

Easter 2015

Going Before Us

Mark 16:1-8

We rarely read the account of the resurrection that is found in the Gospel of Mark. There is no mention of the appearance of the resurrected Christ. The women leave the tomb running in terror and it says they say nothing. Almost from the beginning people have had problems with the way this Gospel ends. At some point well-meaning folk tried to fix Mark's account. You pick up almost any Bible and you find in brackets two additional endings. The reason they are in brackets is because when scholars found ancient copies of the Gospel of Mark these later verses were not present. The short version has the women fulfilling the commission given to them by the angel to tell the disciples and then there is mention of the beginning work of the church. The longer ending contains resurrection sightings, chastisement and commissioning of the disciples by Jesus and stuff, such as snake handling and drinking poison without it hurting, that should have never been allowed in the Bible. Some want to explain what happened by saying that the "real" ending was on the end of a scroll that got lost and so others had to help out by crafting a new ending. Today I want us to ask seriously the question, "What if Mark had meant the gospel to end where it did?" What was he trying to say to his listeners, to us? Forget for a moment what you know from the other Gospel accounts of this day and together let us see what Mark implies in his account.

The first thing that comes to mind is that this can't be the end of the story. If the women ran away from the tomb and never said anything then the disciples would never hear the word to go to Galilee, never meet the risen Lord, and the good news would not have been shared. So we know that the women would have finally moved beyond their fear and doubts to share the message they had been entrusted with.

This awareness brings with it my first question for us all: Where does fear and doubt keep us from talking about or acting on our faith today? There are many reasons for our silence. Perhaps we think we will be misunderstood, or maybe we don't want to appear pushy, or we are afraid it will cause a rift in a relationship or maybe we don't

want to appear “holier than thou.” We gather today because we believe the good news that Jesus is risen. We are asked to share it but we know that sometimes we are silent or we hide our church related activities from some so as to not make them uncomfortable or get into challenging conversations. The women running from the tomb can be a symbol for us of these types of actions and we are encouraged to move past them, to let the light of our actions shine, to share the good news even when we might be misunderstood.

The second thing this shortened account makes us confront is the fact that the disciples would have had to believe the women without any stories or personal encounters with the risen Christ. The women had been given a message by the angel that Jesus was risen. Women were not held in high esteem in this culture. In fact, their testimony was not admissible in legal proceedings because it was felt that women were too emotional to be trusted. Yet these were the heralds of the resurrection. The disciples would have had to believe the women, pack their things and travel to Galilee.

This brings me to my second question: Where do we let skepticism keep us from hearing and believing or receiving the blessings that God wants to give us? Skepticism comes in many forms. Perhaps, like the disciples, we doubt the source of the information. What we hear comes from places we distrust. We get too tied to logic and don't allow any room for us to be surprised. We might even doubt there is any such thing as a miracle. Mark's account reminds us that we need to be challenged to, at times, move beyond skepticism to belief.

Finally, let us hear the message they were to impart. It is important to note that Peter was signaled out specifically for hearing the good news. We talked earlier in Lent about Peter's denial. If the other disciples had heard about his actions they would likely be shunning Peter. Even if they hadn't heard it Peter was so filled with remorse that he might have distanced himself from them. To hear Jesus was risen from the dead could mean that Peter would think he was only in for condemnation and so even if believing would not go with the others to Galilee. To mention Peter specifically meant that he was included, that he was forgiven, and that he was valued.

When we sin and make mistakes we sometimes respond like Peter might have responded at first to his actions. He was full of remorse. Mark's account reminds us that God wants to be in fellowship with us no matter what we have done. God forgives us and points us to the future. God reminds us that we are still valued, still beloved.

Finally, and most importantly we hear in the message the women shared, "I will meet you in Galilee." There is a future. There is a future beyond the dark times of loss. There is a future beyond betrayal and cowardice. There is a future beyond endings, the most permanent of them being death.

This leads me to my final question: Where will Jesus meet us? We may be experiencing grief and loss. Its pain is especially acute for us this year at Easter. Jesus says, I am going before you and I will meet you later on at a place of joy. Yes Jesus is with us in the grief and loss but also proclaims there is something better that awaits. Get moving, leave behind negative feelings and you will find me and life.

We may be experiencing fear and doubt. Jesus says, "I am going before you." Jesus points us to the future. A time where we are no longer letting fear dominate, or doubt cloud our actions.

The message of Easter is always future oriented. But we have to believe, act and hope, living into the future God is offering us. She woke up in a hospital bed completely disoriented. She had been having dinner out with her husband and some friends. That was the last she remembered. Why was she there? Why couldn't she move? Or talk? Her husband leaned over the bed to tell her she had had a stroke. She couldn't believe it. She had done everything right, exercised, ate well, had her yearly physical. Her cholesterol had always been good. How could this have happened? Yet, she had no ability to move her right side and she couldn't talk. It had to be true. She talked later about how all she could do that day was think about endings. She had created a long list, in her mind of things she would never do again.

The next day she met a physical therapist who talked about the future. She set out a plan of speech and physical therapy that would help her get back much of what she had lost. It sounded too good to be true. She wanted to ignore it but the therapist

was so kind that she finally agreed to go to the therapy room. Upon arriving she noticed a woman at one of the machines. She was laughing and having a good time. The therapist saw the woman look at her with questioning eyes. She smiled and said, "She is one of my patients. She had a stroke just like you." All of a sudden she had hope. She saw someone who had experienced what she experienced and had survived. She started to work on her exercises with a passion and slowly she gained back much. Later she could talk and tell me her story. She could walk again, but used a cane, and life was good.

It was an Easter moment. We experience loss. We hear the good news of love, of hope, of a future. It is easy to dismiss it. But when we listen, we open our lives to the possibilities we find and life today can be good and tomorrow even better. Jesus is always ahead of us beckoning us into a new future.