

“Is This the End?”

Valley Presbyterian Church – March 31, 2024

Easter Sunday

I Corinthians 15:1-10a

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Mark 16:1-8

Visiting the tomb at dawn after the Sabbath is the same trio of women who beheld Jesus’ crucifixion and burial. Joseph of Arimathea had requested permission to take down the body on Friday (before the Sabbath) and put place it in a tomb hewn of rock. A large stone had been placed at the entrance.

The first thing the followers of Jesus did after the unimaginable had happened, when their teacher and Lord had died, was nothing. Nothing is recorded to have taken place on the day of rest. The Sabbath functioned like a cosmic pause after the rush of getting the body entombed.

The three women rise early to bring spices to anoint Jesus’ body. In the Jewish tradition, there are few *mitzvahs* – acts of compassion – considered more honorable because these can never be repaid.¹ As they approach the tomb, they are discussing who will roll away the stone in front of the tomb. Maybe if the disciples had not all fled, some of them would have come along to help; but these women would not be deterred.

Looking up, or opening their eyes, they see that the stone had already been rolled away; what had been blocking their way had been removed; they could now see clearly what had been hidden from them.

And, entering the tomb, the women saw a young man in a white robe; at least this is what the women perceive. We may think it’s an angel – it will speak like an angel, telling them not to be afraid – but we don’t know for sure. Sometimes, like these women, we encounter things that we think may be divine, that we believe might even be a miracle; but we can’t prove it. Here, Mark holds us

¹ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

in the women's experience; it is left to us, the reader, to determine what to take away from their witnessing.

This young man in the tomb knows to comfort the women's fears, and he also knows that they are looking for Jesus. "He has been raised," they are informed, "he is not here."

The women came with a plan, to anoint the body, but things did not go as planned. And so, now it is time for a new plan. "Go," they are instructed, "tell his disciples and Peter that (Jesus) is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

How interesting that Peter is singled out by name. Does he so urgently need to know he is invited to come, after what he has done? Was Peter so disappointed by his actions that he would need this special invitation?

Each of us knows that person, or maybe has even been that person, who – because of what we have done or failed to do – feels beyond the reach of God's grace. Sometimes, the good news of divine love needs to be personalized to remind us that God is ever-reaching out to us, making the first move, and awaiting our response. The risen Christ is at work redeeming the world – out ahead of us – and we are called to go and join him there.

So, the women are commissioned with this bold message to share. But, as it's described in today's reading, their response is neither bold nor loud. Instead of going and telling, they fearfully flee and keep silent.

This is hardly the satisfying ending we might hope for. After all, Jesus has been preparing his disciples for what is to come. Three times he told them that he must undergo suffering, be rejected, and killed, and then – after three days – rise again. Following his transfiguration, Jesus told Peter, James, and John on the way back down the mountain to tell no one what they had seen until "after he had risen from the dead." (Mark 9:9)²

Yet neither Peter, James, nor John is around now to tell. When the hour of trial came, when Jesus was arrested in the garden, all the disciples deserted and

² Elisabeth Johnson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

fled. Peter showed up in the courtyard of the high priest but when confronted as one who had been with Jesus, Peter denied knowing him; not once, but three times.

Thus, the women are now commissioned to proclaim the good news that Jesus has been raised. And yet, the words they hear fail to dispel their fears. Like the other disciples, the women flee in fear and silence. There, Mark's gospel ends.

Scholars agree that the earliest known texts conclude Mark at verse 8 and what some bibles include after that are later additions. It's no wonder interpreters throughout the ages have felt compelled to finish Mark's story for him. We like closure; we want an ending that ties up the loose ends and brings the story to a satisfying conclusion. Most of all, we desire a happy ending; we want to see and touch Jesus, to rejoice with the disciples that he is alive. But, with Mark, we are left with what Jon Crossan calls *the great omission*; the risen Jesus makes no appearance; we are left, like the women, fearful and confused.³

But is not this unfinished story closer to our actual experience in the world; where loose ends are rarely all tied up, where tensions are often left unresolved? Are not our lives full of unfinished stories: opportunities that we let pass by, relationships that have fallen apart, the friend or family member who died far too young? We try to find ways to make sense of our stories, to discover an ending that satisfies us – that ties up the loose ends and dispels doubt – but these still all-too-often disappoint.

Perhaps the women's silence is a literary device, designed to draw the reader deeper into the narrative; like the end of a movie that has no clear resolution, with everything hanging in the balance and the audience left on the edge of their seats. It disorients us, but maybe purposely. Jesus dis-oriens us so that we might be re-oriented.⁴

Maybe Mark concludes the gospel this way because the readers – disoriented as we may be by the uncertainties of life – are the only ones left at the end of the story that know the whole truth; we hear the instruction to go to Galilee to meet Jesus even if the intended messengers are too afraid to tell us. We know that the risen Christ is out ahead of us, redeeming the world; that the powers of death and

³ John Dominic Crossan from *Homebrewed Christianity Podcast*

⁴ Amanda Brobst-Renard from *WorkingPreacher.com*

the walls of a tomb could not hold him. We, the readers of the gospel, the hearers of this good news, are left to speak and act; how else will the Peters of the world know the amazing grace of God?

Songwriter Natalie Sleeth wrote the words for “Hymn of Promise” – also known by its first line, “In the Bulb There Is a Flower” – to convey this mystery of what awaits us when we go to meet the risen Jesus; and when we experience the gift of new life in Christ:

*In the bulb there is a flower;
in the seed, an apple tree;
in cocoons, a hidden promise:
butterflies will soon be free!
In the cold and snow of winter
there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.*

*There's a song in every silence,
seeking word and melody;
there's a dawn in every darkness
bringing hope to you and me.
From the past will come the future;
what it holds, a mystery,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.⁵*

Mark's story concludes at an empty tomb and a decision for its readers to make. We can be a continuation of the story; we can carry forward the message of hope amid disorientation and of new life in the midst of loose ends. God will adapt to our fears and failures; for the divine is already at work, out ahead of us. He is risen, risen indeed. Amen.

⁵ Natalie Sleeth, “Hymn of Promise”