

Just Another Sunday – Anthony Livolsi

If there were a poll, say, or some prize, if we were to put our heads together and come away to offer a big award in the category of “Things that Are Highly Unlikely to Ever Happen at Plymouth Church,” the events in this morning’s Scripture would win the day. Now, I’m new enough to Plymouth Church that I can’t say so for certain, but it strikes me that usually – and I say usually; one never knows – it strikes me that *usually* people in Plymouth Church don’t just suddenly start seizing in the pews and then stand up on the pews and shout out smack in the middle of David Ruhe’s sermons. No one would dare to interrupt David Ruhe’s sermons. If a person in Plymouth Church has a head cold and, you know, their throat is sore and a little scratchy, legions of penguin-like people in stock, black suits will appear on command with cough suppressants. One can’t cough in Plymouth Church during David Ruhe’s sermons. In the storage room, off the gymnasium, downstairs, there are the skeletons of people who have coughed in Plymouth Church during David Ruhe’s sermons. And you people, poor, poor people of Plymouth Church: if you haven’t set your cell phone to silent something will happen to you that is positively medieval.

There’s a lot of to-do these days about so-called “Restless Leg Syndrome.” Restless Leg Syndrome describes the acute pain a person feels, for instance, when they’re on a long flight and they’re cooped up and can’t move and their circulation is stifled. Delta and Continental, they’ve put placards in their airplanes that show passengers how to do little leg exercises and stretch and stave off these cramps. At Plymouth Church, we’re not so concerned about Restless Leg Syndrome. There are asterisks in the bulletins that tell you when to stand, and

when there's not an asterisk, you sit. You sit. *You sit still.* You sit still and even if your foot falls asleep, even if you can't feel your big toe, well, you sit still. We're implementing a new policy at Plymouth Church; we're posting deacons as sentries in the balcony because we're on to you. We're on to you up there. Awhile back we installed security cameras in the building and now we know, we know you've been up there stretching, doing little leg exercises on the sly. And we can't have that happening in Plymouth Church.

This is Plymouth Church, not a carnival house. This is Plymouth Church and you see it's decorum we appreciate, decorum – and those teensy, polite, mini-muffins that you can eat in one bite, eat without fear of ever looking slovenly with crumbs on your lapel. We appreciate this at Plymouth Church. And if the volunteers slip up some Sunday and forget to sharpen the pencils that get passed around in those red friendship pads, you know, this is quite nearly scandalizing to people. It's just upsetting is all, which is why I wonder how on earth we at Plymouth Church are supposed to get our heads around a Scripture where good manners get trounced, where there's a crazy, rude person come running down the center aisle shrieking. No, Plymouth Church is not the sort of place where people stand up in public and have unclean spirits cast out of them. (Maybe at the Saturday night service, where it's more casual and the hippies hang out, but not during the sermon on Sunday morning.) We can't have coughing or cell phones or stretching out or blunt pencils. So don't even get me going on the exorcism of demons.

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Several years ago, not long after I had started my studies at seminary, I was let go from a field education placement. (A field education placement is essentially an internship; I had signed on to do mine with a big, evangelical campus ministry at Princeton University.) Maybe two months had passed. I was leading a book group with a bunch of undergraduates. Well somehow, word had gotten out that I was gay. And I should say that coming to terms with sexuality was very complicated, was painful for me. I was just shy of ordination in a conservative denomination, in the Church of the Nazarene, and hadn't yet considered how on earth to proceed with things. I wasn't caught out on a date or doing something licentious in public or being political and marching in a pride parade. One day I was walking home from a support group is all, and the next I was sitting across from my supervisor. Before her were a Bible and my employment papers. And she said, "How can you reconcile being both a pastor and a 'practicing homosexual?'" And I said, "Well, suppose I'm visiting an old widow, some shut-in. I'll show up to her home and pray and have some coffee and on my way out the door I'll say 'Hazel, *honey*, your drapes are simply... sinful.'" And she fired me.

In the months that followed, friends and family and professors came out of the woodwork. They were cheerleaders for my calling, they were lovely, kind people who took me to lunch and talked with me, people even who let me turn on them, who took the venom just so I could get the anger out of me. And I'm nice, you know, but I had degenerated into a toad then. I read all the crass, unintelligent classics that atheists love so well – Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris – and just spewed that vitriol at my seminary friends. Nothing I said or did that year

amounted to more than nonsense (it's tough to think straight when you're in a tailspin), but if there was any logic to it, it was this: I would repay Christianity, tit for tat, the pain it had caused me. I would go out on the warpath and use what I knew about the church against the church so that never again would a little gay boy lock himself up in his bedroom and beg God to let him like *just any* girl enough to ask her to the junior high school dance. Never again would a kid who lived and breathed for Bible Study, who never in sixteen years told so much as a dirty joke, never again would such a kid be made to feel like a pervert, like a little deviant.

A few more months passed, and I found myself in the seminary office that handles all the internship placements. A person there told me that I needed to find a new internship placement, that I wouldn't graduate without finding a new internship placement, and that per such and such a policy, the internship placement needed to be at a church. And I erupted: *After all that I've been through, the humiliation, getting "outed" and getting fired, not believing anything anymore, you would send me back to the wolves, to the church?* (Yes.) Well, this person in the internship placement office had a friend who was pastoring the UCC congregation there in Princeton – would I meet with that minister? would I go there to worship, just once? they would carry me, kicking and screaming, they would carry me to the church, whatever it takes, but would I go?

So one Sunday I slunk into the back row and I didn't make eye contact and didn't shake anyone's hand. I sat there seething mad and started to make the bulletin into origami. And a person up at the podium said, "Good morning," and

from the pews came back a fairly mellow “Good morning.” And the person at the podium said, “If it’s your first time with us…” and I rolled my eyes. The person at the podium said, “If it’s your first time with us, know that whoever you are, and wherever you are on life’s journey, you’re welcome here.” And everything cold and closed-off in me melted. And I cried. I cried because, you know, we don’t call them “unclean spirits” anymore, but something was cast out of me that day.

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Here’s the thing: Mark hasn’t got the stomach for hocus-pocus. He tells it like he sees it, and if that means he skimps on the supernaturalism, well, so be it. When he tells us the story of Jesus’ baptism, it’s so sparse compared to all the other accounts. Some of those other guys, they describe a great crowd, standing slack-jawed, all of them, staring up at a sky that’s been cracked open like an eggshell. They say that a voice came from heaven and that it was so big that it bounded from hill to hill. But Mark says, well, if you read it closely, in short, says Jesus had a personal religious experience. Some of those other guys, they say that Jesus went off and traded barbs with Satan, say that Satan teleported Jesus, oh, hither and yon, you know, to the edge of a cliff or the tip-top of the temple. But Mark says simply that Jesus was tested. Some of those other guys, Matthew and Luke, they tell stories about virgins getting pregnant and giving birth to miracle babies and then of seraphim and stray, lowing cattle coming together to choir praise. But Mark is mum; Mark says that Jesus just shows up, all of a sudden. Who Jesus is, from whence he’s come, why he says such wacky, strange things – this all remains to be seen.

Which is *not* to say that Mark doesn't believe in angels or demons or voices from the far, great beyond. We've got to get this if we're going to get Mark: most of Mark's story narrates what happens on the surface of things, shows us that business as usual in first century Palestine is upended when an itinerant prophet comes to town. This prophet, Jesus, causes a stir – that's most of what Mark says. In itself, this is an unspectacular claim: gaggles of these guys had come by before, preaching revolutionary politics, criticizing the conservative priests, on and on. Most of Mark's story narrates what happens on the surface of things. But. But. But: there are these precious, few times when Mark tips his hand, he pulls back the curtain, as it were, and shows us that there is more to Jesus than meets the eye. There is more to Jesus than meets the eye. Mark hints that there is action happening *under the surface of things, too*. That's what happening in this story about Jesus showing up at the synagogue, just another Sabbath, right? He teaches them, dazzles them with a slam-dunk of a sermon. That's at the surface of things. But then, then, then Mark pulls back a bit: this isn't just another charismatic preacher who could charm a stone. What Mark shows us is that when a community comes together in worship and encounters Jesus, there is struggle – deep, fierce, struggle – under the surface of things.

There is more that happens Sunday by Sunday by Sunday – listen to me – *there is more that happens in this sanctuary than you can see*. There is a struggle under the surface of things. We don't call them unclean spirits anymore, but people come into Plymouth Church with huge, heavy secrets, people come, no – *people crawl* into Plymouth Church after someone's walked out on them, people come into Plymouth Church who have been quite nearly crushed by

addiction, people come into Plymouth Church when they're desperate for their kids, people come into Plymouth Church to beg money for groceries and for gas, people come into Plymouth Church to grieve, people come into Plymouth Church who can barely believe in God they've been burned so badly, people come into Plymouth Church – people like me – come into Plymouth Church who have been shamed and lied to and had life stolen from them. We come into Plymouth Church and the community surrounds us and sings “Let us build a house where Love can dwell and all can safely live, a place where saints and children” – and all children, *all children*, even the children who are different and afraid, where all children and outcasts and strangers hear proclaimed from the floor to the rafter, “All are welcome. All are welcome. All are welcome in this place.”

We are not a people who stand up on the pews and seize and shriek and make a scene in the middle of a sermon, but make no mistake: the events in this morning's Scripture do happen *here*. We are a community of people who are having an encounter with Jesus Christ. And we don't always or ever know how to name what is happening to us, but under the sway of the most profound love and acceptance that the world, that I, have ever known, we are having all manner of darkness and self-hatred and fear cast out of us. And, no, we don't have the temperament to make a show of it, but we feel it. I know you feel it; I feel it. Every Sunday the choirs come down from the chancel and stand uncomfortably close to us and we sing those same words – “May the Lord Be Always With You” and we sing it, and your kids come home from college and sing it, and someone has passed away and you can still hear them singing it next to you, and the sopranos

soar at the end, on the descant – “May the Love of Jesus Go Before You” – and we sing it. We live it. I feel it. You feel it. *You feel it.* Thanks be to God. Amen.