

A Sermon for DaySpring

on Easter Sunday

by Eric Howell

Finishing the Story

Mark 16.1-8

April 4, 2021

Easter morning brings us to the Resurrection. The Resurrection is a cosmic story we sing together with all creation and also a personal story we each experience in an intimate way, unique to each of us as the Holy Spirit whispers to our hearts. Each of the Gospel writers tell the story of the resurrection of Jesus from their individual perspectives and so each resonates with different people in different ways at different times. Mark's Gospel, the story we read this morning, does not give us what we've come to expect in a good, full-Gospel resurrection story. But just for that reason, it may be perfect for a lot of people at this particular time.

Mark, as you may have noticed, doesn't have alleluias or celebrations or clean, happy endings. It doesn't have any of those things, but it does have an assurance that our Easter celebrations are big enough to hold within them all the uncertainties of even this moment in time, when we've been through a long darkness. We've been through quite a year. It seems like much of it may be mostly behind us, but the way forward today is not quite yet fully clear. That's true about the situation with the pandemic, but if you think about it, is true at many stations in life. The way forward in life isn't always clear. It's often not clear at all. *Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*, but often we only see far enough to see the next footfall in life. Everything beyond that is unknown.

If you're feeling at all that way these days in life, in your faith, you might feel at home in the unfinished nature of Mark's Easter story. You might feel comforted that Easter isn't just bright lights and loud noises. With the women early in the morning at Christ's tomb, there's a lot of room for not knowing what's going on, not being sure about anything, and just trying to make sense of the upside down, rock rolled away world you're living in. Sometimes that's exactly where God wants us.

Female followers of Jesus go out to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. They were going out early in the day on Sunday to prepare his body properly for burial according to Jewish custom, having been unable to perform this duty on Friday. They were going to grieve. They find the stone rolled away. The tomb is empty.

Mark's resurrection story, you may have noticed, doesn't have a resurrection. At least there's no resurrection appearance by Jesus. What Mark does have is early morning while it's still dark, and uncertainty and fear and trembling and not knowing how any of this is going to work out. And amazing news, and hope, hope that something that is not supposed to happen has happened. And it will change everything.

There are disciples, but no Jesus. There is a tomb, but no body. There is an empty tomb, but no resurrection appearance.

There is fear. Mark emphasizes this point. Listen again to the descriptions:

They were alarmed

Terror and amazement seized them

They were afraid.

One of the themes of Mark's Gospel is amazement. People are in awe at what Jesus is doing from the very beginning. "What is this?" they asked, "We've never seen anything like this."

But what happens at the empty tomb is fundamentally different. In the place of delighted amazement is alarm. They are frozen in place. In another book in the New Testament, this Greek word is translated as being in a trance.

The empty tomb and absence of Jesus' body has put these women in shock, and adding to all of that and the mystery of it all is a young man dressed in a white robe who is there at the tomb. This story does not have an account of a resurrection appearance, but through him, it does have a resurrection promise:

"Do not be alarmed;

you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified.

He has been raised; he is not here.

Look this is the place where they laid him.

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."

All through Mark's Gospel people are told to keep quiet, but they talk anyway.

Here they are told to go and tell, but they 'say nothing to anyone.' They are alarmed, amazed, in terror, and afraid.

Is this an Easter story a time such as this? It could be. I think a lot of us would describe our experience of the last year as marked by periods of alarm, fear, even terror. . .

From New York City morgues to overflowing ICUs in every city across the world;

From quiet stadiums to darkened classrooms to empty sanctuaries to empty arms;

From a gruesome death on a lonely sidewalk in Minneapolis to grief and anger crashing in waves over the city streets of so many cities;

From violence and murder in Asian spas in Atlanta to a supermarket in Boulder to an office building in Southern California;

From contention about voting day to overflowing anger leading to inauguration day;

All of this taking place in a world where the distance between here and an unnamed market on the other side of the world in a city most of us had never heard of gets painfully small while the

separation from the people most of us can hardly bear to be apart from has gotten impossibly wide.

Goodness, you've been through a lot this year.

It hasn't all been bad, let's be sure to remember that. A lot of good has come in a lot of ways to a lot of people. There is always something to celebrate. Always a reason to give thanks. *Whatever is good, whatever is true, whatever is noble . . . think on these things.* Indeed.

Just waking up this morning, being here outside under these majestic oaks on this beautiful day with one another to sing and pray and celebrate baptism. And more and more families reuniting after a year apart. Doesn't that first hug feel so good? Doesn't that first time to be back in person at church feel so good?

We have so very much for which to be grateful. And we're even more grateful because we've been through so very much together, and uniquely personally.

Why does Mark just leave us in the dim half-light with people who alarmed in shock? Maybe because that's the human condition into which the resurrection bursts forth. Mark, especially by only telling the part of the story characterized by uncertainty, helps us remember that living as a faith community in the risen life of Jesus is to live in a world where the resurrection is an utterly shocking unmasking of the way things are. He takes us there and holds us there, lest we ever cease to be shocked by it. Let us never, ever cease to be amazed and shocked by the empty tomb of Jesus.

The Easter story about God's power over evil and death is rooted deeply in human inadequacy, lack of understanding, and weakness. And so, it is a story to which we can all relate. Mark knows the world is one where sickness, leprosy, blindness, lameness, religious hypocrisy, and misused political power all constitute the world Jesus came to save. If the resurrection matters at all, it matters because death is such a fearsome enemy and evil is an ever-present danger and darkness is all around.

And there it is. Jesus, who embodies all of human condition is not in the world's tomb, not defeated by death, not overcome by evil, and not afraid of the dark. He has risen, and we rise with him. Even from the ashes, even from the uncertainties, even in our fears, our doubts, our sins, our grief, our despair. We rise with him.

The empty tomb story is the ultimate "This was not supposed to happen" story.

The stone was not supposed to be rolled away.

The tomb was not supposed to be empty.

The young man dressed in white, he's not supposed to be there.

Jesus, raised from the dead, that's definitely not supposed to happen.

In a world where 'that's not supposed to happen' happens, causing grief, suffering, and death, Easter is the ultimate 'that's not supposed to happen' bringing joy, hope, and life.

And yet they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. What kind of ending is that?

Pretty much immediately each of us, like scribes long ago, mentally writes at least one additional line to the Gospel. Here's mine:

They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

But then they did because they had hope.

And hope finishes the story that fear threatens to end.

They had hope.

And so do I.

And so do you.

And so do we all.

Thanks be to God.

Alleluia. Amen.

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