

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Resurrection of the Lord: Easter Sunday
Sunday, April 4, 2021

“For They Were Afraid”
Mark 16:1-8

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We just heard the final words of the Gospel of Mark, but it ends so abruptly, you'd be excused for thinking that the microphone had failed or that the livestream had frozen: “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” And? We wait for more, but that's it. No need to refresh the browser or reboot the router! That's really it. In a way, Mark doesn't so much finish his Gospel as, well, just stop writing. We might prefer it when a story reaches a tidy conclusion, with loose ends tied off, but Mark ends his Gospel like his laptop ran out of battery: “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid—” Now that last word is ‘afraid’ (ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ): the story ends abruptly *with fear*. So, a question, as we explore this story: where did that fear come from?

Mark writes, “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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb” (vv. 1-2). These three women, “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome,” were exceptionally courageous. By taking the risk of tending to the body of a man executed by the Roman Empire, these women showed that they were remarkably brave. Remember that.

And, Mark writes, “As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed” (v. 5). Their first response was ‘alarm’ (ἐκθαμβέω): in the original language, that word is more about amazement than fear. They were startled, surprised—and I think we can understand that: if one walks into a tomb, and there's this striking figure in a white gown sitting there—yeah, that's alarming. So at first, they were “alarmed.”

But that's still a long way off from afraid: they weren't seized with fear quite yet. Then this angelic figure spoke: “Do not be alarmed” (v. 16), he said. That's the same word in the original (Μὴ ἐκθαμβεῖσθε): this is still alarm, not fear. “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” (v. 6). If you notice, his speech here is a bit repetitious: “He has been raised” and “he is not here” and “Look, there is the place they laid him.” It seems as though the resurrection was so shocking that this messenger needed to repeat himself to convey the message. Yet eventually he got the point across—and the trio immediately fled. Mark writes: “they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them” (v. 8).

Now notice *when* this terror, this fear, took hold: not on Good Friday but on Easter Sunday. This fear wasn't caused by the death of Christ; to the contrary, these three brave women boldly faced death and the threat of the Roman Empire by taking it upon themselves to anoint the body of a condemned criminal. They proved they could absolutely handle the threat of death.

Yet they were left frightened by the news that Christ had “been raised” (v. 6). It was resurrection that scared them. That first Easter morning, they didn't greet the news with uplifted songs or triumphant hallelujahs: there was no joy in their initial reaction. Instead, these three brave

followers of Jesus experienced terror, even panic, at the announcement of resurrection, fleeing from the tomb not with excitement but with fear. I'm not even sure that the angel was done talking: reading the story carefully, it seems possible that his last few words may have been cut short by their terrified escape.

Mary, Mary, and Salome had readied themselves to face death, and had steeled themselves to handle the mangled body; but an angel announcing resurrection? They hadn't readied themselves for that, and—in this moment—resurrection shocked and frightened them more than death. For this trio—all of whom were certainly braver than any of us—for them, an empty tomb proved more frightening than a full one.

And I wonder, how might we compare? What frightens us more: death or resurrection? Death is always hard, disturbing, unsettling...but at least it's familiar: we know it, we get it, we expect it. But resurrection? We can hardly begin to understand it (Crafton); we don't know what to expect from resurrection. Death is easy to believe in: unimaginative people can have no trouble believing in death. But believing in resurrection, in its uncertainty and mystery? It's no simple matter to believe in resurrection.

In a way, resurrection is everything that death isn't: death is anticipated, foreseeable—but resurrection is dazzling and unpredictable. The prospect of death can weigh on us, but at least we can anticipate it and plan for it. We can prepare for death by arranging our wills; we can anticipate death, in all its contingencies, with life insurance policies. In a previous congregation I served, I knew people who'd been planning for death so long that they pre-paid their own funeral expenses way back in the early 1990s, because—in prudent, Presbyterian fashion—they were thinking ahead, and didn't want to get dinged for the GST.

Death—at least it's predictable, something we can prepare for. And the two Marys and Salome, at the tomb, they came prepared, too: Mark tells us, they “bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him” (v. 1). They made the appropriate purchases, preparing the expected responses to death. All that's ready: they've prepared to face death, and they're as ready as they can be for death—yet resurrection leaves them “seized” with “terror” (v. 8).

I wonder if we—like those three—are also not ready for resurrection. Resurrection cuts against our sense of what's possible. If we've come to view death as some settled, unchangeable fact, then we're likewise not ready for resurrection. Jesus dies, and we understand it; Jesus rises, and we're stunned. As a colleague of mine once commented: they say the only things you can count on in life are death and taxes, but—after Easter—even that's no longer true! (Except taxes: you're still stuck with taxes.)

Before they “fled from the tomb” (v. 8), that messenger in a white robe gave the trio some instructions: “but go,” he said, “tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (v. 7). The directions were “go” and “tell”...yet, according to Mark, they followed only the first point: instead of “go” and “tell,” they “go” and—that's it! Mark writes: “And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (v. 8). They encountered resurrection, it frightened them, and so—instead of speaking—they remained silent.

According to Mark, resurrection scared the trio so much that they didn't tell anyone about it. But think about this... There's a question that should occur to you: “Wait a minute! If they didn't tell

anything to anybody, then how did Mark find out about this and write it down?" If they really never told anybody anything, we wouldn't have this story. (I'd be out of a sermon!) They must've told somebody sometime: they had to! At some point, they must've broken their silence and told their fellow followers of Jesus that he is risen and alive.

Who knows how long it took; eventually, however, that memory of the empty tomb was something they could no longer hold in. Once they'd seen that empty tomb and heard the announcement—"He has been raised" (v. 6)—then maybe it was only a matter of time until they just had to share what they'd seen. Maybe there was just no going back: you can't put toothpaste back in the tube, and you can't put resurrection back in the tomb! The memory of resurrection was too vital to pass over in silence—and that brave trio, at some point, had the courage to declare the message entrusted to them.

The Gospel of Mark doesn't really end; it just stops: "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid—" doesn't offer the satisfying conclusion we'd like to see; yet it's clear that the story continued *after* the written story ends. Somehow, somewhere, some way, this Gospel story continued beyond these pages, as those three faithful followers of Jesus realized they just had to speak and live the news of resurrection. And preaching on a text like this, a text that doesn't really finish, just stops—I feel like maybe I shouldn't really bring this sermon to a tidy conclusion either, since my preaching won't finish in this pulpit but must continue in your lives long after this little sermon is done.

Maybe what matters isn't how I talk about Easter today; maybe what matters is how you live Easter after you turn off your tablet or close your laptop. In the memory of the church, you've once again seen the empty tomb and heard the announcement that Christ is risen...and now it's up to you to carry resurrection with you: it's up to you to carry Easter hope into situations of hopelessness, to carry Easter possibility into situations of cynicism, to carry with you—wherever you go—the knowledge that Christ is risen and our world is not abandoned. I don't even really need to finish preaching: my sermon could pretty much stop mid-sentence anytime now! I could just trail off and close up the rest of my notes, because it's up to you now how this Easter story continues out there in your life.

Mary, Mary, and Salome came to a tomb, and saw a man in a white robe who told them Christ is risen; you came (virtually) to a church service, and saw a man in a black robe who told you the same thing. But the conclusion, the next part of this story—that's up to you: in the Gospel story, they were scared, at first...but eventually they bravely spoke and lived the resurrection. And the same goes for you: perhaps this news is frightening, but in the end, the question is whether you will find ways to live Easter hope in your lives and jobs and relationships...because Christ *is* risen, and for you this means—