

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Of all the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection of Christ, Mark is the toughest to preach on (at least in my opinion). The temptation is great on Year B to switch over and preach on John's version instead. But one lesson I learned well in seminary was that if there's something in Scripture that bugs you, it probably bugs others too and you should probably address it head on. So...here we go...about John...no, I'm just kidding! What do we make of this odd ending to Mark's Gospel?

It feels very abrupt, doesn't it? Not only that, but you may have noticed that Jesus appears nowhere in this resurrection account. The women are on the way to the tomb to anoint his body, but there is no body. They arrive and encounter a young man dressed in white with surprising news about Jesus, but no Jesus. Jesus is completely absent from this scene about his resurrection. What are we to do with that?

Perhaps the Greek will give us some insight into what's going on here in Mark. A very literal (and therefore clunky) translation of the last verse of this earliest Gospel would be along the lines of: "The women went out from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; they said nothing to anyone, they were afraid for..."

Not only is the ending abrupt, but it's also not much of an ending! Most translations move the preposition, so it isn't dangling at the end, making this verse read: "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid"¹ instead of the more difficult dangling preposition. This ending is so dissatisfying that later editors came along and tacked on two other endings to Mark's gospel to avoid the original ending.

I can certainly relate to the desire to try to resolve this ending. It is...dissatisfying...disquieting. I also worry that the original ending leaves us too much opportunity to fill things in. "They were afraid for..." what? For themselves? That makes a lot of sense. For the other disciples? I can see that too. For Jesus? Maybe, his body is now missing. For Jerusalem and Israel? I think we're starting to stretch now, but...maybe.

¹ Mark 16:8b (NRSVue)

But all of that is inference, and distraction. The text tells us in a few different ways that the women were afraid...alarmed...terrified...amazed. Maybe the original ending is inviting us to sit with that reality. Who among us has never been afraid or terrified? Who among us has never been grieved and lonely? Powerless and trembling?

Into this fear, into this scene of death, comes a message of hope, “you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.”² And not only has Jesus been raised, but “he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”³ God’s messenger meets the women with words of comfort and hope.

Of course, we humans are lousy at letting go of our fear and anxiety. We cling to the chains Christ has broken all the time. So, this message of hope is a start, but the women are still afraid. We still need to sit in the tension of this dangling preposition of an ending. It can be true that we have hope in Christ, while also struggling with the chains of fear that we are so accustomed to holding around us.

The heart of the Incarnation is found in a title for Christ that Mark never uses: Immanuel, God-with-us. Except, Mark **does** use it, just not how we expect. From the very start of Mark’s Gospel to its end we will regularly hear Jesus articulating the reality that “the kingdom of God has come near.”⁴ And if we explore these teachings we will learn that God’s kingdom grows in God’s time, and that it is like a weed in how it spreads and grows. It can start small, but become an overwhelming influence on people and the world. God’s Kingdom is hard for the rich to enter and is centered on loving God and loving our neighbors. But ultimately, that very first reference says the most important thing about the Kingdom of God: it has come near!

How has God’s kingdom come near? In Christ! We may not see the Immanuel title in use in Mark’s Gospel, but the message is still clear: God is with us. The Kingdom of God is breaking into human reality, in the person of Jesus Christ. He is, literally, the Kingdom of God come near. But where does that leave us? Where does it leave the terrified women walking back from the tomb?

I believe it leaves us with each other. Mark’s Gospel leaves us with a new community. A messy, broken community, to be sure. But one attempting to walk the Way of Christ. A Way that acknowledges our fear and anxiety. A Way that calls evil

² Mark 16:6c

³ Mark 16:7b

⁴ Mark 1:15b

what it is, evil. A Way that is difficult and dangerous. A Way that we **never** walk alone! A Way that we walk with God...and with one another.

What are the instructions the women are given by this odd messenger? First, don't be afraid! One of the major themes of Christ's teaching. When the Kingdom of God has come near, what have we to fear? Be bold in walking the Way! Second, they are instructed to look! See for yourself the empty tomb. Open your eyes to the new reality of God's in-breaking Kingdom. Death has been defeated; it has lost its sting! Third, go and tell. Share this amazingly good news with the community. Bear witness to what God has done! And lastly, they are instructed to believe...to trust. The community is told to go to Galilee where they will see him, "just as he told you."⁵ Understand that God is trustworthy then act like it!

Now, the final verse seems to indicate that these instructions weren't carried out. "They said nothing to anyone"⁶ after all. Except...we have Mark's Gospel. We have more than Mark's Gospel. We have numerous gospels, letters, and other texts; all of which indicate that the women did follow the instructions given them at the empty tomb. They boldly witnessed to what they had seen to their community. The exact time and manner of their testimony may not have made it into Mark's Gospel, but if it had never happened we wouldn't be here today reading this text and worshipping our Risen Lord.

Those women, those first apostles, in community lived in the tension of fear and anxiety, but also experienced calling. Perhaps they shared the good news with confident and strong voices, or perhaps their voices were soft and shaky...but they shared the Gospel. And they shared it with, to, and for the community, for their fellow walkers of the Way. Their example is for us too. Their instructions are ours as well: being grounded in community, boldly go out to the world and witness to God's overcoming of death. Speak out about the values of God's Kingdom and walk the Way of Christ.

And when you know fear or terror, powerlessness or injustice, know that the Kingdom of God is near. Know that you never walk this Way alone. And knowing that, we can confidently live in the tension of an incomplete ending. The Brazilian writer and journalist Fernando Sabino (1923–2004) wrote, "In the end, everything will be [all right]. If it's not [all right], it's not the end."⁷ Things still aren't all right, so we're clearly still working towards an ending. An ending that will see God's

⁵ Mark 16:7d

⁶ Mark 6:8c

⁷ Translation of Fernando Sabino, *No fim dá certo: Se não deu, é porque não chegou ao fim* (São Paulo: Record, 1998).

Kingdom fully overwhelm all earthly ones. An ending that will see all cycles of violence broken, and the peaceful and just reign of the Lamb. Amen.