

The Georgetown Presbyterian Church
March 31, 2024, Easter
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He's Not Here

Mark 16:1-8

¹When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But 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." ⁸So 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.

The story of God for the people of God.
Thanks be to God.

I'm going to guess that's not the Easter story as you remember it. Aren't there angels? Doesn't Mary tell the disciples that Jesus has risen and don't they run to the tomb to see for themselves? Doesn't Jesus appear? You need Jesus on Easter morning, right?

The gospels of John and Mathew and Luke give a lot more detail. Their accounts are more in line with the splendor of our Easter lilies and the majesty of the music today.

Mark's Easter just has these eight short verses and that's it. That's the end of his gospel. It's minimalist Easter.

A large stone rolled away. An empty tomb.
A report from a young man that Jesus is not here.
Instructions to go and tell the others.
And faithful women who flee in fear.

A friend of mine said the other day: Mark's version is the "sad trombone Easter."¹

But it gets worse. In the original Greek manuscript, the gospel actually ends mid sentence. It's as if Mark's gospel ends with the women flee in terror and amazement and say nothing to anyone for they were afraid ... dot dot dot...²

Something more is coming, but we don't know what.
No bows to tie it all up. No happily ever after.

If you pulled out the bible in your pew to read along this morning, you might have noticed there are two other, alternative endings to Mark's gospel. Biblical scholars don't believe those endings were part of the original text. They think that early scribes were so uncomfortable with this downer non-ending that they actually added some things about the other disciples learning that Jesus was raised and about the resurrected Jesus appearing and ascending into heaven to round out the ending.³

But that's not what Mark wrote.

He simply tells us of the women who had come to the tomb expecting to finish their burial rituals and mourn the horrendous death of their friend.

He tells us these faithful women are afraid.

He tells us a young man sitting in the tomb reassures them it's ok.

And then he tells them the Good News of Easter:

"You are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here....he has gone on ahead of you to Galilee, just as he told you."

Mark tells us the women are seized by terror and amazement and they run from the tomb, saying nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.
dot...dot...dot...

This is highly unsatisfying!!

I am a child of the 80s and when I was growing up there were these books called Choose Your Own Adventure. This is how they worked. You would be reading along in a story when some inflection point would come.... let's say: a thief grabbed a backpack from your friend and ran off.

And there, the text would end. And a little ways down the page it would say:

Do you want to run after the thief? If so, turn to page 62.

¹ The Rev. Jenny McDevitt.

² Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. The People's New Testament Commentary (p. 171). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

³ Brian Blount in Blount, Brian K. and Gary W. Charles. Preaching Mark in Two Voices. Louisville: WKJP, 2002, p. 257.

Do you want to stay with your friend and call the police? If so, turn to page 43.

You'd make your choice and then read along until the next inflection point when you'd make another choice and another choice and another choice until you got to the end of your storyline. It was very highbrow literature.

The stories could take radically different directions based on the choices you made along the way.

I kind of wonder if that's what Mark is doing here. He leaves us at an inflection point and invites us to make a choice.

Will we flee from the tomb and stay silent?

Maybe. I get their fear.

Will we dare speak of this crazy thing we've been told?

Maybe. I could perhaps tell a friend or family member the Good News I've come to know.

Will we follow Jesus to Galilee?

Maybe. But what's in Galilee?

Galilee is where most of Jesus' ministry has been. It's where these women learned to follow. It's where they've learned to heal and feed and teach and cast out demons and proclaim the Promised Day of God is at hand.

Galilee is where these women are from. It's home. They know the beauty of the countryside and the smells of the different seasons. It's where their loved ones are.

But it can be hard to go home. At home you know the patches of green space where there are tent encampments. You know the stretches of sidewalk to avoid at night. You know the news outlets that will set your blood to boil. And you know the stories of desperation that will break your heart.

Home, Galilee, is where their lives are, their loved ones are.

Do they want to go back there where they are stretched so thin?

How do you go back and forgive the spouse who had an affair?

Or make peace with the sibling you don't speak to?

Or face the dementia that stalks your loved one?

Or push against the depths of depression?

There's a lot that's hard in Galilee.

And they probably especially don't want to go back if they are supposed to keep doing what Jesus taught them to... to heal and teach and sell their possessions and forgive and publicly say that their allegiance is not to the kingdoms of this world but the Promised Day of God

These are the very things that got Jesus arrested and tortured and betrayed and killed, after all.

No wonder they flee.

Mark says they flee, seized by terror and amazement.

The Greek words used here are *tromos* and *ekstasis*.⁴ They sounds like what they means in english:

Tromos = traumaquaking with fear....terror ...

Terror makes sense when Jesus has told you to follow him to Galilee, to pick up your own cross and follow.

And when you encounter that which defies logic, defies everything you thought knew you about how the world works.... To be told that Jesus, who was crucified, “He has been raised. He’s not here.”

Terror makes sense.

The second emotion that seizes these women is

Ekstasis = ecstatic...astonished....amazement.

You know those moments, don’t you? The ones when your breath catches for a moment? The moments that give you goose bumps? Those times when “you let your toes curl over the edge of what you know to feel the updraft of what you don’t understand at all. That’s God territory.”⁵

I’m not surprised these women left with both emotions. And I wonder if both are just what they needed to carry on the work of following Jesus and living toward the Promised Day of God.

A healthy dose of fear because following a Messiah whose power comes from humbling himself in this world that values strength and control and wealth, following Christ will always carry a cost.

And a good dose of amazement at what God has done and is doing will be needed to serve as an antidote to the fear.

Mark’s gospel is the only gospel that doesn’t have any record of the risen Jesus appearing to the women or the disciples. But the young man does say to them that Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee and there YOU WILL SEE HIM, the man says.

That message reverberates over these two thousand years. Yes, there is fear. But there’s also a promise. You will see him.

⁴ bibilehub.com

⁵ The Rev. Rebecca Gillespie Messman in a paper for The Well, 2023.

Out in the world, you will see him. And in that there is amazement.

A church in North Carolina has a tradition in worship that when it is time for the confession, the leader asks, “Why do we confess our sin?”

The congregation responds: “**BECAUSE ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALL SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD.**”

“But why do we do this together?” the leader asks.

The congregation replies, “**BECAUSE WE ARE A COMMUNITY, A COVENANT PEOPLE.**”

It is a weekly refrain for that congregation and it helps to shape who they are. A friend of mine had just moved there to serve as their pastor when he and his wife found out their infant son had a heart defect. After months of hospitalization and many sleepless nights, their son was able to get a heart transplant. He’s now a happy teenager. But in those early, terrifying days of the diagnosis, a pediatric geneticist in their brand new congregation helped obtain some obscure research and testing that led to the right treatment paths.

When my friend said to her, “We really can’t thank you enough for all that you’ve done for our family, for our child,” she responded simply, “We are a community, a covenant people.”

You will see him. That’s the promise.

Several of us were over at Excel Academy, one of GPCs mission partners, a few weeks ago, touching base on the support we offer the school. Almost as an aside a member of the administration said, “I just want to let you know ... remember last year when the mother of one of our students was killed and you all gave financial support to the grandmother who took in the kids? I just want you to know that that family is doing well. The girls have adjusted ok. They are playing and smiling and eager learners. They’ve got a stable home with their grandmother. It’s remarkable where they’ve come since the heartbreak a year ago.”

You will see him. That’s the promise.

For more than a decade a group of churches have banded together to raise the capital to invest in rebuilding two of the most blighted neighborhoods in Baltimore. Abandoned row house by abandoned row house they have renovated AND rebuilt in such a way that the homes stay affordable...families are not pushed out due to gentrification. These churches confronted the open air drug markets, the gang violence, and did what no one believed was possible. This week they celebrated the completion of another block. All told more than 200 homes have been restored, generating unprecedented generational wealth for African American families in that city. One of the residents of these new homes couldn’t stop talking about her beautiful master suite on the top floor of her new house. She talked about how her teenage kids finally have a home they aren’t ashamed

for their fiends to see. A house they can afford....and how she can finally resign from her second job and be home with her kids on weekends. All because some churches refused to give up on their neighborhood.

You will see him. That's the promise.

A friend of mine sent a note on Friday. The organist at his church died surprisingly from COVID-19 last year. On Good Friday his husband came to the church to place the ashes of his beloved in the columbarium. He said, "I want him here on Friday so he will be here on Sunday."

You will see him. That's the promise.

You know the moments of which I speak, right? When your breath catches and goosebumps tingle your skin and you know you are in the presence of Easter hope. You have those moments. I hope you'll share them with me and with one another.

Because I think, I think Easter comes when we go ahead to Galilee — go out into the world and stubbornly hold onto hope where there is despair, act in love where there is hate or indifference, create community so that no one would feel alone. That's where we'll see him.

And about this abrupt ending to Mark's Easter morning? A preacher friend of mine says, "We wouldn't be sitting here today with lilies and brass and all our hopes and joys if the Easter story ended with fear and silence. No. Of course it didn't. Someone went there. Someone let their feet move beyond their fear. And then someone else did too. And someone after that. And after that and after that. And someone gave that wild Easter hope to us. Today, we proclaim that resurrection hope to one another."⁶

Friends, in just a few minutes and tomorrow and the day after that, we take this Easter hope with us outside these walls. And we keep our eyes peeled for the crucified and risen Lord. And when you catch a glimpse, when your breath catches for a moment and you feel the goosebumps tingle your skin, say, "hey, look at that." Share that Easter hope with someone else.

Friends the Good News is that He is not here.
He's out there.
And you will see Him.
The Lord is risen. He is risen, indeed.
Happy Easter.

⁶ Rev. Messman again.