

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Resurrection of the Lord
Sunday, March 31, 2024**

**“And They Said Nothing”
Mark 16:1-8**

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We just heard the final words of the Gospel of Mark, but the way it ends—so abruptly—you’d be excused for thinking our reader forgot to turn the page: “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (v. 8)—And? And...that’s it! We would prefer a tidy conclusion, but Mark finishes his Gospel like his laptop ran out of battery. And in that abrupt ending, the last word is about *fear*: “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid—” (ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ). So a question: where did that fear come from?

Because fear is not where our Gospel Lesson began: “When the sabbath was over,” we heard, “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [Jesus]. 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 are exceptionally courageous. Jesus had been executed by the powerful Roman Empire; yet they have the courage to tend to his body, taking a real risk by showing openly that they were his followers.

And even with what happens next, they’re still not afraid: “As they entered the tomb,” we heard, “they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were *alarmed*” (v. 5). In the Greek, in the original language, the word for ‘alarmed’ here (ἐκθαμβέω) is more about amazement than fear (Trenchard); they were surprised, astonished. And I think we get that: if you walk into a tomb, and there’s a guy there in a white robe—yeah, that’s surprising.

But they’re still a long way off from *fear*. When the angelic figure speaks to them, it’s still about *alarm*: “Do not be *alarmed*,” he says [μὴ ἐκθαμβεῖσθε]; “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). And it’s only *now*, at this point, that their alarm turns into fear—as they bolt out from the tomb: “they went out and fled from the tomb,” we hear, “*for terror and amazement had seized them*” (v. 8).

Now notice *when* this fear takes hold of them: it’s not on Good Friday but on Easter Sunday. Even after the Roman Empire executed Jesus, these three remained remarkably unafraid. By visiting his body, they were risking death at the hands of the Empire. But that doesn’t scare them. Heck, even the appearance of an angelic figure (which scares everybody else in the Bible) doesn’t scare these brave women.

Yet they become afraid, terrified, at the announcement that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It’s not death but resurrection that scares them. The news of resurrection wasn’t greeted with trumpets and hallelujahs, but rather with fear and panic. If—here at New St. James—we

wanted to emulate that first Easter: in lieu of a Recessional Hymn, I'd get the choir to run to the exits screaming.

So what is it about resurrection that causes fear? What is it about Easter that's more frightening than the Roman Empire, more frightening than death? Death and the Romans—those were frightening, certainly, but also, in a way, predictable. The violence of the Empire was expected: death was expected; these were frightening, but could at least be anticipated. Death and Romans, these were unsettling--but also foreseeable.

So when these three women approached the tomb that morning, they had readied themselves to face what they expected to face: the death of Jesus. They were prepared to face death; but an angel announcing resurrection? They couldn't possibly be prepared for that. They were ready for death; but they were caught totally off guard at the news of risen life. I think that's what's so frightening about resurrection. These women were absolutely braver than any of us here; yet resurrection was so far outside their expectations and experience that it shocked them into fear.

And what about us: how do we compare? What do we find more unnerving, more frightening: death or resurrection? Death is hard and unsettling...but at least it's familiar; it's something we anticipate and understand. But resurrection? We can scarcely begin to imagine resurrection; it's uncertain, unfamiliar, unpredictable. We don't know what to expect from resurrection.

In a way, resurrection is everything death isn't: death is anticipated, foreseen; yet resurrection is dazzling and unpredictable. We—just like those three at the tomb—we are not ready for resurrection, because resurrection cuts across our sense of what's possible. Jesus dies, and we understand; Jesus rises, and we're stunned. They say the only things you can count on in life are death and taxes; but after Christ's resurrection, even that's no longer true! (You're still stuck with taxes; though at New St. James we do issue charitable receipts!)

And I think resurrection frightens us also because death would be a whole lot less responsibility than resurrection. If Jesus had died, that would be that—and we could just sort of go about our lives, same as always; the church would be merely a memorial society; and that would be very easy and also very boring.

But Christ is Risen, and the Risen Christ is calling us to follow him, summoning us to reflect God's kindness in our world; and that is extremely hard...yet also wonderful and exciting. Resurrection means new life for us, as the church, as we find our purpose and direction together as the people of the Risen Christ. The story of Easter starts in that Empty Tomb—but that story continues to unfold right now, in our midst...

Which brings us back to how Mark's Gospel ends. Like I said at the outset, this Gospel account simply stops mid-sentence on that note of fear... But there's something else: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them," we heard; "*and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.*" Okay. "[T]hey said nothing to any one." They kept their mouths shut, their lips sealed; they never breathed a word about any of this; they took this story to the grave. The end.

That makes sense, right? No! Of course not! Look around! There are multiple stained-glass windows of the Risen Christ in this church! The cat's pretty much outta the bag for that whole Resurrection thing! Apparently, the story got out! At some point, their fear and disorientation must have melted away—as they realized and recognized what this news meant: the Roman Empire, which they'd learned to dread, would no longer hold final sway; the death they'd come to expect would no longer have the final word; and instead of being some little memorial society for Jesus, they were now followers of a Risen Lord. The Gospel of Mark ends with silence and fear, but clearly—somewhere beyond these pages—this story was transformed into celebration and joy.

Maybe they were able to pretend that this hadn't happened for only so long before they could no longer live in denial, and they just had to admit that Christ is Risen. Maybe they felt that they couldn't keep this hope to themselves, that when they saw the other followers of Jesus despairing—that they just had to tell them the truth. Maybe they recognized that the news of resurrection had laid a responsibility upon them—a responsibility to follow this Risen Lord—and these three brave women just couldn't back down from a challenge. Who knows how it happened? We don't know their story.

But we do get to live our story. Resurrection can be frightening, disorienting, confusing—and we may be tempted to flee away from this overwhelming news. Yet like those three women on that first Easter, I don't think we can do it. I mean, we can try: we can try to pretend this didn't happen; we can try to dismiss the hope it brings; we can try to deny the responsibility it lays upon us as followers of the Risen Christ... But I don't think we can pull that off. We can try, but—just like those three women, fleeing from the tomb—I think we'll find that the life-giving news of Easter is something we just can't outrun. Thank God! Amen.