

Easter Yr B

The earliest account of Easter morning, Mark 16, which we just heard, begins in a normal way. It is the women—in this case Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome—who discover that Jesus was raised from the dead. They were the ones who returned to the burial place, just as we might quietly return to the gravesite of a friend or relative we particularly loved. These three women went because it was up to them to care for the body. Nobody did that officially. The climate was such, the practices such, and in this case with such a hasty burial, that they had work left to do. As soon as the Sabbath was over and it was light enough to see they went to the grave to do for their Lord and teacher, their rabbi, what had been done for the dead throughout the centuries. They came to finish preparing the body for burial, bringing sweet and pungent spices to wrap into the grave clothes. Their only hope in this early dawn was that they could give Jesus—the one whom they loved, in whose presence they had felt the power and the justice and the compassion of the Lord God of the universe—the least they could do was to give him a decent burial. And so they went to the tomb, but they were saying to one another “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”—an immense boulder that probably took two or three strong men to put in place, sealing up the grave. No surprise.

But then wave after wave of surprises begin. The grave is open. They are shocked and immediately disturbed. Then a young man in dazzling white appears and they are further alarmed. But he says, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here... But go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee.” It’s too much for the women. Instead of going with the commission that Christ has given them, to go and tell the disciples, they run the other way. They are so traumatized. They are shocked, afraid, and completely silent. They run the other way. The Greek language of the New Testament is like other languages in that it is allowable to break the rules of grammar on occasion to really emphasize a point. What is literally said of the women is this: “They did not say nothing to nobody.”

Since the second century the church has not liked the ending of Mark. A massive array of commentators, classical and modern, have discussed whether Mark really meant to end his Gospel in this way. This is not the way to run a resurrection! The women quiet, scared and running away? So if you look at most any Bible, you find an alternate ending, taking pieces of the other gospels and adding them to Mark. It then has an appearance of Christ and a triumphant resurrection morning, belief of the disciples and many hallelujahs. But I am fine with Mark’s original ending. The women were totally silent. You have to give them some time to doubt what they hear. The men had time to doubt it. All the gospels say that some of the twelve disciples doubted the resurrection. Matthew says, “They worshipped him; but some doubted.” Luke says “While in their joy they were disbelieving.” John included the famous incident of Thomas, who insisted on touching Jesus. Why not let the women have time to question?

Actually, from an ancient perspective the very point of the Gospel of Mark may rest with its incomplete ending. Ancient writing was intended to do things, to make people act or believe or change their behavior, not just to give them a properly executed aesthetic experience. The expectations raised and then crushed by the end of the Gospel are intended to move the hearers of the Gospel to action. If the women don’t carry the message, is there anyone else who can? The audience of the gospel of Mark, both women and men, are challenged to themselves become faithful disciples, carrying the message to the world.

Now in the Episcopal Church, we're not really into the witnessing thing. There's a story I heard. You can believe it or not. It seems there was a preacher who was giving a sermon in a standard issue Episcopal Church. As the sermon got underway, someone yelled from the balcony: "Praise the Lord!" The preacher ignored him and went on. A second time the man in the balcony yelled out, "Glory, hallelujah!" The preacher was irritated, but tried to ignore the man a second time. As the sermon reached its climax, the man yelled out a third time, "Preach it, brother!" Disgusted, the preacher finally stopped and asked, "Why do you continue to interrupt my sermon?" "Because I've found the Lord!" "Well, you didn't find him here!"

But if the world is going to believe that Jesus rose from the dead and is with us now, they're going to believe it because you believe it and you testify to it. This is the Christian message. Jesus Christ is raised. And resurrection is not for Jesus alone, but for us as well—for those of us who know Jesus to be the way to God. If the message of Easter is lost, it dwindles down and peters out. It becomes nothing more than colored eggs and rabbits. But our God is a God who gives life to the dead. It's been that way since creation. He brought into being what didn't exist and out of chaos formed the world. Or look at Abraham and Sarah, so old they couldn't have children; they were dead as far as procreation was concerned. They had a child and named him *laughter*, Isaac. Jesus was dead. You ask his friends or ask his mother—he was dead. And yet we believe that God gives life to the dead. All of us, dead in our trespasses and sins, God has made alive. Is there a way to say that to someone? It's not enough to walk the walk. We have to talk the talk also. Do we believe that belonging to a church community is helpful in life? How many people are unchurched? Well, according to the most conservative statistics I ever hear or read, maybe 75% of Americans are unchurched. Some are unchurched because they can't seem to find a church that feels right for them. But they are searching; it's not that they don't care. What about the Convent of St. John Baptist? This might be the place that is right for a few. There are people who feel comfortable in a convent environment. We won't know until we ask them. Let us not be a community that runs from the empty tomb silent. Christ is risen, hallelujah!