

Sermon: "Meet Me in Galilee"  
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First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

April 5, 2015

Mark 16:1-8

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.

## GOSPEL TRACTS

I grew up in a religious tradition that used gospel tracts.

Someone has probably given you a gospel tract at one time or another. The tracts produced by Campus Crusade for Christ are probably the most famous.

They promote the so-called "four spiritual laws."

Out of curiosity I googled it.  
Sure enough I was able to find a copy online.

Down at the bottom of the page I was invited to click a button which said,  
“I have accepted Christ today!”

And that’s the difference between a gospel tract and other kinds of literature.

The gospel tract requires you to make a decision.  
You can accept or you can reject what the author has to say but you can’t remain neutral.

The gospel tract measures success by those who click the button that says,  
“I have accepted Christ today.”

Now, gospel tracts are nothing new. They have been a part of the Christian faith from the very beginning. Confessions and Creeds are a kind of gospel tract.

And in fact, many scholars think Mark’s gospel was itself a kind of extended gospel tract.

Mark wasn’t just writing a good story.  
Mark was writing so that people might hear the good news (the gospel) and believe.

And what was the message Mark wanted us to hear?  
He tells us in the very first verse of his gospel, a verse that is more of a title than a sentence,

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

You see, for Mark the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is just the beginning.

There is more to come.  
We are challenged by Mark’s gospel to respond to Jesus in faith.  
And nowhere is that more apparent than in our lesson for today.

## ONLY THE BEGINNING

You may have noticed that Mark ends his gospel in a very abrupt way.

The women find the empty tomb and hear the news from God's messenger that Jesus is risen, and what do they do? They run away and say nothing to anyone because they are so afraid.

And that's the end of the story.

Down through the years other folks thought that this had to be a mistake so they gave Mark's gospel a "proper" ending. But, *all* of the earliest copies of Mark's gospel end at verse 8.

I think that Mark's gospel ended at verse 8. But we do have to wonder, "Why does Mark do this?" All the other gospels have stories about the risen Christ and the ascension. Mark ends his gospel with everyone running away in fear.

Mark's gospel ends with an empty tomb, a promise, and frightened women. And that's it.

Why does Mark end his story this way.?

I think Mark ends his story in this way in order to challenge *us* to respond in faith. Mark's abrupt ending invites us to participate in the story.

The tomb is empty.  
The stone has been rolled away.  
Jesus has gone ahead of us into Galilee just as he said.

What are we going to do about that?  
Are we going to run away?  
Are we going to deny him?  
Are we going to keep quiet because we are afraid?

This is not the end of the story, not for the disciples nor for us. This is just the beginning.

## THE RESURRECTION PREDICTIONS IN MARK

Mark assumes that the resurrection does occur. He just talks about it earlier in the narrative. For example, three times Jesus not only predicts his suffering and crucifixion but also his resurrection.

Jesus also foresees that the disciples will run away when the going gets tough. But, the unfaithfulness of the disciples will not spell the end of the story. It was after this prediction of unfaithfulness that Jesus told them, "But, after the resurrection meet me in Galilee."

The women may have been too scared to speak to anyone, but it didn't make any difference. Jesus had already told his disciples where to go after the resurrection.

They would be given a chance to start the story over again in Galilee.

## MEET ME IN GALILEE

There is no "proper" ending to Mark's gospel because the gospel does not end.

It continues in Galilee.

So the obvious question is: Where is Galilee and why does the risen Christ insist on meeting his disciples in this place?

Yes, Galilee was north of Jerusalem, but Galilee is also located in the opening chapter of Mark's gospel. It is in Galilee that Jesus comes proclaiming the good news.

And now that we, the readers of Mark's gospel have been to the cross and the empty tomb, we are invited to revisit that story, to go back to Galilee and read the story in a new way.

Galilee was the place where Jesus' ministry began.

Galilee was where Jesus called his first disciples.  
Galilee was where Jesus preached the good news.  
Galilee was that place where Jesus healed the sick.

In other words, Galilee was where it all began.  
 What better place than Galilee to give the disciples a new beginning?

Galilee is the place where the disciples will have the opportunity to have their sins forgiven.

Galilee is the place where broken people can find a new life.

The empty tomb is an invitation to repent and believe the good news. The message of the angel is clear.

Failure and fear will not have the last word.

The power and promises of God will have the last word. Disciples at the empty tomb are reminded of Jesus' words,

"Meet me in Galilee."

## SHOCK AND AWE

Of course, the women who went to the tomb early on that first Easter day were not expecting to find Jesus in Galilee. They were expecting to find Jesus in the tomb.

They were going to anoint him for burial.

They were going to pay their last respects.

Their only concern that day was trying to find someone to roll away the heavy stone in front of the tomb.

But, on the way the morning sun rose on the horizon, and in the bright light of that first day of the week they saw that the heavy stone had already been rolled away. And inside that empty tomb was a young man dressed in white, God's messenger.

The NRSV says that when the women saw God's messenger sitting inside the empty tomb they were "alarmed." That is way too weak a translation.

A better translation might be,  
 "They were struck with terror."

Why are they so afraid?

The Bible tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. I believe their fear is a natural response to the unexpected intervention of an awesome God.

Many people use religion as a way to try and “control” God, to get what they want.

But, the resurrection gives us a God that we can’t control.

This God is always ahead of us and is never quite what we expect God to be.

This is good news but it is also frightening news.

Our plans will need to be put on hold because Jesus is calling us to meet Him in Galilee where it all began.

If you’re going to follow the God of the empty tomb the process begins with a sense of shock and awe.

I think that’s why Mark doesn’t have the neat and tidy ending that everyone likes.

His ending creates the tension that the moment deserves.

Think of it this way. The resurrection marks the beginning of a new creation.

It is an overwhelming and incomprehensible moment in time.

Nothing will even be the same after the resurrection.

No wonder the women are so afraid that they don’t say anything to anyone. They have been a witness to the aftermath of the new big bang so to speak.

They are shell shocked.

When God draws near silence is appropriate.

What words can the women speak that would not trivialize the moment?

It’s not so much about what they had seen but about what God has done. The story as we have it allows for a moment of holy awe.

In the face of an empty tomb and God's promise silence is appropriate for us too. We too need to stand hushed in awe at God's power to take away the sting of death.

## OUR GALILEE

We know that the women eventually recovered their wits enough to tell the disciples what they had seen. We wouldn't be telling the story today if that hadn't happened.

But, the point of the story is not whether the women or the disciples went to Galilee to see Jesus.

What matters here is our story.  
We have heard the message.  
We know that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty.

What will we do with that information?

Mark points us toward Galilee.  
Everyone is invited to the Galilee reunion.  
Even those who have failed Jesus most seriously are invited to come.

Did you notice that Peter is mentioned separately in this invitation to meet Jesus in Galilee?

It's possible to translate verse 7,  
"But, go tell his disciples and *even* Peter that he is going ahead of you into Galilee ..."

I wonder if Peter had been ostracized from the other disciples because he had denied the Lord. The Lord's messenger makes it clear. Even Peter is invited to the reunion in Galilee.

Have you failed the Lord miserably?  
Are you eaten up with guilt and shame?

You are still invited to the reunion in Galilee.  
Everyone is invited ... men, women and even, no especially, those who have disappointed Jesus the most.

He still goes ahead of us with a message of forgiveness and new life.  
You will not find Jesus in the tomb of political power and powerless religion.

You will still find Him in Galilee.

Today Galilee represents the place where God in Christ has called us to be.

It might seem like no place special.

But, the presence of God in Christ makes it special.

In Galilee we once again find the presence of the risen Christ.

We find Jesus where the hungry are fed,  
and the naked are clothed.

We find Jesus where those who mourn are comforted,  
and the peacemakers are blessed instead of cursed.

In Galilee the risen Christ forgives our sins and frees us to live a life filled  
with gratitude and joy.

God's messenger has told us the mind-boggling truth.

The stone has been rolled away, and Jesus goes on ahead of us.

This is not the end of your story.

It's only the beginning.

His story isn't over, and our story isn't over either.

## THE DRAMA OF A NON-ENDING

Donald H. Juel tells the story of one of his students who had memorized the whole of Mark in order to do a dramatic, Broadway-style reading before a live audience.

After careful study, the student had decided to go with the scholarly consensus regarding the ending.

At his first performance, however, after he spoke that ambiguous last verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other, the audience waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for a proper ending.

Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, "Amen!" and made his exit.

The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively.

Upon reflection, though, the student realized that by providing the audience a satisfying conclusion, his "Amen!" had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the text.

So at the next performance, when he reached the final verse he simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence.

"The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious," said Juel, "and as people exited the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the non-ending."

I hope Mark's ending makes you feel just bit uncomfortable and uncertain.

That's what its supposed to do.

It's supposed to give you a sense of the shock and awe of that moment.

The empty tomb and the call of God's messenger filled the women with fear.

And that should make us afraid too.

But, instead of running away and shutting up, we contemplate a different response.

It suddenly dawns on us that Jesus is not only calling Peter and the women and the other disciples to come to Galilee.

Jesus is calling us to come as well.

Jesus is calling us to get over our fear and get in the game.

We too have been empowered to play a role in the kingdom that comes.

We are equipped to work for the kingdom because we too have been a witness to an empty tomb and a promise.

The Spirit of the risen Christ has invaded our lives, and as Paul put it, with “fear and trembling” we work out the implications of that salvation in our daily lives. (Philippians 2:12)

God rolled the stone away then.  
And today God is still rolling the stone away.

It's only the beginning.  
He still meets us in Galilee.

May faith overcome fear as we make the journey.

Amen.