



Sunday March 31, 2024
Mark 16:1-8 (Easter Sunday)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

“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.” So, let me get this straight...*that’s it? That’s the end? That’s all we get?* After the long and exhausting journey we’ve been on with Jesus – after all the prayers and self-reflection – the repentance. *This is all we’re left with? Did I miss something?* Alarm. Fear. Running away. Mark’s account feels unsettling and disturbingly incomplete. And I know that I’m not alone in this, because second century scholars were apparently so uncomfortable with this seemingly *incomplete* ending that they added a longer and more satisfying one. I’m sorry, Mark, but *this one...this is a terrible ending.* Besides, many of us have been looking forward to Easter ever since we began our 40-day pilgrimage on Ash Wednesday, so forgive me – forgive us, if today’s gospel feels like an abrupt and unsatisfying ending for such an important story.

There were no alleluias, no trumpets and timpani, no egg bakes or baskets full of candy, and no family photos. No one filled the church with Easter lilies, and no one set up extra chairs for guests. That first Easter was without a doubt radically different for the women in Mark’s gospel than it is for us today. And yet, for all the discomfort that Mark’s version offers – it seems strangely *appropriate*. Perhaps then, there isn’t supposed to be a neat and tidy ending to this story. Maybe Mark wasn’t just having writer’s block and decided to wrap this thing up half-baked. Maybe Mark knew *exactly* what he was doing, and he leaves the reader hanging, on purpose. But in order to understand why, we have to look closer. Mark concludes today’s gospel by reporting that the women flee – but wait. Notice what takes place immediately *before* they flee. The women were told by the messenger where Jesus will meet them – in Galilee, you know, that familiar place where it all began; the place where Jesus taught and healed and fed and cast out. And they say nothing to anyone – *at first*. But then here we are talking about this story thousands of years later, so clearly they told *someone*. It might seem odd that Mark ends the Gospel on a note of fear and silence. But a quick overview of Scripture reminds us that this is a reaction we find throughout the gospels – when people see the supernatural power of God in Christ, fear is usually their first response. The women come to the tomb expecting to pay their respects to their recently deceased teacher and friend by anointing his body – and yet *none* of the normal patterns of life hold on this early morning. The tomb is open, Jesus is nowhere to speak of, and they’re greeted with the announcement that Jesus of Nazareth has been raised. And so they flee in terror and amazement. But can you blame them? Would you or I have reacted so differently? So, let’s look even closer now. The announcement “*he has been raised*” is a passive verb, which puts the focus on Jesus as the object of the action done by another – the normal patterns of life and death have been disrupted by someone who can undo the power of death. And so the fact that the women flee in “*terror and amazement*” indicates that they know *exactly* the identity of the unnamed subject of that passive verb. By the way, in ancient times *terror and amazement* were often words used to describe one’s response to a revelation of God. It is God who has raised Jesus. It is God who has altered the rules of the world they know. ***Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!***

So, in the face of a revelation of God then, the women’s silence isn’t a failed or inadequate response. Instead, it’s an entirely *adequate* response, because their silence creates space for the voice and presence of God to resound loud and clear. After all, *what words would’ve been adequate enough* in those first few moments as they left the tomb that wouldn’t have trivialized the moment – that wouldn’t have made the empty tomb into a story about what *they have seen* instead of being a moment of *what God has done*? When the women respond with fear it’s proof that they’ve witnessed the work of God and it’s further proof that Jesus is who he claimed to be. The women’s response then is a subtle confirmation – Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. And like so much about God, resurrection is a mystery, and anyone who tries to tidy it up and turn it into something that makes sense is missing the point. Resurrection is a mystery, but like all God’s promises, its truth doesn’t depend on our ability to understand it. Jesus is risen, and goes ahead of us, even when we can’t make sense of it, even when we forget, even when we’re afraid. When forgiveness and new life and grace seem impossibly far



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off; when we flee and say nothing to anyone, God's promises of resurrection and life are true – **and...they... are... for... everyone!**

The women are so overwhelmed by the resurrection news that they are paralyzed, unable to do what the messenger has told them to do. And their terror and amazement response then is actually *awe* – the feeling of reverence and respect mixed with wonder and fear. They are in awe at what God has done in the life and death of Jesus and the power and love of God to conquer sin and death and prove the depth of God's love. ***Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*** But it's not the *end* of the story...it's just the beginning. If we look back to the very first verse of the first chapter in Mark's gospel, in an opening sentence that's almost as abrupt and awkward as the closing one then the first words we read are, "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.*" And while this may not sound like much of an introduction, the key thing that Mark is saying is that this is only the beginning of the good news of what God has done and is still doing and will continue doing for the world through Jesus. It's only the beginning; this story isn't over. It's only the beginning, and *we* have a part to play. It's only the beginning, and if you're wondering why there's still so much suffering and pain in the world, it's because God's not done yet. It's only the beginning, and Mark is inviting us to get out of our seats and into the game, sharing the good news of Jesus with those who suffering, and his triumph over injustice and death with everyone we meet. It's only the beginning, and we are empowered and equipped to work for the good in all situations because we trust God's promises that all will in time come to a good end even when we can't see evidence of that. And so when Mark seemingly ends his gospel in an unfinished manner what he's actually doing is inviting us to pick up where these women left off and share the good news announced by the messenger at the tomb. The story of what God is doing in and through Jesus isn't over at the empty tomb. It's only getting started. Resurrection isn't a conclusion, it's an invitation.

Therefore, Mark's gospel is all about setting us up to live resurrection lives and continue taking part in God's ever unfolding story of redemption for all of creation. This is what we're invited into confessing...that the beginning, and all the rest, and perhaps even the best parts of this story are still unfolding before our very eyes and indeed *through* our lives. Jesus has been raised. Go and tell. He's going ahead of you, and you'll see him just where he told you. The story isn't over. There's so much more to live and tell. And we know where Jesus will meet us. He goes ahead of us to the familiar places of our homes and jobs and schools; to hospitals and grocery stores. And to the places we'd rather not go – in the midst of relationship struggles, lost jobs, health challenges, and the uncertainty of life. He meets us wherever we are. And then he meets us in the waters of baptism, drenching us with mercy, calling us by name – claiming us forever. He meets us in the meal shared around this holy table, nourishing us with his own body and blood and connecting us to the whole of creation in every time and place. It is just as he told us.

My friends, the Easter promise – the promise of resurrection is about a God who will not let anything interfere with his desire to love us, to restore us, to rescue us – to give us life. The journey through Holy week, the betrayal, the foot washing, the Last Supper, the crucifixion, and the empty tomb are all about God breaking all the rules out of love *for us*. Our God is the God of possible – the God who shatters the impossible, the God who on Easter surprises us again and again just like those women who expected to arrive at the tomb to find the dead body of Jesus. Instead, what they found was the fulfillment of a promise that seemed too extraordinary, too impossible, too unbelievable, and instead God surprised them. And the empty tomb should surprise *us*...it should cause us to stand in awe...to be frozen in wonder at what God has promised...and to rejoice in hope at what God has accomplished out of love *for us*. Earlier in Mark's gospel for today God's heavenly messenger offers the women and all of us a priceless encouragement of hope and promise and blessing which is everything we need...for hope...for peace...for reassurance...for restoration...for joy...for life, "*Do not be alarmed; you*



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*are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here.” And this my friends is not an ending at all, but quite possibly the very best beginning we could ever imagine. **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia!***