

# “Not Here”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – April 12, 2020*

Easter Sunday

Psalm 118:1, 21-27

Rev. John Wahl

Mark 16:1-8

“He has been raised. He is not here.” These three women had come to the tomb at dawn, as earliest as they possibly could; to anoint the body of Jesus: one of the most sacred Jewish acts of *mitvah* – holy service. Their friend had died and – I can only imagine – in the midst of their grief, they are just trying to do the next, good thing.

The women are concerned with practical things: they stop along the way to buy spices and discuss how they are going to roll away that large stone in front of the cave. While the other gospels describe the disciples running hurriedly back and forth from the tomb on Easter morning, I envision these women walking; resolutely, dutifully, lovingly. When they arrive at the tomb, they see that the stone has already been moved. Maybe, at first, this would have been a relief: problem solved.

But when they look inside the tomb, they find not Jesus, but a young man dressed in white; there to tell them this simple message. He sees that they are afraid and knows that they are looking for Jesus. His instructions for them are clear: go and tell that disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee, just as Jesus had told them.

The women are afraid – terror and amazement are the words used to describe their fear – and though they are given instructions to go and tell, we are told that they can’t say anything. Perhaps they were unsettled by the sight of this young man in white: was he an angel, or was it all just a dream? Or perhaps they were frightened by the possibility that Jesus might actually be alive: but as what, a man or a ghost? Or, perhaps they are terrified that no-one would believe their story; who would, what proof did they have? Or perhaps something so simple as not finding what they expected had unsettled them; their plan was to prepare the body

and go back home. Those plans had been shattered and they don't know what to do with the unexpected.<sup>1</sup>

Every Sunday morning when I come here to lead virtual, on-line worship – knowing that there is no congregation coming to worship with me – I am reminded of these words told to the women at the tomb: “He has been raised. He is not here.” I know the promise that whenever two or three gather, Jesus will be present; but in this time, maybe more than ever, I have come to understand that Jesus – the Son of God; the word revealed; the life, the resurrection, and the truth – is not defined by or confined to any church building, but lives in those who serve in his name: resolutely, dutifully, lovingly; those who are looking to do the next, good thing.

These days, like the women at the tomb, we have good reason to be afraid – filled with terror and amazement – at the unsettling, disturbing, and tragic things going on in our world. We expected to be gathering in our sanctuaries this morning; to see and smell the room filled with lilies; to join with family and friends in singing Alleluia. We expected for our children to be in school and to be getting up and going to work; to be attending exercise classes or spring concerts; going to bible studies or committee meetings. We were looking forward to proms and graduations; to weddings and vacations.

Instead, these plans have been shattered; or, at best, put on hold. In the midst of such disruption and uncertainty, we are afraid. Sometimes, that fear comes out in the form of anger or resentment or sadness, in boredom or resolve, in having too much or not enough time or energy. The fear that the women felt at the tomb is not foreign to us. We live in a time of uncertainties for our economy, for our health and the health of others. We see fear manifested in a spike of gun sales – over two million in the month of March alone. Some are afraid of feeling ill-equipped to live in a world dependent on technology. Some are afraid of the questions they might be asking or hearing; afraid to admit that they can't explain what is happening to them or around them. We understand the fear of these women and know that same terror and amazement ourselves.

Mark's version of the Easter story is unique because it does not include any appearances by the risen Jesus: not as gardener by the tomb, not walking on the Emmaus Road, not to Peter and the disciples fishing by the sea, not to Doubting Thomas in the locked upper room. And while there are additional verses beyond

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<sup>1</sup> John Herrin, “Exchanging Fear for Trust”

these printed in most bibles, scholars agree that these were added later, possibly by editors uncomfortable with loose ends.

Because here, we are simply told that the women – after leaving the tomb – “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” In the original Greek, this strange ending to the gospel is even more odd, as it reads, “they were afraid, for...” It ends right in the middle of a sentence, with a word that typically opens something else. Just like the open heavens at Jesus’ baptism and the open tomb at his resurrection, the end of the story is left open; it is not yet written.<sup>2</sup>

Maybe it’s no wonder that those editors felt compelled to finish Mark’s story for him. We like closure; we prefer an ending that ties up all the loose ends and brings it to a satisfying conclusion. But, the beauty of Mark’s story is that it creates not only dislocation and confusion, but also anticipation. In our world – especially at this particular time – questions go unanswered, tensions are left unresolved, the loose ends have not been tied up. But while there is pain, we have also been seeing signs of grace. While the things we expected have not come to pass, some new opportunities have already or may be emerging. While there is still much grieving to do, we can be assured that Jesus is already out ahead of us; standing with those who are afraid, exhausted, or mourning. We walk by faith and not by sight, clinging to the promise that – despite the fear and confusion we are presently experiencing – we will see the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

We know – even if Mark’s story does not explicitly tell us – that at some point on that Easter day, the women moved beyond their fear and found the courage to share their story with the disciples. After taking the time to get their bearings, to let the gravity of the news that they heard sink in, the women set off to do the next, good thing.

Followers of Christ are sometimes described as Easter people: living on this side of the resurrection, meaning that God has been revealed to us as the power of new life. The stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. And yet, we also are people who live by faith, and not by sight. Like the women, we have not seen Jesus. We have testimony of his rising, but no tangible proof. With all that is going on around us – including not being able to be physically together to celebrate the resurrection – it is going to take some time for us to get our bearings. We are surrounded by good reasons to fear; by things that cause us both terror and amazement. We are scared of how many people might be lost to this virus; and

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Williamson and Amy Robertson, *Bibleworm podcast*

<sup>3</sup> Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

who that we know will be affected; and how those who suffer lost lives, lost jobs, lost innocence, lost experiences – will ever recover. We are also amazed by examples we have seen of compassion and commitment, of bravery and generosity. We see the persistence of individuals, but maybe even more so, the resilience of communities; including communities of faith. Even without gathering, we are still giving. Even in this time when the gravity of what is happening has yet to sink in, we are moving forward, setting our sights on doing the next, good thing.

This Easter, the evidence for Gods' action in the world might seem sparse; in some ways it feels more like Good Friday than Easter morning. But we are still called to go to Galilee; to live into a promise that it might seem there is little evidence for; to live this moment even if the reality of it is pretty messy. This Easter, Jesus is not here. Maybe, just maybe, that is precisely the kind of good news that we need to hear. AMEN.