

How Will We Tell the Story?

Mark 16:1-8; Acts 10:34-43

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The Resurrection of our Lord



Now isn't that the strangest account of the resurrection you have ever heard? The women go to Jesus' tomb, find the stone rolled away, and a young man in a white robe sitting inside. He gives them some instructions, but they are terrified, run away and say nothing to anyone. End of the story. Jesus has disappeared, and they are too scared to tell the story.

This is Mark's original resurrection story. Although other writers later tacked on additional versions to give Mark an ending more in tune with the other gospels, we will stick with the original this morning. It is one of the most authentic representations of Jesus' disciples we can ever hope to find. It plays on a theme that occurs over and over in this Gospel where the people who should know what is going on don't, and the people who really do know what is going on can't be counted on to tell the story.

These women disciples have been with Jesus since the beginning of his ministry in Galilee. They were there when Jesus predicted that he would be crucified and raised from the dead. These women should know what's going on. They have all the information they need. They are Jesus' most faithful followers, staying on the scene even after the male disciples abandon Jesus. But here they are terrified and amazed - the original Greek actually says they were out of their minds, beside themselves with fear. The horror of the crucifixion has made them forget everything Jesus told them, leaving them fixated on anointing their beloved rabbi's broken body. But at the tomb, nothing is as they expect to find it. There is no body, only a stranger whose message they are too disoriented to take in. Shock and awe silences them.

This is what happens to real people in the face of real life calamities, in the face of horrifying violence, when loved ones are killed. People who should know, don't. People who do know, forget. They are overwhelmed and just can't tell the story. Mark's resurrection narrative is rooted in this kind of traumatic reality.

But obviously someone did tell the story, didn't they? Mark tells the story even though he never knew the historical Jesus. He tells the story as he remembered hearing it told by others. But Mark's version closes with this resurrection account in which Jesus has disappeared and everyone is too scared to tell the story.

“When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb — and when a gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.” So writes biblical commentator Lamar Williamson about today’s Gospel lesson.¹ An ending is not the end, when we are reading Mark’s Gospel. This is the Gospel that claims to be “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God” (1:1). Everything in Mark’s gospel is just the beginning of the good news. His version of the resurrection — Jesus has disappeared and everyone is too scared to tell the story — is just the end of the beginning. Mark is relying on his audience, on you and me to tell the story of Jesus’ resurrection and why it is the most important, the most life-changing, world-changing event in all of human history. How will we tell that story?

Here are two things that I personally think we need to say about the resurrected, living Christ if we are to tell his story today.

The first thing has to do with where we find Jesus. The women went to the tomb on that first Easter morning expecting to find Jesus’ battered and broken body, but he was not there, he had somehow gone missing. I often run into a slightly different version of this Jesus MIA theme. It usually goes something like Jesus came and lived among us, but then he died and went up to heaven, so he’s not here anymore.



But that’s not what the young man in the tomb tells the women, is it? No. He tells them that Jesus “has been raised” and “is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him” (16:6-7). Jesus is neither dead nor gone to some heaven light years away. Jesus is alive and he’s headed to Galilee: the place we call home, where we live and work, struggle and suffer, prosper and perish. Jesus is alive and at work in the midst of the ordinary things of our lives: the dirty dishes and unmade beds, yards that needs work, garages that needs cleaning, cars that need washing, meals that need to be prepared, homework that needs to be completed, lessons that need need to be planned, papers that need to be graded, projects that need to be completed, accounts that need to be updated. The risen, living Christ is already at work in the lives of with our students, our patients, our clients, our neighbors, the strangers down the streets and even in our enemies (as we shall see in a moment).

The second thing has to do with how we recognize the risen Christ present in our midst and in the world around. All of Jesus’ life and ministry, life, especially his crucifixion, his empty tomb and his resurrection, disclose the first and deepest impulse of God as self-giving love. The cross shows us not only how much God loves us, but also the cost of that love. The living Christ is present and active wherever self-giving love is happening. Our Scripture reading from the book of Acts points us to what that looks like in the everyday ordinary life of the church.

¹ quote from Lamar Williamson Jr., *Mark - Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

In this text, we hear the apostle Peter preaching. It is a few years after that first Easter, and he is describing this gigantic “aha!” moment that he has just experienced. While waiting for lunch one day, Peter is praying on a rooftop, falls into a trance and sees a large sheet filled with “unclean” - non-kosher — animals. A voice from heaven tells him to help himself, but Peter, a devout Jew, protests that he has never eaten any kind of unclean meat. This vision occurs three times. As Peter is trying to make sense of this, messengers arrive inviting him to the Roman city of Caesarea to the home of an Italian officer named Cornelius. The light goes on for Peter, and he realizes that through this vision God is showing him that no human person is profane or unclean (Acts 10:28) or as he puts it here, “God shows no partiality” (Acts 10:34). Not only was Peter’s mind and heart towards non-Jews changed, but so was the entire focus of the church’s mission. Two decades later, the apostle Paul wrote that in Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female (Galatians 3:28). A few years ago, another Christian teacher declared, “there is neither Republican nor Democrat, citizen or undocumented visitor, gay nor straight for all are one in Christ Jesus.”²

I believe that we see the living Christ at work today in the lives of ordinary men and women, whenever we see prejudice, discrimination and judgmental attitudes being replaced by acceptance and self-giving love. The living Christ is present and active whenever believers come to realize that God simply has no interest in, and does not even recognize the distinctions and differences that we make such a big deal about. God shows no partiality, God plays no favorites. In God’s eyes there are no unclean people. In God’s eyes there are no unacceptable people.

In Mark’s Easter story, Jesus has disappeared and everyone is too scared to tell the story. Will that be how our story ends? Or will we find the courage to tell the story of the risen, victorious Christ who has already gone ahead of us to our Galilees? Will we dare to show Christ’s self-giving love to all those who have been labeled unclean, bullied, judged, and excluded? How will we tell the story of Jesus and his love?

² John C. Holbert, “A Christ for All: Easter Reflections on Acts 10:34-43” available at www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Christ-for-All-John-Holbert-03-30-2012?offset+1&max=1.