

For many, Mark's version of Easter morning isn't the popular one, as it is often seen as unsatisfying and disquieting, yet it is the word of the Lord, so let's look and listen a little deeper this morning. Right before today's passage, Mark reports that Mary Magdalene, Mary, who is James' and Joses' mother, and Salome were among the group of women watching from a distance at Jesus' crucifixion. Mary Magdalene and Mary were also present at Jesus' burial and watched Joseph of Arimathea take down Jesus' limp, lifeless body off of the cross and then wrap him in a linen cloth, and lay his body- their dear Messiah, Teacher and friend's body- in the tomb. These two women then watched Joseph roll a very large stone against the entrance of the tomb...sealing Jesus' body inside. They saw with their own eyes where his body was laid to rest. The male disciples were nowhere to be found. Only these strong, faithful women- who were last at the cross and first at the tomb on Sunday morning- were there. Let us pray before reading God's word.

PRAY. READ. Mark 16:1-8.

The women ask themselves on the way to Jesus' tomb: "Who will roll away the stone for us?" I don't think having seen what they saw with their own eyes at Golgotha that I'd be thinking clearly enough to think through logistics but in grief we can do strong and strange things. In order to anoint his body, they would have to have access to his tomb. They asked an excellent, logistical question! However, their question becomes a moot point when, as they look up, they see that the very large stone has been rolled away already! Problem averted! But this leads to bigger questions, doesn't it? Questions that aren't mentioned in our story today- but are left to our imagination. Questions such as, "Where is Jesus?" "Is he still in the tomb?" "Has someone stolen his body?" "What happened?" In

the midst of the few seconds of pondering and panic in their heads, they see a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting in Jesus' empty tomb- where Jesus' funeral linens were left behind. Of course these women are startled! I would add maybe they're also shocked, overwhelmed, sad, exhausted and grief-stricken? These women have been through a lot in the past 72 hours or so and now there's this young man- hanging out in Jesus' empty tomb- telling these often unrecognized loyal followers of Christ who have remained by Jesus' side through thick and thin- not to be alarmed. It's a lot to process! What else are they to feel in this moment?

This young man, who some scholars say is an angel or a messenger, manages to continue with his words of assurance in the midst of their astonishment. He knew that these women were looking for the body of Jesus of Nazareth. This young man then said something that perhaps wasn't fully heard by the women. "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him." He then goes on to give them a message from their risen Lord. "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." But instead of going and crying out with joy at this amazing news...these women fled the scene- scared- and said nothing to anyone- at least then. Talk about a let down to the ending of this story! Can you see why some don't tell Mark's version of the Easter story? There is no glimpse of the risen Jesus. The disciples, including Peter, are nowhere in sight. What kind of Easter story is that? It seems incomplete and unfinished. Y'all know most of us don't like unfinished stories. We don't like unresolved tension. There's something in all of us that craves resolution- completion- the answers. TV show writers torture

people by leaving not one but several cliffhangers at the end of a season finale and unless you're binge watching season after season, you have to wait months to see what happens. But, they leave us hanging on purpose. According to most scholars, this is the way Mark ended his version of Easter morning even though many well-meaning Christians have tried to add their own ending to Mark's Gospel. I wonder if this isn't just the version of the Easter story that we need to hear still living in the midst of a pandemic. "Maybe we need time- as the women- in the amazement that must fall upon us when God's incomprehensible work of redemption collides in real time with the broken bewilderment of our lives" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.org)? Or I wonder if "Mark's ending points to a truth that often gets lost in the celebration: Easter is a frightening prospect. For the women, the only thing more terrifying than a world with Jesus dead was one in which he was alive" (*New York Times*, Esau McCaulley). They weren't sure how to behave in the face of death's undoing- for death- once it loses its grip on them- all of a sudden there would be nothing to hold them back.

These women knew how to do the funeral rituals, but hope was much harder to come by. "They had come to conduct a funeral, not a revolution. They had come to grieve, not to organize. They had lost more than their beloved Messiah and friend; they had lost their best hope for a new kind of life on earth. What this means is that when the women came to anoint Jesus' body, they were not just coming to mourn their dead friend. They were coming to mourn their dead hope" (*Always A Guest*, Barbara Brown Taylor). You know the dead hopes and dead dreams that we put in the tomb- that leave us with our tears and grief. In times of suffering, we lose hope and flee into our tombs of imprisonment and death or

we stay and fill our empty space with lifeless words. These women and many of us, I would suspect, have had our faith shaken to its' very core. "The resurrection exceeds all our attempts to pin it down, because it's a mystery known only to God. All we can know is that somehow, in an ancient tomb on a starry night, God worked in secret to bring life out of death. Somehow, from the heart of loss and misery, God enacted salvation. Mark's version of the Easter story honors this mystery, and it allows the bewilderment of the first witnesses to be exactly what it is" (Thomas). When we're weary and fearful, sometimes we don't hear hope in a shout but maybe we can hear it in a whisper? "He has been raised; he is not here. Just as he told you, he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." These words are a fulfilled promise, as Jesus had told his disciples a few chapters before today's passage that after he was raised up, he would go before them to Galilee (14:28). Notice that the young man didn't say Jesus was going ahead of them to heaven, but to Galilee, where it all began, which meant that God's hope was alive on **earth** (Taylor).

Maybe "the terrifying prospect of Easter is that God called these women to return to the same world that crucified Jesus with a very dangerous gift: hope in the power of God, the unending reservoir of forgiveness and an abundance of love? It would make them seem like fools. Who could believe such a thing" (McCaulley)?- that Jesus's tomb is empty...that he has risen and goes ahead of us. That *it's not over yet*. That our hope is not dead but in a God who raised Christ from the dead! As people who follow Jesus we are "fools who dare to believe in God's power to call dead things to life" (McCaulley). As I reflect, I wonder for some of us, like these women, if "maybe the most faithful response to the

seeming disconnect between Christ's resurrection and our continuing pain is a reverent silence. These women waited before they spoke; they led with wounded awe, not premature consolation. I wonder if we shy away from Mark's Gospel because we don't trust the story itself to do its work. But isn't the really good news that the truth of the resurrection doesn't depend on the religious performance or the spiritual stamina of us flailing human beings? It doesn't matter one bit if we believe on the spot or not. The tomb is empty. Death is vanquished. Jesus lives. Period. We are not in charge of Easter; God is" (Thomas).

Friends, as we come out of our tombs of quarantine, we're going back to a world desperately in need of healing and community. "For us, the source of that healing [and community] is an empty tomb in Jerusalem. The work that Jesus left his followers to do includes showing compassion and forgiveness and contending for a just society. It involves the ever-present offer for all to begin again. The weight of this work fills us with a terrifying fear," (McCaulley) **especially in light of all that has taken place or not taken place in the last year.** "This year in particular, I'm grateful that Scripture preserves the gap between God's all-sufficient work and our tenuous apprehension of it" (Thomas). The complete witness of the four Gospels show us that the frightened silence of these women eventually gave way to proclamation. "Eventually their alarm subsided, their courage deepened, their trauma healed, and their amazement grew. They learned how to choose hope" (Thomas). Today we hold in tension- just like the women at the empty tomb on that first Easter morning- our despair and our hope; our silence and our proclamation; our fear and our faith. The tensions and feelings are real. Those in

wounded awe- “you don’t have to force the good news of the resurrection into your wounded heart prematurely; it is trustworthy, and it will wait for you” (Thomas).

On the wall in our living room, there are excerpts written in chalk from Wendell Berry’s poem, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*. The poem begins...

*Love the quick profit, the annual raise,
vacation with pay. Want more
of everything ready-made. Be afraid
to know your neighbors and to die.
And you will have a window in your head.
Not even your future will be a mystery
any more. Your mind will be punched in a card
and shut away in a little drawer.
When they want you to buy something
they will call you. When they want you
to die for profit they will let you know.
So, friends, every day do something
that won’t compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.*

And the poem ends... Practice resurrection. Practice resurrection. How will we practice resurrection? “Because God knows we need to practice living as Easter people. Death may be beat, but it hasn’t hit the ground yet. Lord Caesar may be gone, but his successors aren’t out of business yet. That’s why we need this meal of bread and juice we’re about to share, to remind us that God’s hope is alive on earth. It’s not over yet. When you can, as you can, hear the good news, friends! Though wounded, peace lives. Though killed, justice rises. Though buried, love

goes ahead of us to Galilee; there we will see him, just as he told us” (Taylor).

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Hallelujah and Amen!