

**Westminster Presbyterian Church
533 S. Walnut St.
Springfield, IL 62704**

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee
April 16, 2006

Easter Journeys Mark 16:7

At one time or another we all experience storms in our lives that force us to re-examine who we are as human beings. For a fifty-one year old clarinetist named Michael White that storm was Hurricane Katrina. Six months after Katrina he was finally able to return to his classroom at Xavier University where he teaches African American music. Like many New Orleans residents he had gone through an intense period of depression as he dealt with so many losses. His house in the Jentilly section of New Orleans was destroyed along with his extensive collection of rare jazz artifacts. He still doesn't know what the city is going to decide about the redevelopment of his neighborhood. He cannot make his own decisions about rebuilding. He has moved back to New Orleans but he wonders how he will care for his elderly mother and aunt who are now living in Houston nursing homes and grieving over their own losses. He is also struggling with his vocation as a jazz musician which is so rooted in the cultural identity of a city which is now a shadow of its former existence.

Michael White's re-examination of his life has led him to explore with new eyes his experience of New Orleans jazz. He hopes to survive the storm by tapping into the lessons that the music has taught him. Michael says it like this:

And one of those great lessons is that you have to improvise. You have to be able to take what comes and make something good happen with it. And...we see that, not only in jazz but all of New Orleans culture. If you look at food, like gumbo, for example, you take many different things that don't necessarily seem to work together, pork and seafood and poultry, and you mix it together and you make something new and exciting. And that's what Jazz does. Jazz can take something as simple as a folk song or European march and give it new life, make it personal. You have to learn how to adjust. So it's time for me now to...use the lessons that I've learned from...being a jazz musician...to improvise not just in playing, but in everything that I do in life (News Hour Online, "Rebuilding Lives in New Orleans," February 9, 2006).

A similar process is at work in the 16th chapter of the Gospel of Mark. Here the disciples are confronted with a storm that leads them to re-examine who they are. Jesus' crucifixion has put their lives in a state of chaos. They have lost the hope which had anchored their lives. It is in this state of hopelessness that three women arrive at the tomb of Jesus. These disciples come looking for a sense of closure to their grief but what they find is an empty tomb.

In Mark's gospel we see in stark terms a truth about the resurrection that is less obvious in the other gospel accounts. When the women go inside the tomb they encounter a young man dressed in a white robe. He tells them that Jesus is risen and invites them to inspect the place where his body was laid. He then tells the women to instruct the other disciples to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus. Then Mark reports how the women responded. Did they go with joy to tell the disciples? Did they rush to proclaim the good news to the world? Did they lift their hearts in joyful song? No. Mark tells us that

they fled. They ran away in fear. They did not say anything to anyone. Most scholars agree that these are the last words of Mark's gospel. A more joyful and optimistic ending was added later by other writers. The last word of Mark on the resurrection is fear and silence.

Why is Mark so hesitant to celebrate the resurrection? Mark wants us to understand that the resurrection did not resolve the state of chaos the disciples were experiencing. It raised more questions than it answered. First among these difficult questions is how can they take up the work that their teacher began? This is not the role that they have imagined for themselves. The troubling message of the resurrection is that they must learn to see themselves as people who can improvise their way through this storm. This is a journey they do not want to make.

In 1662 Scottish Presbyterians were battered by a storm set in motion by King Charles II. Their world was turned upside down when the King dissolved the presbyteries and ejected more than 400 Scottish ministers from their pulpits. The Duke of Lauderdale was made a virtual dictator of Scotland and began persecuting those who resisted the King's policies. These people were called Covenanters. They were imprisoned, tortured, and executed without due process of law. Thousands fled to Ireland to escape this persecution. The Scots gave a colorful name to this storm. They called it the "killing times."

My grandparents liked to tell a family story about the "killing times" that had been passed down through the generations. The soldiers of the King periodically raided the villages which sympathized with the Covenanters. They plundered homes in these villages and carted off items of value. They also confiscated Bibles. Lauderdale knew that the views of the resisters were rooted in Scripture. He also understood that depriving the people of their Bibles was an effective way of breaking their spirits. My grandparents described the precautions our family took against these measures. When word came that the soldiers were on their way my ancestors took their Bibles out of the house and buried them in the ground. It was their way of affirming the crucial role that Scripture played in telling them who they were. The Bible anchored them through the storm and became their source book for finding creative ways to respond to this crisis.

The "killing times" lasted more than twenty years and led to many forms of improvisation. Ministers who were ejected from their churches had to learn to serve their people in a different way. Worship was conducted in private homes and in isolated outdoor settings. For the first time in Scotland people began thinking of the church as completely separate from the government. This was an innovation that the next generation of Scots would bring with them to America. This new way of doing church would come to have a profound impact on the American experience. It is one of the sources of our tradition of the separation of church and state.

Our Easter journeys are like that. The chaos of the storm never has the final word. It is the grace of the resurrected Christ which tells us who we are. Our spirits are set free to rejoice and to improvise as we learn to live in that grace.