

Easter Sunday Sermon

Mark 16:1-8 (NIV)

16 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

⁴But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

⁶"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

⁸Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

"He Has Risen!"

What you just heard was Mark's short account of the resurrection of Jesus. He does not narrate any post-resurrection appearances to the disciples, nor their commissioning for mission. And yet Mark *must* have known *something* of those events. It is a bit of a mystery, but instead of thinking about what we *wish* Mark *would* have told us, let's explore what Mark *does* tell us! And let's begin by placing the stunning Easter morning news in the context of other events in his gospel.

In the previous chapter, Mark relates the events of the crucifixion. There is a climactic moment when a centurion at the foot of the cross, on seeing how Jesus died, says, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"¹ The identity of Jesus that Mark announces in his very first verse, and which has been suppressed throughout the gospel, is publicly affirmed by a Roman soldier – of all people – and one who was intimately involved in the killing of Jesus. We are also told that some women were watching *from a distance*; among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph,² and Salome. We are told that these women were from Galilee and they had *followed* Jesus *faithfully* and cared for his needs. There is no mention of the men. They had run away earlier at the trial,³ yet Mark does relate how Peter denied Jesus three times.

¹ Mark 15:39.

² This is possibly James the brother of Jesus, i.e., Jesus' mother, but this oblique reference is strange and, therefore, it may well be another "Mary."

³ Mark 14:50.

After the Sabbath had ended at sunset on Saturday, some of those same women bought spices in order to bury Jesus properly. The two Mary's knew precisely the location of the tomb since they had witnessed Joseph of Arimathea placing the body of Jesus there on Good Friday. We are told it was *very early* on Sunday morning, at sunrise, the earliest opportunity on the first day of the working week, that they went to the tomb in order to complete the primary burial. This was a sad task, but a necessary one, both for reverence sake, and to lessen the smell of decomposition.⁴ Later on, the bones of Jesus would have been collected and put in a small box, an ossuary ("*osh-u-ary*"); this would be the 'second' burial.

Whatever the emotions going through the minds these devoted women, whether overwhelming grief, anger, fear, or some other sentiment, for them, the *body* of Jesus still *mattered*. Clearly, they had absolutely *no expectation* of the resurrection, else they wouldn't be taking spices! And they were discussing who would help them roll the stone away from the tomb's entrance. The stone, which Mark notes was "very large," was their main concern.⁵ Who would help them roll it away so they can perform their task? They were clearly expecting to find someone in the vicinity to help them - else they would have brought others with them. Then they had the shock of their lives! Mark tells us they "looked up and saw that the stone had been rolled away." Mark's reader, nevertheless, understand that this deed is *God's* doing. This completes the earlier divine action that tore the temple curtain in two,⁶ symbolizing that God is no longer hidden and we now have direct access to God. The stone was *not* only 'once-upon-a-time' rolled away, but *once-for-all-time* rolled away; this past act of God definitively affects the present and cannot be undone.

Entering the tomb, the women see a young man in white robes, sitting at the right side - the place of dignity and authority. The women's reaction of alarm is typical for angelic visitations within Scripture, indicating that this is, in fact, an angel. It is this divine messenger who says to the women:

"You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

The new reality are made crystal clear: "I know you are looking for a *specific person* – Jesus of Nazareth - who met his death in a *specific way* – who was crucified - and who was buried in this *specific place*. No, you have not got your facts wrong. But he *is* risen! He is *not here*. If you're looking for the one who was crucified, then you're looking in the wrong place! He is *out there* – he is *going ahead of you!* Into Galilee – and, yes, you will see him there, just as he said he would."

The risen Christ does *not* appear to the women in a dramatic way in order to overwhelm or coerce faith. Witness to the resurrection *in the process of it actually happening* did not occur! Even if that

⁴ Even by day three, it was a losing battle in that the body would already be smelly!

⁵ Mark 16:4.

⁶ Mark 15:38.

were witnessed, would we believe that claim? Probably not. We are not given rigorous “proof” of the resurrection in Mark; we are called to a journey of *faith*. Moreover, Mark’s account doesn’t really focus on the physical evidence, such as the empty tomb, but stresses the *words of the divine messenger*. The question then, and now, is whether we will believe *those words*. Mark’s account ends with the women fleeing from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, and saying nothing to anyone because they were afraid.⁷ There is no shout of victory, only astonished silence; no leap for joy, only running in fear. There is uncertainty, mystery, silence, a brooding puzzle.

Of course, although that is the abrupt end of Mark’s gospel, it is *not* the end of the story. Evidently the women did tell people - else we would not have their testimony! Moreover, if Jesus had not been raised from the dead *we would never have heard of him*. By far the best evidence of the resurrection is the very existence of the Church. Nothing else could have changed sad and despairing disciples, and trembling and bewildered women, into people radiant with joy and aflame with courage and hope. They went on to proclaim that Jesus *did* rise on the third day and some of them were martyred. And we already know that Mark believed that Jesus *was* resurrected. *Three* times Mark has emphasized that Jesus predicted the details of his own death *and* that he would rise again after 3 days.⁸

Incidentally, the *resurrection* of Jesus is *not* literally Jesus coming back to life again with a reinvigorated human body, as in the case of Jairus’ daughter in Mark 5.⁹ As mentioned in Mark 12, there was already a Jewish expectation for the resurrection of the righteous at the end-time renewal of all creation.¹⁰ The resurrection of Jesus, then, announces that this end-time salvation has already begun; we have a “glimpse of future in the present,” with Jesus being resurrected to new life and with a new kind of body.

Mark doesn’t spell out that detail, of course, but what he does say is that after the Last Supper, on the Mount of Olives, Jesus told his disciples, “After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.”¹¹ In mentioning Galilee, what Jesus and the angelic messenger *both* state is that *there is more work to be done*. The focus of mission is not in Jerusalem, the political center of the region, but in Galilee – signifying the place where Jesus preached the “kingdom of God,” healed the sick and exorcised demons. This suggests we carry on doing *that* kind of ministry, with the authority and blessing of the risen Messiah. Moreover, the angel mentions Peter by name, indicating that grace is even extended in this new beginning to those fearful disciples who abandoned Jesus, and to Peter who denied him. In Mark’s own time, there must have been some readers who had been tested by persecution and had failed. They would therefore find encouragement in the story of Jesus’ own disciples, all of whom had

⁷ Mark 16:8.

⁸ Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34. – See also Mark 9:9.

⁹ Mark 5:21–43.

¹⁰ Mark 12:18–27; see also Dan 12:2.

¹¹ Mark 14:28.

failed during his passion. It provides hope for all of us too, and it also indicates that God has continuing work for us to do as well.

As I said at the beginning, Mark's account of the resurrection of Jesus is short. Many scholars think that that is where Mark deliberately ended his gospel; others are convinced that Mark either wrote more or intended to write more, and what we have is therefore incomplete. It seems as if the later copyists also thought that Mark couldn't have meant to stop here, and were determined to fill in the gap! If you look in your Bibles, you will find two additional endings, a shorter one and one longer one. The Greek of the shorter one is very different from that of Mark's gospel, and was therefore obviously added later. And the longer version, which was already known in the second century, seems to be made up of elements of Matthew's and Luke's account, together with bits and pieces from elsewhere. But the oldest manuscripts of Mark's gospel end at 16:8, where our reading ended this morning.

The ambiguities and curiosities over Mark's ending are beside the point. If there is a deliberate "blank" at the end of the story, then *we* are invited to fill it in ourselves. That story will be based on *faith*. Even so, Jesus goes before *us* and so remains Lord of *our* story, and he invites us to meet with him in the "Galilee" of our daily lives. Consequently, there is an endless quality about the Christian faith. It should never stand still because our Lord is the *living* Jesus and new Spirit-inspired truths and wonders are being discovered all the time. As we move forward in faith, simply note that Jesus is not merely a figure in a book. Yes, we may *begin* our journey by considering him to be just like any other great historical figure, but we must *end* by meeting him. Jesus is not someone to simply discuss, so much as someone we encounter.

He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him – it's empty. Go tell everyone that Jesus has gone ahead of you into the world. And there you will see him, just as he promised." **Amen.**