



Again & Again, The Sun Rises

Mark 16:1-8

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Good morning, and Happy Easter!

Easter is a well-celebrated holiday. Like Christmas, many of us have Easter decorations that adorn the house, and we have specific outfits (newly purchased, or hanging in the closet from past years) that are marked for Easter Sunday. We have special Easter dinner recipes, and many of us have detailed Easter traditions – specifically around easter eggs, easter photos, and yes, even Easter worship.

The Easter story is one we love to celebrate, and it is worth the celebration.

The story of Christ's resurrection is told in all four Gospel texts. All four narrative accounts of Jesus' life share the story of the empty tomb. Read Luke 24, Matthew 28, John 20, or Mark 16 – each recalls the resurrection of Christ.

I was a bit miffed last week as I started working on this morning's sermon, because, with only four accounts of the resurrection, you'd think that I would have preached on them all at some point in the past. I've preached 8 Easter sermons in this pulpit alone. Surely, with only four gospels, each would have its fair share, right? ... But, to my own surprise, I've never preached on Mark's version of the Easter story before. So, for a story that is 2,000 years old, that's been told a bazillion times before, this morning's telling of the story feels somewhat new to me. Indeed, Mark's Gospel invites us to hear the story a bit differently than the other three gospel authors.

So let us remember the Easter proclamation anew today.

The resurrection story is the conclusion of Mark's Gospel. In fact, it is widely agreed that verse 8 is the original ending to Mark's penned account. There are 12 more verses that we find published in most English translations of the text today, but it is almost universally agreed that those 12 verses were added later than the original writing. It's thought that they were added at a later date because of the odd conclusion of Mark's writing in verse 8. The last word penned in Greek in verse 8 is the word *gar*, which, in English, is the conjunction word, "for." There are many scholars who believe Mark meant to add more content to the story, perhaps including stories of Jesus' resurrection, but for whatever reason, he never wrote anything else.

Forgive me for the interjection, but it reminds me of the sketch from Monty Python and the Search for the Holy Grail. In their quest to find the grail, they find some Aramaic writing on a wall, and the "scholar" among the group attempts to read the writing. As he reads it, it says the "holy grail can be found in the castle of ugghhhhhh." And then there's a huge debate among the group about whether

the author died while writing out his last words of “ugggghhhh,” or if the castle itself is actually called the castle of “ugggghhhh.” It seems like there should be more to the story. There’s writing that is missing.

That’s the kind of ending Mark gives us. It’s like there should be more to the story than the text provides. Perhaps that’s why I’ve never preached on this text before ... it seems to leave us without conclusion.

For the moment, we’ll borrow from Mark and put a pause on the end of the story, to which we will return shortly. For now, let us go back to the start of that Easter morning.

As we begin Chapter 16, verse 1 introduces us to the women who found the empty tomb. “When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.”

Jesus had been laid to rest following his crucifixion the later-half of the day on Friday. The Sabbath began at sun-down on Friday night, and as such, among the Jewish community, there could be no commerce or work. So the women in our story had to wait until the Sabbath was over to purchase the burial spices. As soon as the sun went down on Saturday, and the Sabbath was over, they went and purchased spices to embalm Jesus’ body in the tomb. They waited to go to the tomb until the sun rose on Sunday morning.

At some point that night in between purchasing the spices and waiting for the sun to rise, the women asked each other, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” To our knowledge, the women had not been to the tomb previously, and having such a large stone in front of a tomb was not necessarily a common burial practice. While Mark doesn’t tell us how the women knew there was to a stone guarding the tomb’s entrance, Mark is sure to highlight the miraculous nature of the stone having been moved from the entrance to the tomb. It is important for Mark that, at a minimum, we know the women going to the tomb that morning wouldn’t have been able to move the stone themselves. It is as if the stone’s removal is just another way for the Gospel to highlight that “the resurrection [is] the divine finale of removing barriers that separate God and the world.”ⁱ

As the women approach the tomb, Mark says, “they looked up” and saw the stone, which was very large, had been rolled back. This small bit of narrative gives us a better sense of how the women approached the tomb that morning. That “they looked up” offers us some indication that they had been looking down. You can probably imagine that they were watching their steps, heads down, shoulder sunken, as they walked to the tomb that morning. The women, like the absent disciples, were in a state of shock and dismay.

Given the triumphant entrance that Jesus made into Jerusalem just a week earlier, there were high hopes for how Jesus might claim the glory of the Messiah. There were high expectations for what Jesus might offer following the cries of Hosanna – “Save us!”

And yet, on that first Easter morning, as the women approached the tomb, all they could remember was Jesus hanging from the cross. The disciples themselves couldn't even muster the strength to go with the women to care for Jesus' body. The women were distraught, and unsure of even putting one foot in front of the other, and so they had their heads down, watching their steps. Their spirits sagged as they made their way to the tomb.

As they finally reached the tomb, they looked up and they saw that the stone, which had sealed the tomb, had been rolled back. You can imagine the kinds of thoughts that must have run through their minds in that moment. How did this happen? Why is the stone no longer guarding the tomb? Who moved this stone?

In their confused concern, they entered tomb, likely fearing that the grave had been robbed. Such nefarious activity was common at the time, and is likely why they waited until the morning to approach the tomb.

When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side. ... Mark doesn't tell us outright that this young man is an angel, but certainly the details of the story fit the standard angelophany – the unexpected presence, the white clothing, the divine knowledge, and the authoritative posture ... this young man is a representative of God.

As with any angelic visit, the women were alarmed. And so the angel said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified."

I'm not sure this opening invitation alleviates their fear, but at least now they know they're in the right place. Jesus is, after all, the reason they came to the tomb.

The angel continues, "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, here is the place they laid him."

Call me a skeptic, it doesn't feel like motioning to the space where Jesus had previously been laid is going to help these women understand the prior comment, which claimed he has been raised. What does *that* even mean? Sure, his body used to be here, great ... it's not here now. That's what's important to us in this moment. You motioning to where his body used to be doesn't help us understand what's happening right now. What do you mean, he was raised?! Where does one even begin with such a statement?

The angel continues even further, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter, that [Jesus] is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

In this moment, the women are the first to be given the invitation to preach the good news of Christ's resurrection. They are told to go and tell the disciples and Peter ... as if Peter needs some special attention, given that he was the one who denied association with Jesus on the night of Jesus' arrest. The women are to tell the disciples that Jesus will go ahead of them, and will meet them in Galilee.

Galilee is the place where it all began; it's where Jesus first called the disciples to be his followers. In Mark's Gospel, Galilee is where almost all of Jesus' teaching, healing, and ministry took place. It is the epicenter of the new beginning.

And this is where Mark's resurrection account differs from the rest. Verse 8 reads, "So [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone; they were afraid."

That's it. That's the end of the story.

In this Gospel account, Mark never records a resurrection encounter. Jesus never shows up to Mary; Jesus never breaks bread in Emmaus; no one touches Jesus' wounds; Jesus doesn't appear in a closed room with the disciples; Peter never goes for a swim and there is no fish fry on the beach at the Sea of Galilee.

The women flee the empty tomb, and they said nothing to anyone. Here ends the Gospel of Mark.

Admittedly, Mark's ending doesn't carry with it the same kind of resurrection excitement as the other gospels. Perhaps that's why I haven't used Mark's text on Easter mornings before.

In search of some support for using Mark's text as this morning's scripture, I read through a number of preaching commentaries, hoping that someone – some scholar or homiletician more enlightened than I – could wrap this story up with a nice Easter bow. And, one should not be surprised, there are a number of attempts to clean up the story.

There are many who suggest that Mark's ending is intentional. It is as if Mark has this hope that we will take the knowledge of the empty tomb back to the start of the story – back to Galilee. How different does the story read the second time when we know that Jesus will be resurrected from the tomb? How many times did Jesus try to tell the disciples that this was going to happen? How many times did Jesus try to prepare the disciples for the resurrection? The narrative of Jesus' life reads quite a bit differently when you know the ending.

There are other scholars who suggest, again, that Mark's ending is intentional. But their claim is that Mark has the women leave the tomb in silence to offer an invitation to the reader. As William Placher writes, "The three women run away silent, but we have heard the story; it is up to us, in our lives and our testimony, to tell it and keep it alive."ⁱⁱ

Still, others suggest that Mark's ending leaves us with an eternal promise: that Christ has gone ahead of us. Just as the young man told the women at the tomb, "Jesus has gone ahead of you to Galilee," we are promised Jesus has not abandoned us. Yes, "Jesus is absent [from the tomb], but he has not abandoned his followers – he is "ahead of them" and ahead of us."ⁱⁱⁱ

The more I read from various commentaries, the more solutions I found to solve Mark's cliffhanger of an ending. Everyone had their own solution to his lack of resurrection encounters. And then I found this

comment, from Professor Richard Swanson. He writes, “Anything you do to finish off the action implies too much finality, too neat a packaging job.” He continues, “Mark’s story is completely incomplete.”^{iv}

As a people, we tend to prefer the neat and the well-kept. It’s why we imagine Christmas as a Silent Night, with a quiet baby wrapped nicely in swaddling clothes in the manger. It’s why we tend to skip Holy Week services, jumping from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday ... for Holy Thursday and Good Friday can be a little too messy. It’s why don’t like change, and why some work so hard to keep things the way they have always been. It’s why we prefer that which we know, even if we don’t love it, to that which we do not know. We’re too scared to face the reality of what we can’t control, the places of discomfort and misunderstanding, even if that path is the most faithful path forward.

It's why we prefer Matthew, Luke, and John on Easter Sunday – because they give us something tangible to hold on to in the resurrected Christ. We love the way Jesus says Mary’s name outside the tomb, “MARY.” We love the Emmaus Walk, where Jesus is made known to the disciples in the breaking of the bread. We love the story of Doubting Thomas touching Jesus’ wounds. We love the way the gospel accounts allow us to box Jesus’ resurrection in, inviting us to grab hold of what we can see, hear, and feel.

But not Mark.

Mark will not let Jesus be boxed in. Mark does not package the resurrection neatly and wrap it with a bow.

Instead, what Mark offers is something far greater than a neat and tidy story. What Mark promises, is that no matter how many times you go to the tomb, it will still be empty. No matter how many times you fear the weight of the world, the sun will still rise. No matter how many times you worry about what comes next, you can trust, the promise of life and love will win out.

There is no box that can inhibit the Lord, for even the tomb could not contain him. The promise of Easter is that again and again, the Sun rises. New life is made possible. A new beginning has begun. And the love of God is on the loose, calling us, inviting us, and leading us to proclaim the glory of the Lord. So let us rejoice, even when we do not know what comes next, for this promise remains: He is not here. He has been raised. Again and again, and again and again, and again and again the Son rises. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ M. Eugene Boring. *Mark: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006.

ⁱⁱ William C. Placher. *Mark: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Audrey West. “Commentary on Mark 16:1-8” <http://workingpreacher.org>. Retrieved March 26, 2024.

^{iv} Richard Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Mark*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005.