

Easter Sunday Sermon

When Sabbath was over,

Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them,

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

There are numerous reasons that people show up for church today. Whatever your reasons are, we are glad that you are here; glad that *we* are here in this place, for there is work to be done. That is what the word "liturgy" means—it's not about the preacher, or the celebrant, or the choir or the readers but about the work of all the people on this day—all of God's people. We gather to proclaim the central mystery of the Christian faith:

*Christ has died,
Christ is risen,
Christ will come again.*

That may be difficult to do, however with all the distractions we bring to the table. Some of us have dear friends, or children, or siblings in Iraq. And all of us are impacted by the state the world is in right now, with its wars and rumors of wars. Some of us have parents in nursing homes, or children going through difficult divorces. Many of us have some kind of roast in the oven and all the anxieties and joys that go with adding a leaf or two to our tables and having family over. Perhaps we are praying that the sermon isn't *too* controversial, so that we don't have to talk about religion too much or try to defend the Episcopal Church. Oh, and maybe some of us are just praying that Uncle Russell with his quirky political views doesn't have too much to drink

today. Some of us will be alone this afternoon and wish we had company of some kind—even if it is the dysfunctional kind.

It is into *this* moment—into the context of our real lives with their mixture of joys and concerns—that Mark’s Gospel breaks in to offer a word of good news. If we had only Mark’s Gospel—not Matthew or Luke or John—if this was the *only* account we had of Easter morning (and as the scholars tell us this is where the gospel originally ended) then what could we say about the meaning of this day?

I do know we have four gospels—and I know that the Church’s faith is shaped by the four canonical witnesses. But each of the gospels arises in their own particular contexts and experiences of Jesus as the Christ. Each tells the story of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection from their own perspective; their own slant. The lectionary this year gives us Mark to gather around—not Matthew nor Luke nor John. Their turns will come. Our work today is to listen as attentively as we can to the word of hope that Mark speaks.

If you have a good Bible you might notice that while there are verses that go beyond where we stopped today there is also a note from the editors saying that virtually all scholars—liberal and conservative—agree that where we stopped today is where Mark in fact stopped. While there are in fact two different endings that come later, they are not found in the earliest manuscripts. What seems to have happened is that later generations felt uncomfortable ending a book of good news with the word “afraid” and so they added on some extra verses.

The scholars are pretty clear about the fact that this is where Mark did end; the debates come when they try to explain it. None of us can get inside of Mark’s head to know for sure. Did the original ending somehow get clipped off accidentally as some have argued? Or did Mark drop dead suddenly of a heart attack before he was done? Did the Roman authorities knock on the door in that moment and “disappear” him before he could finish? We’ll have to wait until St. Peter can answer that question for us at the Pearly Gates.

On this Easter morning all we can say with any degree of certainty is that it did end here, without even a specific sighting of the resurrected Jesus. In Greek the grammar stammers along, so that you could translate it something like this:

“and going out they fled from the tomb, for fear and trembling had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone. They were afraid, because...”

Now if this is how a film ended you could be sure that a sequel was already in the works. It’s no way to end a story; unless there is more to tell. And I think this is precisely the point. Mark leaves us with questions: what happened next? When did they find their voices and speak? How exactly did they overcome their fears? What happened when they finally did, and told the disciples? Dan Brown could have a field day with what we’re not told!

But we know that they did find their voices. We know that they did speak, for the same reason that the first-century Church knew they did. We know they finally spoke because someone told someone who told someone who told someone who told us. *He isn’t there*. He’s not dead! He’s gone ahead of you. Keep on keeping on, and you will find him...

We know they spoke because the story didn't end at that empty tomb; it begins there. *The Church is born*. So I don't think Mark dropped dead of a heart attack at all. Nor do I think that the ending somehow got clipped off. I think this is a brilliant way to end a gospel because the burden of the narrative shifts in that moment from the women in the story to us, the hearers of the story. What will *we* do with it? Will we flee, or follow? Mark says, in effect, "*you* are the sequel" to this text. Who will you tell?

Now fortunately the Easter Season lasts for fifty days, and I expect that together we can unpack the texts assigned over the next seven weeks as we explore the mystery of the resurrection and what it means for us to become that sequel. There are other stories: like Thomas and his questions; like those disciples walking toward Emmaus; like Peter's fishing story. But for today this is our text—which is admittedly not as fluffy as those colored chicks nor as sweet as chocolate bunnies: *The women fled for fear and trembling had seized them and they said nothing to anyone. They were afraid, because...*

Fear is a part of life. Courage isn't the absence of fear, it's the ability to face our fears and somehow still move forward. This gospel acknowledges that the resurrection is a pretty scary thing, because if Jesus is alive then it means what he said was true. It means he is who he said he was. Whatever else resurrection means it means that God has said "yes" to Jesus and as at his baptism and as on the Mt. of the Transfiguration the voice says to us: "listen to him." The life of faith isn't a journey without fear or struggle, but a promise that Christ has already gone ahead of us. It doesn't say we have nothing to fear but simply that we do not have to face our fears alone.

I love Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*, a humorous and honest account of one woman's journey to faith. I love the way it begins, maybe in part because it affirms my own journey. She writes:

My coming to faith didn't start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another...I can see how flimsy and indirect a path they made. Yet each step brought me closer to the verdant pad of faith on which I somehow stay afloat today.

This is good news. And the proof is found in our own lives. In spite of our fears I have the great privilege in my work to see faith taking hold in people's lives: sometimes it happens with dramatic leaps and sometimes it happens with hints and guesses. But here we are, God's people—those whose journeys have been dramatic and those that have been more mundane. Here we are once again, at the empty tomb. And he isn't there. He's gone ahead of us. Our work is to keep muddling along knowing that if we keep our eyes open, we will surely find him.

To be continued...

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