

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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“The Stone is Rolled Away”

Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV)

[16:1] When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. [2] And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. [3] They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" [4] When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. [5] As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. [6] 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. [7] 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." [8] So 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.

HOW WE COME AND GO

Why have you come to church this Easter?

I know that many of you have come to this Easter service for many reasons. Some of you have come because you have always come ... not only at Easter, but also most every Sunday of the year. Perhaps some of you have come for the special music.

Some of you have come because a relative laid down the law and said, “It’s Easter. You are going to church!” You can’t fool me. I know who you are!

How and why you come to Easter is not nearly as important as how you leave. You see today’s message more than any other requires a response on your part. Before you leave the empty tomb, you must decide what you believe about Jesus.

Has He risen as he said? Did Jesus really appear to the disciples back in Galilee as he promised? And most importantly, is the Risen Christ a part of our lives?

These questions lie at the heart of the Christian faith. If He has risen as he said, if the bonds of death were defeated on this day, then this is the most important day of your life. Everything else is just window dressing.

It doesn’t make any difference if it is rainy or sunny. It doesn’t make any difference how beautiful the sanctuary and the flowers might be.

It doesn't make any difference if we have a new dress for Easter. It matters not if the music is beautiful and the sermon is inspiring and helpful.

Only one thing matters.

If God raised Jesus from the dead on this day, then the world as we know it is changed forever. And if you believe this, your life will have changed forever as well. You too will have been a witness to the resurrection.

WOMEN COME TO THE TOMB

The synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all agree on certain details when it comes to the resurrection. Only women dared to come out to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday. The men ... well, they were still in hiding.

It was still dark when those women made their way through the narrow streets in Jerusalem. Those were the same streets that just a few days earlier had been the scene of terrible violence.

These women must have loved Jesus very much to come and anoint his body this day. After all the same soldiers who crucified Jesus had been ordered to guard the tomb.

Yes, these women were courageous and loving. But, they did not come to seek a Risen Christ. They came to pay their last respects. On this everyone and all the gospels agree. Jesus was dead.

Do you know why the Bible makes such a big deal about the fact that Jesus was dead for three days? They waited three days to anoint the body so they could be sure that the deceased was in fact really deceased.

That's why when Jesus raised Lazarus after four days it was such a big deal. Not only was Lazarus dead and buried; after four days ... well, let's just say that no one would unseal any tombs after four days.

Jesus (as our Creed puts it) was "crucified, dead and buried." It had been three days. Besides, how many days do you need when a man has been crucified and his side has been pierced with a spear?

The woman who came to the tomb that morning came to perform one final act of devotion. They would lovingly wash the blood from his battered body and anoint him with sweet smelling spices.

THE STONE WAS ROLLED AWAY

There was only one problem. The tomb was sealed with a gigantic stone weighing a thousand pounds or more. This stone was rolled into a slot that effectively kept unwelcome visitors out. Perhaps three or four very strong men could roll the stone away. Perhaps, three or four strong men could do it.

But, remember the men were still at home in hiding. Who would roll the stone away?

The women had no answer to that question. And yet even this did not stop them from coming to the tomb. The sun is rising now as they approach, and they find that the stone has already been rolled away.

Inside the tomb they find a young man dressed in white.

Mark doesn't say it, but Mark's first readers would have made the assumption. He's an angel, a messenger of God. Angels reflect the glory of God with their dazzling white garments, and the women respond as everyone responds to angels in the Bible. They are scared to death.

And this young angel gives the typical word of comfort. He tells these women "Don't be afraid." And then he says more.

"Yes, Jesus was crucified, but He's not in the tomb any more. Look. See that the place where they laid him is empty.

Now, you have a job to do. Go back and tell Peter and the others disciples. Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him just as he said."

AN ODD ENDING

Each Easter Sunday all over the world the greeting is the same. I say, "He is risen." And you say? [Wait for congregation to respond]

That's right. He is risen indeed. But, that's not how Mark tells the story of that first Easter.

The angel says, "He is risen." And the women say what? They don't say anything. And that's the problem.

Most scholars (both conservative and liberal) now agree that Mark's gospel probably "ends" right here at verse 8. The earliest and best manuscripts all agree. This is where the story "ends."

But, it doesn't really end does it? In Mark's gospel there are no appearances of the Risen Christ. There are no breakfasts beside the Sea of Galilee.

There is no Mary Magdalene singing, “There He is ... right before my eyes ... the Son of God alive in all his splendor.” No, in Mark’s gospel we have women running away because they are terrified. And they don’t say anything to anyone.

What a letdown! How incomplete can a story be?

Indeed, when you read this story in the original Greek, the incompleteness of the story is even more striking. The last sentence in Mark’s gospel ends with the Greek word “gar” which means “for” or “that.” Literally the sentence reads, “They told no one for ...”

What happened? Tell us Mark.

It’s as if someone had jerked Mark up from his desk before he had the opportunity to complete his story. Where is Paul Harvey when you need him? But, unfortunately, Mark doesn’t give us the rest of the story.

DOUBT AT EASTER

Duke University has one of the most beautiful cathedrals in the country. They have first rate music and one of the best preachers you will ever hear. And this great preacher tells of an encounter he had with a young man after an inspiring Easter service.

He said that the people were surging out the door after having sung their Alleluias. They were shaking the preacher’s hand and telling him how wonderful it was to be in that beautiful church on Easter morning.

And then there was this young man, a student who had undoubtedly learned to be skeptical of such large claims. He shook the preacher’s hand, and then he also shook his head and said,

“I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

The preacher wrote,

“As we danced forth into the warm glow of Easter, the certainty of our faith having been renewed by the music, the message and the crowd ... He was only able to stumble to our assured, ‘Christ the Lord is risen today’ ... I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

The preacher concluded, “I think that young man’s name must have been Mark.”

That does seem to be the testimony of Mark. While the other gospels sing their praise and tell their stories of power, Mark can only stammer, “I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

Perhaps some of you can identify with Mark.

LEARNING TO LOVE MARK'S GOSPEL

When I first learned that the gospel of Mark probably stopped at verse eight, I found it very disturbing. I wanted Mark to be like the rest of the Gospels. I wanted him to bring a sense of closure to the whole affair. In my opinion he left the best part out!

It's no wonder to me that by the second century some helpful preachers took some other ancient traditions about Jesus and helped Mark out by adding a "decent" ending to the story.

You can't blame them. After all can you see these words from Mark inscribed over the gateway to a cemetery or carved on a tomb? "... and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

I don't think so.

And yet as I have thought about this troubling passage over the years I have come to believe that in some ways Mark might have the best ending of all.

Mark certainly believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. He tells us in the very first verse that this is gospel, good news. This is a story about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1) In Mark's gospel when Jesus predicts his Passion he always predicts his resurrection as well. (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34)

In Mark 14:27-28 Jesus predicts that his disciples will run away when the time comes for the crucifixion, but Jesus also predicts that after he is "raised up he will go before them into Galilee."

So, we don't have to worry about Mark's faith. Mark knows about and believes in the resurrection.

But, we still have to wonder why Mark ends his gospel in such an unusual way. Many scholars now think that Mark deliberately ends his story in this ambiguous way because he wants us to know that the story does not end.

For Mark, the resurrection of Jesus was not the end of the story. It was just the beginning.

I love the way commentator Lamar Williamson puts it,

"When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb—and when a Gospel ends in the middle of a sentence."

In other words it's not just about what some women saw way back when. We know without Mark writing it what those women did and what happened in the final analysis. They told and Jesus came. As one preacher put it,

"They told someone, who told someone, who told someone else, who told a lot of people, because 40 years later Mark is writing this Gospel. And nearly 2,000 years later here we are believing and sharing it."

LIFE CHANGING HOLY FEAR

But, Mark also wanted us to think about the resurrection for ourselves. He wanted us to experience the fear ... the awesomeness of this moment in the hope that we too might leave the empty tomb this Easter transformed by the experience.

Mark wanted us to know that we will not find Jesus in the graveyard of history. He goes on ahead of us. This Jesus is not the domesticated Jesus that so many believe in. He is the Risen Lord, the Son of God. Nothing like this has happened before or since.

And holy, life changing awe and terror are the proper responses to such a message.

The women came to give Jesus a decent burial. But, he had gone on before them. He was ahead of them. The stone had already been rolled away. And it scared them half to death.

And if you aren't frightened by this message you haven't been listening.

The angel gives us the same message that he gave those women long ago. He goes ahead of us. Our job is to follow.

It is not a safe path. But, it is a path that offers life eternal. Once we see the empty tomb our world will never be the same.

Yogi Berra, the talented and eccentric former catcher for the New York Yankees is well known for his mangling of the English language. He said in reference to baseball games, "It ain't over 'till its over."

Actually, Yogi was trying to recall what other fans and players often said, "It ain't over 'till the fat lady sings." This was an uncultured reference to the opera and the hope that the ball game isn't lost until the last man is out.

But, Yogi never seemed to get it straight. Instead, he always said, "It ain't over 'till its over."

Now it strikes me that a paraphrase of that statement can be a very powerful (albeit grammatically atrocious) expression of the Easter message. The message of Easter is that when we're talking about God's powerful activity in our lives and in the world, "It ain't over! It ain't ever over!"

To the frightened, discouraged disciples on that first Good Friday and Low Saturday, it certainly seemed like it was over. Their friend was dead. They had hoped that he might be the Messiah or even more.

But, now all hope was dead and gone. The last man on their side had struck out, and the game was over.

But, on Easter, the first day of the week long ago some of Jesus' friends went to the tomb expecting to see a dead body. Instead they heard an angel say, "It ain't over!"

The final enemy, death has been defeated. Jesus lives. He is present with you today and tomorrow. He goes ahead of you to prepare the way ... in this life and in the life to come.

A VISION TO OVERCOME FEAR

I know that some of you ... maybe most of you ... are going through a difficult, fearful time this morning. It may be Easter morning, but you're still on the way to the tomb. Your hopes have been dashed because your worst fears have become a reality.

You may think that things are about as bad as they can get. You may think that your story is over.

But, Mark tells us that the story, our story is not over. There are chapters left to write in your life. God is not powerless and dead. He is risen, and He goes ahead of us. As the hymn puts it, "We serve a risen Savior. He's in the world today."

He always leads us forward into the future ... into whatever uncertain "Galilee" that you and I must face this coming Monday. That's where He is, and that's where He'll meet us.

It doesn't mean that we will always have our way. We will still have many trips to the tomb before our days are done. We will still have many disappointments and fears to face.

But, this day, this blessed Easter day, we have been given a vision that one day will set us free no matter what happens.

During the Inquisition of the Seventeenth Century a man was arrested and thrown into a dungeon cell. His life was over. Those arrested during this time were never set free. They were presumed guilty until proved innocent. And no one was ever proved innocent of heresy. This man faced torture and a sure death.

But, this man did not lose hope. He had a vision, and he found a way to express it even in such dire circumstances.

He took clay from the floor of the cell and mixed it with some of his food to make a kind of paint. He took fragments of cloth and straw and made them into a paint brush. He used his cell door as a canvas, and on that door he painted a picture of the Virgin Mary and the Child Jesus.

The picture was so beautiful that in 1667 the Inquisitors did something that they had never done before. They said that anyone who could paint such a lovely picture must have seen a heavenly vision. And they set him free.

The painting still exists and is known as the Altar Del Perdon or the Altar of Pardon.

Take this as a parable of our lesson for today. We too have been given a vision that sets us free no matter where we are or what has happened to us. We too have been given a vision in which our sins are forgiven, and we are freed to live by grace.

Preacher Scott Johnston says that every Easter Sunday for 40 years now he gets a phone call. A voice on the other end will say, "Jesus is on the loose."

And then Scott will hear the click of the connection ending.

Scott knows who it is. It is a friend from seminary who is reminding Scott in his very quirky way that the story is not over.

And that's what I proclaim to you this morning.

Jesus is on the loose.

The stone has already been rolled away. The tomb is empty. He is risen.

He goes ahead of us preparing the way in this world and the next.

And the story continues.

The story of love and the hope for life eternal is still being written in the hearts of faithful yet fearful disciples everywhere.

May God help us as we seek Him and write the end of Mark's story in our own lives.

For those who are in Christ Jesus, this is not the end.

It is only the beginning.

Amen.