

SERMON: What Is There to Say?

Easter April 12, 2009

Scripture Lessons: Mark 16:1-11 and Acts 10:34-43

There is a recurring nightmare that I and a good many other ministers have. It is 11:15, 11:20, or so—the sanctuary is packed with the largest crowd of the year—everyone is waiting to hear what I have to say...and I can't find my sermon. I look all over the study. It's not there. Finally, I go into the pulpit...with nothing to say. That's when I wake up in a cold sweat every time—a very unnerving experience.

Recently one of Buz's best friends had that nightmare almost literally come true. Chip was on a ski trip with the youth of the church he serves in eastern NC. At 5:00 am on Sunday morning, he got a call from an elder saying that the minister was unable to preach that Sunday, and they couldn't find anyone else to take his place, so they needed him to come back and preach that morning. Oh, and by the way, it was Transfiguration Sunday. All the way back, as he drove across the state of NC, he was wondering what could he say about one of the strangest stories in the New Testament. What is there to say?

That same question runs through all the accounts of the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospels, especially in the Gospel of Mark. Mark says that when the women arrived at the tomb of Jesus **“very early on the first day of the week,”** they were startled to see a **“young man...dressed in a white robe”** sitting on the right side of the tomb. He tells the women, **“Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here... Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee, there you will see him as he told you.”**

Go and tell the disciples who had abandoned him, the angel commands the women—**go and tell Peter** who three times had denied him—**go and tell the good news** on which the future of the church and the world would rest—**go and tell, “Jesus Christ Is Risen Today! Alleluia!”**

But what do the women do? You heard it. They do what you and I might well have done. Mark says bluntly, **“They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”**

There the earliest and best manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end in mid-sentence, with the story left unfinished. The last sentence is particularly awkward grammatically because in Greek it breaks off with a conjunction “for” or “because.” Mark says literally, **“To no one no thing did they say, they were afraid because...”** There we are left waiting for the words we know ought to come next—and wondering why in heaven's name Mark does not tell of the resurrection he clearly knows to be true. Otherwise, why would he have bothered to write a gospel in the first place? A tragedy, perhaps, but not a gospel!

Mark's gospel ends so abruptly that some conclude that the original ending must have gotten torn off the scroll and lost. The abrupt ending was so unsatisfying to early readers of the Gospel that at least two other endings were added to bring Mark more in line with the other gospels. Five times in the Gospel of Mark Jesus had told his disciples of his coming death and resurrection. Twice he had promised that after his resurrection he would meet them again in Galilee. Everything in the Gospel of Mark leads us to expect that Jesus would fulfill his promise,

and the gospel would end with a scene like in all the other gospels of the risen Jesus meeting again with his disciples.

But in all of the earliest manuscripts of Mark the story simply ends in fearful, bewildered silence. **“They said nothing to anything, for they were afraid.”** And so, we are left hanging, waiting for someone to break the silence, someone to sing at least one little “Alleluia,” for Christ’s sake. But what is there to say?

The story is told of a seminary student who memorized the Gospel of Mark to do a dramatic, one-man performance of the Gospel. But when he ended with that last abrupt sentence, he didn’t know what to say or do. So he just stood there on stage in silence, until finally, when the silence became unbearable, he simply mumbled “Amen” and walked off the stage.

Bob Lawrence did a similar one-man performance of the Gospel of Mark at the Little Theater a number of years ago, but Bob had a more effective way of ending it. Bob had a chess board on the stage. As each of the disciples abandoned Jesus, he would remove a chess piece from the board. At the end, as the women fled in terror and astonishment, he removed the last pieces, leaving only one lone King at the center of the board as the spotlight fell upon it.

I think Mark would have loved that ending. One way to read the whole Gospel of Mark, and especially the final chapters, is as the complete failure of all of Jesus’ followers. Mark opens his gospel with stories of Jesus’ power and authority. He calls disciples, and immediately they follow him. He teaches with authority and casts out demons. He heals the sick and cleanses a leper. In amazement, the people glorify God and exclaim, “We never saw anything like this!”

But as the story unfolds, the disciples at every turn fail to understand Jesus’ way of being the Messiah, the Christ of God. All the way up to the end, even on the night of his last supper with the disciples, they still don’t get it. They are still jockeying for positions of power and authority when he comes into his kingdom. And that very night Judas would betray him, and Peter would deny him, and all the rest of the disciples would flee for their lives.

The only followers of Jesus who come anywhere close to getting it right are the women. They consistently make the right responses to him. But as Mark tells it, when they are confronted by the startling message that the crucified Jesus is no longer in the tomb of death but has been raised to life again, even the women flee in terror and amazement and say nothing to anyone. What **is** there to say, for heaven’s sake?

I wonder--is that Mark’s way of saying that in the end even Jesus’ most loyal followers failed him? Or could it be that once again the women do make the right response—as, at least for the moment, they are stunned speechless by the awesome strangeness of the resurrection? What is there to say when all our expectations of life and death have been turned upside down?

The longer I live and the more I reflect on the abrupt ending of Mark, the greater is my appreciation for it, both as a person who struggles with my own issues of faith, and a pastor who shares your struggles. Mark is absolutely insistent that whatever happened on the first Easter is not something easily understood or put into words. In almost every way resurrection is deeply strange and beyond our grasp. We must do nothing to lessen its strangeness.

A wonderfully honest member of the church said to me recently that he knew that something happened that first Easter that turned a bunch of faithless cowards into courageous apostles. That is clear historically. But whether Jesus was actually raised bodily from the dead is not something that he had ever been able to get his mind around. I applaud his honesty. So would Mark.

The startling ending of the Gospel of Mark will not let us forget that the reality of Easter is not something we can ever comprehend on our own. “There are no experts on resurrection,” says Eugene Peterson, “except God alone.” On Easter most of all, Peterson warns, “We inhabit a mystery. We must be careful not to pretend to know too much.”¹

Good advice. We must not pretend to know too much. The event of Jesus’ resurrection is hidden in deep mystery. It is not a human possibility. It is solely an act of almighty God—like that of the creation of the universe itself.

At Easter, more than any other time in the Christian year, we stand before that which is beyond the power of language to describe. The worst thing a preacher can do on Easter is to say too much, as if somehow the power of the story were dependent on our persuasiveness. Thank heavens, it is not! Not in the least!

Instead of trying to explain or defend or argue the resurrection, it is best to let the almost unspeakable strangeness of the resurrection speak for itself. In his “Seven Stanzas for Easter,” the late, John Updike, wrote:

“Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His Flesh: ours.”

“Let us not mock God with metaphor,” writes Updike, “. . .making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages; let us, he says, “walk through the door,”² the door of a tomb emptied by resurrection.

The resurrection is not a metaphor for the disciples’ experience of Jesus’ living presence in their lives despite his shameful death. It is not a symbol for the renewal of life in general, like the annual blossoming of dogwoods and azaleas in Spring. It is not an object lesson in immortality, or a parable of how the love of Jesus was “too great to die.” Easter is about the **bodily resurrection of the crucified Jesus** in all its startling strangeness! At the door of the empty tomb, what more appropriate response could there be than trembling silence?

And that is good news. For in the trembling silence of the women at the empty tomb there is a place in the Easter story for those for whom faith does not come easy--those who cannot be argued or lectured or cajoled into faith. There is an important place in the Easter story for those who every now and then look around the sanctuary and wonder whether they are the only ones here today who have trouble believing what they wrongly suppose everyone else believes more

¹ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 120.

² John Updike, “Seven Stanzas At Easter” *Telephone Poles and Other Poems* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1961)

easily or more fervently than they do. Mark makes a place in the Easter story for those who were “born under a skeptical star,” those who find too many “alleluias” a bit annoying. If you’ve ever wondered, even for a moment, whether all this is really true, then Mark’s gospel is for you. Where the text breaks off I in mid-sentence... your own name is written in the margin.

That's not just the case in Mark's Gospel. In all the gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, the first reaction of those to whom the good news comes is not, “Alleluia! He’s back--just like he told us!” The first reaction is nearly always disbelief—sheer bewilderment.

In the later endings added to the Gospel of Mark, we read that when Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, **“she went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. But when they heard that Jesus was alive again and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.”** And again when two of them, who had seen the risen Lord as they were walking into the country, went back and told the others, Mark says, **“they did not believe them.”** Even the later endings, added to tell of encounters with the risen Jesus, all contain a strong element of disbelief. This is not religious propaganda we are reading. It is the stammering witness of faith--a faith that always points away from itself to the tomb-shattering power of the living God alone.

One of the most surprising things about all the gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus is how understated they are. It is only with the greatest of reserve that they tell of Jesus' resurrection--always affirming it as a fact--as the great central fact of our faith!--but never seeking to argue it or prove it. The gospel accounts never attempt to sing or proclaim the resurrection so loudly as to silence all doubt and bewilderment. They all insist that the reality of Easter is not rooted in our faith and faithfulness. It is rooted solely in the faithfulness of God, who will not let death have the final word. Easter has nothing to do with our human attempts to deny or overcome death, and it has everything to do with the God who makes and keeps promises of life on both sides of the grave.

As we sing our Easter “alleluias”--as well we should, enjoying every note of them--let us also leave room for trembling silence before that which we can never fully grasp. Only when we have let the deepest, holiest mystery of all grasp us, will we be given new words to speak and new lives to live.

Perhaps Mark deliberately ended his gospel abruptly in order to insist as strongly as he could that we can never write “The End” over the story of Jesus. The story goes on, and we are continually invited to add our own chapters. We are never finished and done with Jesus, for the simple and profound reason that he is never finished and done with us. The resurrection is not the end of the story. It is its true beginning. The story of the covenant faithfulness of God in Jesus Christ that did not end on a cross, does not end at an empty tomb either. The story of the resurrection goes on in your life and mine, as even today, in fear and trembling, the risen Christ meets us in the Galilees of our daily lives, just as he promised. That is the good news which we have received, and in which we stand, and by which we are saved. **“Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” “Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.”** Amen.

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