

An Invitation to Proclaim

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Mk. 16:1-8 (C.E.B.)

Did you hear how the scripture ended?¹ "They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (Mk. 16:8). Nothing. To anyone. In fact, that's how the Gospel ends.

Now, of course, they eventually told someone. We all know that. If for no other reason, we know because Paul wrote about it before any of the gospels were written (see, for example, 1 Cor. 15:1-11). They told someone or he wouldn't know.

Nor would we.

But this is the way Mark ends his Gospel. In fact, in the Greek it is even more abrupt than that. It seems to end in the middle of a sentence.² It's a strange way to end the story. For that reason, there are some scholarly debates.

- Some believe the original ending was lost.
 - Others believe a different ending was added.
- (You can look at the footnotes in your Bible to learn more about that.)

But I am convinced Mark ends it here for a reason. Actually, I am convinced by several reasons. Not the least of which is that Mark is keeping the focus on what God is doing. It doesn't matter if the women tell anyone or not.

- God rolled the stone away (Mk. 16:4).
- God raised Jesus from the dead (Mk. 16:6).
- God made the promise to meet the disciples in Galilee (Mk. 16:7).

This is a story about what God *is* doing; it's not about what people have *failed* to do.

Actually, I think the women at the tomb are a lot like Samuel (1 Sam. 3:1-18). You remember the story of when he was a young boy? He was learning to become a priest. So he was staying at the temple. And one night, he heard God calling his name. He thought it was his mentor, Eli. So he came running to Eli, who told him to go back to bed. It happened again. And again he was told to go back to bed. The third time, Eli realized it was God. So he told Samuel what to do if it happened again. And it did. This time Samuel says, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam. 3:10).

¹ There is a musical break between when the scripture is read and the sermon begins.

² I do not know Greek, but several of the commentaries refer to this fact.

That's usually where we stop reading the story, though. We sometimes forget what God says to that young boy. And we forget that in the morning, Samuel is afraid to tell Eli what he had heard (1 Sam. 3:15).

His reaction is just like that of Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome. They run in fear. And that doesn't seem to be such a strange thing. We would likely do the same thing.

- Can you imagine your surprise if you found the stone rolled back?
- Can you imagine your hearts racing as you enter the tomb?

I know you can imagine being startled by seeing someone sitting inside the tomb, sitting where they expected to see Jesus. Just Friday these same three women had seen Jesus die (Mk. 15:40). They had watched them place his lifeless body in this very tomb (Mk. 15:47). Now he is not there – and someone else is!

I remember being at the office once. It was at a different church, and I had walked to work that day, so there were no cars in the parking lot. I was working on my sermon when I thought I heard a noise. So, I went to explore the sound. I wandered around a little, listening tentatively.

Seeing no one there, and no cars in the parking lot, I headed back to my office, assuming it was my imagination. That's when someone walked around the corner.

We both jumped. Neither of us was expecting to see someone there.

I don't know which of the women would have jumped higher. But there is no doubt in my mind that Mark understates it when he says they were alarmed (Mk. 16:5). They probably jumped out of their skins!

In their society two witnesses were required to verify anything out of the ordinary. If it were women, however, their testimony was not accepted – not even if three of them corroborate the story – because women were not to be trusted.

I'm so glad we live in a different world today, aren't you?

But given their social status, I can understand why they might not want to tell anyone anything (Mk. 16:8). That is to say nothing of their fear of the Romans. They were the ones who put Jesus to death, after all. What would happen to these women if they were to announce that Rome had failed?

But I don't think this story is really about their fear. Like every other visit by an angel in every other story in the Bible, they are told there is no need to be alarmed (Mk. 16:6). Rather than be alarmed, they are told to go (Mk. 16:7).

They are told to tell someone.

And I believe Mark ends the story here as a way of inviting us to go. He intentionally tells us the women remain silent. I think Mark does so because he wants us to be the ones who tell the story.

At the beginning of the year, I invited you to read through the Gospel of Mark, knowing we would be reading through it on our way to Easter. If you did that, you may have noticed a technique Mark uses to get us involved in the story. In the very first line he tells us a secret that no one else says out loud until Jesus is on the cross. He tells us that Jesus is God's son (Mk. 1:1, 15:39).

It seems so obvious to us, as the reader, that we become more and more frustrated with the apparent blindness of the disciples – and everyone else in the story. And then Mark ends it by telling us the women didn't tell anyone anything.

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As I said earlier, it is not about what the women have not said. It is not about their fear, either. No, this is a story about what God is doing.

- God has rolled the stone back.
- God has raised Jesus from the dead.
- And God has promised to meet us in our hometown.

Sometimes, that seems a little hard to swallow, though.

It's like the boy who went to Sunday School for the first time.³ When he got home, his mother asked him what he learned. He said the teacher told the story of how Jesus had gotten arrested. He had stolen a donkey. Then he broke into someone's house and had dinner. So they put him to death. Only someone snuck him off the cross before he died. Then they buried a sack of potatoes so it would look like a body. During the night someone came in and got the potatoes. And after church they had mashed potatoes and said Jesus is alive.

His mother asked, "Are you sure that's what the teacher said?"
"No, but if I told you what she really said, you'd never believe me."

It is strange that they are told to go to Galilee, though. I mean, really? If you were going to announce an earth-shaking news event, would you hold the news conference in Halstead? Or Inman?

Or would you choose a venue like Wichita or Kansas City? Maybe you would choose Washington, DC.

So why does Jesus meet them in Galilee? Why not Jerusalem?

I think it gets back to why Mark ends the story where he does. I think it's to remind us that Jesus comes to our hometown. Jesus is inviting us to tell the story.

Several years ago, I read a book in which the author told a story.⁴ It's a story, he says, that haunted him for many years. It's a story that began when a member of his congregation came to meet with him. The man said something happened on his way home from his weekly poker game. On the way home, he became aware of the physical presence of Jesus. The incident clearly unnerved him.

The pastor could tell he was shaken by the encounter. When he asked when this happened, though, the man said it was ten years earlier. Ten years! And he was still visibly shaken. He told the pastor that he had never told anyone about it before. Why?

- Was it because he was embarrassed?
- Was it because he was ashamed?
- Was it because he thought no one would believe him?

No. He remained silent because he was afraid. He was afraid it might be true. You see, if it was true, he would have to change. And he didn't want to change.

The truth is, we are a lot like him. Sometimes we want the story to be just that: a story. Just like the man who encounters the living Christ, we don't want to change.

³ I could not find the original story, so I made up this one. The punch line, however, is not original.

⁴ Willimon, pp. 40-41.

But Easter is all about change.

- God changes the rules about death.
- God extends forgiveness to all of us.
- God invites us to be a part of the Resurrection story.
- God is calling us to leave behind our habits of death and destruction.
- God is inviting us to live with a sense of hope and purpose.

It is an invitation to finish the story where Mark left it dangling. It really is bringing the story full circle, completing the story where it began. I don't think it's a coincidence that he begins by telling us this is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God" (Mk. 1:1). On Easter the story is still beginning.

Of course, an empty tomb is just an empty tomb.

It could be the wrong tomb, after all.

And a stone rolled away is just a stone in the wrong place.

It could be the wrong tomb.

A man inside the tomb is just a man inside a tomb.

It could be the wrong tomb.

Except. Except this is the same place the women had stood on Friday night (Mk. 15:47). It is not just any empty tomb. The stone has been rolled away to release a prisoner. And Jesus will meet us in the Galilees of our lives, in our hometown.

But no one will know any of that if no one speaks. And since the women have gone away in fear and trembling, it is up to us to tell the story.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Amen.

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