

“A Healthy Fear”
Mark 16:1-8
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006

Welcome to Easter Sunday. Holy week is a time of remembering and a time in which we are surprised and even horrified by the rapid changing events. It is a week when the unthinkable happened to Jesus—he was executed. Today, however, is a day in which we celebrate the unexpected---**resurrection**.

-1-

Among the gospel accounts there are different versions about the empty tomb. These differences reflect different traditions, different purposes of the authors, and different faith communities. The gospels are not a “history” of Jesus as we today understand history. The gospels were written to convey a message, an understanding to people living in real times, raising their families, earning their livings and doing the best they could. Although history has claimed the First Century culture, the gospel---the good news is still relevant to we who live in this time---you and I, raising our families, earning our livings and trying to do the best we can.

In this way Mark is strikingly different from the other gospels. Mark names three women: Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary the mother of James who approached the tomb in the early morning hours of that day. They were wondering who would move the heavy stone covering the tomb. They find that the stone has been moved. They go into the tomb and see a young man in a white robe sitting there. They are afraid.

The man, who is not identified and is not referred to as an angel says, “Don’t be afraid, I know you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene the one they nailed on the cross. He’s been raised up: he’s here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now---on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You’ll see him there, exactly as he said.”

Mark continues: “They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.”¹

That is precisely where Mark’s gospel ends---the original version. Some later copies of Mark have a second ending which relates that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, then to the two disciples and then told the followers that they were to go and proclaim the good news AND that followers would be able to handle poisonous snakes, be bitten, and not die. Most scholars suspect that this ending was added at a later time because Mark ended so abruptly.

There are some manuscripts that contain a **third ending** which appears alone on some manuscripts and together with the second ending on others. In this ending the women tell Peter and the disciples what had happened and ends by saying that later Jesus sent the disciples “east and west” to proclaim the good news.

The consensus among many scholars is that both of these endings were added at a later time because the oldest manuscripts of Mark have no resurrection appearance and have no commissioning scene. Thus according to

¹ The Message, Eugene Peterson

the oldest manuscripts Mark ends where Mark ends---with the women running away in fear and saying nothing.

There are some interesting things about Mark's text:

-2-

FIRST: The first evangelists were women. It appears that men and women had a new equality in the early church. Jesus is remembered as being inclusive and is remembered as including women within his ministry. All gospels attest that the first evangelists were women who carried the message back to the disciples.

In the early church, women and men served side by side. Priscilla and Aquilla were early church leaders. Priscilla, a woman, is mentioned first indicating that she was the leader in the church. The current debates about the status of women in the church have no basis in the early church. These modern exclusive attitudes developed later as the church began to reflect the attitudes of the culture rather than the attitude of Jesus.

Mark and the other gospels confirm that God had no hesitancy in women being the first evangelists.

-3-

A second interesting point in Mark is that the women are afraid.

Mark seems to emphasize this point. They are afraid before they enter the tomb and they are afraid when they are told to go and tell others about the risen Jesus. The young man tells them "do not be afraid!" In the first case they

overcame their fear and entered the tomb and in the second case they got over their fear or we would not know the story.

Many believe that the Christian community to whom Mark's gospel was addressed was experiencing pressure to remain silent---to not speak what they had experience for fear of reprisal. Could it be that Mark intentionally ended his gospel in the way he did to affirm that fear is real but to also affirm that God overcomes our fear so that the gospel is shared?

Healthy fear is not only normal but appropriate. As some of you know I took up horseback riding a couple of years ago. The first time that I was told to go out and "get the horse" I was quite fearful. Horses are a lot bigger than the dogs and cats I was used to. The thought of walking up to a horse and putting a halter on the horse was frightening. Obviously I overcame that fear---because I continue to ride horses today.

What should we be afraid of concerning God? Well to begin with God is larger than anything we can imagine. The Hebrews had a healthy respect and fear for God to the point that they would not use the name of God but instead substituted the letters that are roughly translated "Yahweh". To name God, they felt, was to diminish God because God is more than we can ever imagine or define.

When God interacts or when something happens that we discern is God's action my experience has been a sense of fear---awe---and respect. The women knew that they were witnessing something great---something important---fear was not only normal but healthy.

Perhaps we in the church should be afraid more often----not a fear that paralyses but a fear that puts things in perspective. A fear sometimes happens that reminds us that we are engaged in doing something holy---something awesome—we have been called to be witnesses to what God is doing.

-4-

Another interesting point in the way that Mark ends in that the story is left uncompleted. I believe this was intentional on Mark's part. The lack of a resolution or a resurrection appearance and the last words being “**they said nothing!**” would cause one to ask a question----**how will the message get out?**

Imagine the Gospel of Mark as a sermon---which is closer to what it is---- imagine that it was a sermon. You are sitting there listening to this marvelous story of a man from Nazareth who did remarkable things, who preached remarkable things, and whom God claimed was the “son of man”—the one God had chosen.

Then you hear the events of the last week---how Jesus was falsely accused---beaten---executed and buried. You listen to how one of his followers betrayed him, another denied him, and the rest fled. Then you hear the remarkable story that Jesus has been raised and hear the young man tell the women to go and tell the disciples---and then the story ends abruptly with the words that the women were so afraid that they told no one.

What would you think or say? Most likely, “**Then how is this story going to be told? If they don't who will?**”

And the speaker looks at you---just as I am and says---if you are too afraid---then the story ends here. You are the one to share this remarkable story. You are now the witnesses.

-5-

Finally, there is hope and comfort for the young man tells us that Jesus is going on before us. In Mark we never see the Resurrected Jesus, he never speaks, but we are left with the image that he has gone on before us and we are to join him. We are the settlers following where Jesus has already gone. Theologian Jurgan Moltmann positioned God as just beyond the horizon beckoning us forward. God is not only with us but ahead of us beckoning us to become what we can be.

In this regard the church and for that matter the disciple of Jesus is oriented toward the future---toward possibility---toward hope rather than entrenched in the past--- believing something is possible---being people of hope.

Resurrection is about hope. It is about life conquering death---love conquering hate---and light conquering darkness. Jesus is going on before us and we are to follow. Jesus invites us to carry the wonderful "good" news of God's love and God's redemption. We may be afraid but we must move beyond our fear and carry the message. Easter is not the end it is really the beginning.

So as Mark says---we say---if the women were too afraid to speak then who will tell this wonderful story---we will!!!!