

**“Afraid of Easter?”**

**Worship on Sunday, March 31 and Monday, April 1, 2024**

**Mark 16:1-8 (1-20) *NRSV***

**New London UMC**

**Rev. Joyce Rich**

There are a variety of alternative endings for the Gospel of Mark because so many people found the original ending to not be “enough.” They wanted something more than:

*So 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.* *Mark 16:8 NRSV*

Folks didn’t want the Gospel of Mark to be left hanging there. Because leaving the gospel be so open-ended would only lead people to ask questions like: Why would these women be so afraid of what the young man in a white robe told them? Wouldn’t most Christians say that he told them “the good news” of Easter? What did they have to be afraid of? . . . And yet these three women were seized by terror and amazement, and left speechless when they heard that: Jesus had been raised; he was not dead in the tomb; he was going ahead of them to Galilee; and they would see him there, just as he told them they would. . . . Well, I think we can rule out that the three women feared they wouldn’t be able to return the spices they’d just bought to anoint Jesus’ body – even though they wouldn’t be needing them! And for all we know those spices could have fallen right out of their hands onto the floor of the tomb when they caught sight of the guy in white and listened to what he had to say. I think it’s more likely that Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome were afraid the news of Jesus’ resurrection was too good to be true.

Should it have been so surprising to them? They had probably (even repeatedly) heard Jesus talk about his death, and heard him say that after three days he would rise again. But these women had also actually witnessed his crucifixion. They saw the nails being pounded into his body. They saw his body hanging on a cross, as he slowly died right in front of them. They heard him cry out and take his last breath. They saw the Roman soldiers determine that he was dead before taking his lifeless body off of the cross. And from a distance they had watched Joseph of Arimathea wrap the body in a linen cloth and carry it to a tomb. These women knew which tomb the body was laid in, and that a large rock was rolled against the door of the tomb. . . . They had also heard talk that the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom, when Jesus died. . . . They had seen and heard A LOT! I imagine them going over these things in their minds throughout the sabbath day. And they agreed that they just couldn’t let it slide that Jesus’ body hadn’t been properly prepared before being laid in that tomb. That did not sit well with them. So the women were ready and determined to get up and do what they could about it on the morning after the sabbath. While they knew nothing they could do would make Jesus’ death “right” – they could at least try to do what should have been done for his dead body. And, of course, they knew that their spices wouldn’t be enough to counter the smell of death that was already enclosed in that tomb. And they legitimately wondered if, between the three of them, they would be able to move the rock from the tomb’s door.

But despite these pragmatic concerns, they set out for the tomb. And I think their hearts must have broken all over again when they saw that the stone had already been rolled away from the door to the tomb. . . . Now what?! Had someone desecrated his tomb? . . . And as they approached the tomb they must have hastily come up with a list of different scenarios for why the stone was moved – but finding a young man in a white robe sitting in an empty tomb was probably not one of the options on their list. . . . Who was he? Was he an angel? Was this some kind of a vision? Were they really seeing and hearing him? Because this was definitely NOT AT ALL what they had braced themselves to find in this tomb! And yet none of them screamed. None of them fainted. They just listened to him and then *rapidly* fled from that tomb.

Obviously, that was not the end of the story. But the women’s initial response to what they saw and heard at the tomb was genuine – and very understandable. They had shown up at that tomb thinking they KNEW how things would go that morning – and they had been surprised and shocked by something so extraordinary, so far out of the realm of their day-to-day experience, that they had no words or coherent thoughts for it, they just had the adrenaline of their fear of the unknown to propel them out of there. That probably was how Mary, Mary, and Salome remembered it. That was their first Easter experience.

But for those of us who grew up in Christian families, who have never known a time when we did *not* celebrate Easter, we cannot fully appreciate how ANYONE could be afraid of the “good news” of Jesus’ resurrection! We are unable to understand how “out of the norm” our “good news” is from other people’s day-to-day experience of life and death. And because Jesus’ resurrection does not seem strange to us, we can’t comprehend just how freaking weird the Easter story comes across to other people! But if we don’t learn how to talk about Jesus’ resurrection in a way that other people can hear – they are going to flee from us as fast as Mary, Mary, and Salome left that tomb.

We need to remember that these women had been followers of Jesus. They knew that people had been raised from death. Lazarus had been in a tomb for three days before Jesus came and had called on God to bring Lazarus out of the tomb to live again. But even knowing that – these women clearly did not expect to find Jesus raised from death. They went to the tomb expecting to find his **dead** body. And if finding out that Jesus had been raised from death was such a shocking surprise to his own followers – imagine how shocked and surprised someone (who has never heard word one about Jesus) is going to be to hear us gush on about his resurrection!

Maybe OUR telling of the Easter story, the good news of Jesus’ resurrection, has to begin with introducing people to the Jesus that we know. The incarnate love of God who shows us that nothing is impossible for God. Who has offered us healing, forgiveness, and new life. Who has invited us to follow him and see where and how we can help people. That’s not too scary, is it? We shouldn’t be afraid to share that good news. Amen.