

“Easter Sunday”

April 4, 2021

Gospel Reading
Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him

And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; 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.

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.”

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The Gospel most preachers will use today is John 20:1-18, where Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early on the first day of the week, while it is still dark. You know that story. It’s a good one.

Mary goes to the tomb and finds that the stone had been rolled away, and runs back to tell the disciples, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him!”

Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, comes running to the tomb. The other disciple gets there first and looks inside but doesn’t go in.

Peter, impulsive as ever, goes on into the tomb.

Sees the linen wrappings lying there, empty, and the cloth that had been around Jesus' head rolled up and lying in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple comes into the tomb and sees what Peter sees but unlike Peter, he believes, believes that Jesus has risen, and not that his body has been stolen, and this is even before they understood the scripture that said Jesus was supposed to rise from the dead.

At any rate, the disciples return to their homes, but Mary stands there just outside the tomb, weeping.

At last, she looks inside and sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

They ask her why she is weeping, and she says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him."

Then she turns around, she sees Jesus standing there, but she doesn't know it is Jesus. She thinks it is the gardener.

He asks her, "Why are you weeping?" Whom are you looking for?"

And she says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

And that's when Jesus says, "Mary," and when she hears that voice as she had many times before, she knows who it is. Her heart leaps and she says: "Rabbouni!" which means "Teacher."

She runs to embrace him. Jesus says, "Don't hold on to me, because I haven't yet ascended to the Father, but go and tell the others, 'I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.'"

And that is what Mary does -exactly what Jesus told her: she tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

It's a good story, isn't it? A great story. It's the best surprising ending of the greatest story ever told. Which is probably why John 20:1-18 is a preacher's favorite reading for Easter every year and not Mark 16:1-8.

Mark's Easter Gospel is different. Instead of ending the story with the songs of Halleluiahs, Christ is risen today; Mark simply ends it with silence. Not like John's good news. Mark's story doesn't hand over to us a perfect ending. That would be too easy.

Mark ends his gospel with more questions than answers. He leaves us wondering and longing for the good news.

The power of Mark's story is its relevance today. It speaks to our lives and those before us who have waited a long time for answers. Instead of gathering in the sanctuary singing Jesus Christ is Risen Today, most of us will wear mask and stay home. Silence can be overwhelming.

In Mark - there are no Alleluias from the mouths of those women who waited all night long. That's not what they said when the Sabbath was over; they made their way to the tomb; Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, Mark calls them by name.

They had been there on Friday. They witnessed Jesus crucified.

Mary Magdalene even saw Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus' lifeless body in linen and lay him in the tomb. Their friend was dead and left them to deal with whatever was next.

The women worried as they walked toward the grave: "Who will roll away the heavy stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

And when they were nearer to the tomb, they saw that the stone had already been rolled aside.

They still didn't shout Alleluia. Even after the young man in white tells them that Jesus had been raised, they didn't shout "Christ is risen!"

That's what we want them to say. But they didn't. Instead, they fled from the tomb for "terror and amazement had seized them."

They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Then Mark's gospel ends and Jesus never appears.

People are not good with silences. And soon others after Mark, added new endings, endings where Jesus did appear to Mary Magdalene and to the eleven disciples. And the good news was definite. Those endings are usually printed in italics or in brackets in most Bibles.

Mark knew the story. He had heard it from those who knew Jesus and the faith community who gathered in his name.

So, I am thinking, maybe Mark wrote his narrative like he did - so the story would have meaning to those after the generation of eyewitnesses.

Mark was writing in the midst of trauma. The Roman armies had squashed a Jewish rebellion, destroyed the temple and much of Jerusalem. Jews were killed by the thousands and those who followed Jesus were increasingly persecuted. (Pause)

He is writing to a community whose lives had been torn apart.

Mark allows room for a silence that acknowledges trauma. A place where Halleluiahs are not possible. A silence that demonstrates there are no words for trauma or amazement. Mark stands with them in a deafening silence. (Pause)

You see - those three women - didn't see Jesus that morning. Neither do we.

They didn't hear Jesus call their names. Neither have we

They weren't invited to touch his wounded hands. We haven't touched Jesus' hands either.

We know about Mark's silence. The fear and trauma living with this pandemic- feels like there is no end. The lack of conversation with a loved one at Easter dinner replaced by the buzz on TV screens. The subtle silence of a ventilator trying to pump life back into the death. We know about Mark's silence.

The children who call out for their mothers in the middle of the night hear silence. Asian, Black and Brown people who cry out for justice and nobody says anything. We know about Mark's silence. Mark's story acknowledges our silence on this Easter morning. And stands with us.

That means God hears us too. And is as close to us as life and death.

For me, that is resurrection.

Joan Mitchell says ...the silence of the last disciple in Mark's gospel is to bring us to the edges of our own faith - to the place where we do not have words to speak the unspeakable... to those times, when we are not sure how to trust Who or What is beyond death. Mary's silence, the narrative, still calls us to speak and bring the gospel into dialogue with whatever is going on with you.

Mark's ending. and Mary's silence, is a segue of sorts. Because what you do with this good news is up to us. We can listen to it, we can overhear it, we can read about it, or we can claim it and make it our own.

You can make it your own for this life, this morning, right now without worrying about yesterday, or speculating about tomorrow.

You can seize this moment this day, this very hour and you can start over.

Mark's silence gives you space where you can claim your second chance, your second birth, your new lease on life, - because it is entirely up to you.

It was the same for the women who arrived at the silent empty tomb. They went back home to Galilee as Jesus had invited them. They had a choice of what to do. Because what they did next was living proof of the resurrection.

If you hear nothing else this morning - the proof of the resurrection, is not simply in your hands, it is literally in your life. What are you going to decide? If you want to make the resurrection yours both now and at the hour of your death, get on with it now, for Christ's sake and yours.

Thus, the ending – we get to choose.

The end of Mark's Easter Gospel demands: don't stay at the tomb; start living your life. Start claiming it. Start making it your own today, for the first time, and you will be the only proof of the resurrection that this tired old world will ever need.

I like how Fredrick Buechner talks about the Easter story: "The power of stories is that they are telling us that life adds up somehow, that life itself is like a story. And this grips us and fascinates us because of the feeling it gives us that if there is meaning in any life.

And if this story is true, it is of enormous significance in itself, and it makes us listen to the storyteller with great intensity because in this way all his stories are about us and because it is always possible that he may give us some clue as to what the meaning of our lives is."

Amen.

*Credits to:
Barbara Lundblad
Peter Gomes
Fredrick Buechner*