

Mark 16:1-8 With the women witnesses at Jesus' resurrection

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Across the world in Christian homes and churches, and even out in public, these words will ring out today, as Christians joyfully declare and confess this central pillar of our faith, that Jesus rose from death to new life. Without this cornerstone of our faith, if Jesus hadn't been raised from death, as St. Paul reminds us in his great resurrection proclamation in 1 Corinthians 15, our faith in Jesus would be useless. We would be worshipping just another dead religious reformer, and our sins would not be forgiven. So he hastens to proclaim: "But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised."

Yet in our sceptical scientific age, so many cannot accept and believe in the resurrection of Jesus, as the ancient alternatives to the resurrection of Jesus are still put forward e.g. that a look-alike, not Jesus, died on the cross and that's how Jesus was able to appear alive afterwards, or that in the cool of the tomb Jesus recovered from his wounds, and so on. Some archaeologists, I'm sure, are still hoping to find a tomb with bones inside with an inscription there that says: "This is where the body of Jesus lies." So even for believers perhaps some lingering shadow of doubt remains.

That's why we still need to listen carefully to the four accounts of the resurrection that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John give us. Today we shall consider Mark's version, which is the shortest, the plainest, and the most surprising. Just think for a moment about these two aspects of Mark's telling of the resurrection story: 1. There are no post-resurrection appearances of Jesus, just the angelic message that he would appear to his disciples in Galilee; and 2. The final words of Mark's Gospel tell of bewildered, fear-filled women who say nothing about their experience at the tomb. It's no surprise, then, that later pious copyists have added different endings to Mark's account to try to overcome these apparent deficiencies.

So today let's follow closely Mark's telling of the Easter story. Let's go in spirit with the women, and see what they saw and feel what they felt.

The Jewish custom was for family and friends to visit a dead person's tomb for three days after the body had been placed there. I think we can assume, because of the sacred Passover Sabbath, nobody went to Jesus' tomb of the Saturday. But on the Sunday, at the earliest possible time these three women who had, according to Mark, been present at Jesus' crucifixion and two of them had also been present at his burial, go back to the tomb. They go, as was the Jewish custom, to anoint Jesus' body with oil and spices to slow the process of bodily decay. They knew Jesus was dead. They went expecting to find his body in the tomb.

On the way they remember the large shaped stone that had been rolled in a shallow u-shaped groove in front of the tomb, and discuss how they are going roll the stone aside so that they could get into the tomb. Then comes their first big shock. When they arrive at the tomb, they find that the stone has already been rolled aside. Then, as they went into the cave-like tomb, they find a young man dressed in a white robe sitting there on one side. Their shock and alarm grows. Then comes his amazing message: "You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is not here. He has risen." Then he invites the women to look and see that the tomb is in fact empty. Finally he instructs them to go and tell the disciples who had scattered at Jesus' arrest, including cowardly and faithless Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee and that they will see him there.

Well, what was the impact of this first brief and powerful Easter sermon? Trembling and mystified, the women flee from the tomb, and for a time, at least, say nothing to anyone. Can you imagine it? Would you have acted any differently if you had been there then? I don't think so. I think we can agree that Mark's

account is blunt and realistic, but it confronts us with the obvious question: Why did Mark end his Gospel so suddenly and so negatively?

If Mark really intended to finish in this way, then he has only done what novelists and TV drama and film directors regularly do these days. He has left the faith-story he tells open-ended, leaving thoughtful hearers and readers of his Gospel to reach their own conclusions about Jesus. In addition, many of Mark's hearers and readers would have been people of faith who knew the fuller story with the many appearances of Jesus after his resurrection, and his meeting with his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

But even in his brief telling, he has left a number of leads and clues for us to consider and contemplate.

First of all, Jesus goes ahead of his followers to Galilee. Like a Palestinian shepherd with his sheep, he leads from the front and calls people to follow him, to go his way.

Secondly, they will see him in Galilee, not in Jerusalem. That is a strong clue, a way of saying that Jesus the Messiah-King will not have an earthly kingdom, will not make Jerusalem his capital city, and will not restore political independence to the nation of Israel. No, Jesus has a very different mission for his followers.

Thirdly, they will **see** Jesus. Mark, I'm sure, means more than Jesus being visible to them, though of course it includes that. This "seeing" includes understanding clearly and believing, which is why the angel adds "just as he told you". A number of times Jesus told his disciples that he would suffer and die and rise again, but they couldn't understand and wouldn't believe what he told them. But now, through this new lens of Jesus' death and resurrection, they can get into clear focus what kind of a King Jesus is. Now they can understand why he reached out to sinners and outcasts, why he so strongly condemned the proud self-righteousness of the Pharisees and the merciless nit-picking of the teachers of the Law, and above all the purpose in his suffering and death. In all this he proclaimed the boundless love of God for all people.

Finally, the women were urged to "go and tell" what they had seen and heard.

Mark wrote for people like us, people who can no longer see Jesus physically. Like them, we are called to see who Jesus really is through considering his death and resurrection. Like them, we are called to believe that Jesus is God's chosen king, God's suffering servant, our Saviour and our Lord. We are called to believe in a loving and merciful God because of what Jesus has done for us. Then we are called to follow the way of Jesus and to go and tell, to bring the good news to people today.

This is no glory road. Like the women at the tomb, we too will sometimes be uncertain, bewildered, and fearful, and be silent instead of speaking out. Like the apostles, we will sometimes struggle to understand and believe. So let's find comfort and encouragement in Mark's Easter message. Those fearful women did tell the other disciples what had happened at Jesus' tomb, and after meeting Jesus in Galilee, the apostles began to share the Good News of Jesus and God's love with those around them. And now some 2 billion people across the world will be celebrating Jesus as their risen living Saviour and Lord. Let's join the celebration, and let's go with Jesus into our world, which needs the Easter Good News as much as ever. Amen.