Mark's account is not as tame for me as are the others. Mark's God is more like that "wild God" that Bugental describes. There is more mystery here, more "not knowing" of what may come next. Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee and there he will meet us—but what does this mean—what will this meeting mean for us? Mark never says. Mark's entire gospel ends right here, with the women running away in fear.

Many people have found Mark's ending here unsatisfactory, and some have even written additions to it that "finish" the story as they would have it. But I like Mark's gospel just the way it is, the way it ends here, and I am drawn to it maybe more so than the other three, for I think it is more honest about who God really is.

God is sovereign. God is free to act as God wills, not necessarily the way I think God should, or the way I necessarily expect that God will. Furthermore, I find such an ending more consistent with the way life is. Life is more often more wild than it is tame. Life brings us surprises. It brings us things that are unexpected and even unwanted. Life forever brings us new opportunities, yet it also not without danger and peril. Life and God are experienced in mystery.

Mark's gospel calls us at Easter to a most crucial element of faith. It calls us to be willing to trust—trust in the Jesus who goes ahead of us to Galilee—trust in the Jesus who goes ahead of us in life. Frederick Buechner once wrote: "We want to know who Jesus is before we follow him, and that is understandable enough except the truth of the matter is that it is only first by following him that we can begin to find out who he is." So, we need to trust in order to follow—trust that the God who for us is wild, is also the God who for us is good.