

Easter Day

April 12, 2009

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

That's it, all there is. Those last 2 sentences on the insert, the ones you didn't hear just now? *Added, tacked on*, by editors, copyists, someone, early on, who were just too uncomfortable with Mark's original ending. (And *included*, of all things, by the lectionary *augmenters*—not *loppers* this time.)

Maybe those early editors believed the gospel writer just *had* to have written more, that the real ending got lost somewhere. Or maybe they thought that the story he wrote was incomplete and shouldn't be allowed to circulate in this form. After all, everybody knows that Jesus did appear to lots of people after he was raised. [We've just heard about some of those appearances, from the Book of Acts, and from the pen of the Apostle Paul.]

Well, I send my regards to those early, well-meaning, over-functioning scribes, and to the lectionary folks. But the earliest, authentic manuscripts of the Gospel according to Mark really *do* end this way:

The women fled;
were seized by trembling and amazement;
said not a word to anyone;
because they were afraid.

This is what the gospel writer wants us to hear, and wrestle with. So let's do it.

As the women come to the tomb, they are wondering, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they get there, "looking up, they see that the stone has been rolled back: and it was exceedingly great." An odd sentence. Not the way it's put in the English we have here. [lectionary sheet] It is the way it was written, though, and it is odd, also in the Greek. It's calling for our attention: *Hey, there! Did I mention that the stone was really, really, big, exceedingly so?*

The stone. That's the thing that closes us in—in death, in desolation, in fear. It's really, really, big; exceedingly great. It is what blocks the way into new life, holds us in the house of fear. But it has been rolled away—by the one for whom all things are possible. (Cf., 14:36) It has been rolled away for the women who will flee, as the disciples fled from Jesus when he was arrested; for the disciples, who still are nowhere to be seen; for everyone who fell away from Jesus, or pushed him toward death; for us. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the astonishing grace of God has opened, for all, the way out of fear, desolation and death, into new life.

And yet the women flee in trembling and astonishment; they are struck dumb by fear. What to make of this, as an Easter morning proclamation? Certainly to feel terror, trembling, astonishment in the face of stunning evidence of God's power and presence is appropriate. You may know that sense of fear and awe, when something happens and you realize, with a shock,

“My God! It is all true!” Or, in the words of the centurion standing at the cross, “Truly this man was God’s Son!”

Astonishment and awe on the Day of Resurrection—this is an entirely appropriate response. But, the women do flee from the tomb. The stage is empty; unless you count the young man in the white robe, who may or may not still be sitting in the otherwise empty tomb. The women do not say a word. All is silent. Might this be Mark’s invitation to us to come into the silence, to stand in awe and wonder ourselves?

The Gospel according to Mark opens like this: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). Would we, then, call today’s gospel reading “the end of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God”? That’s just it, isn’t it—it doesn’t *sound* like an *ending*. But maybe it doesn’t *sound* like an ending because it *isn’t* an ending, isn’t *meant* to be. Not because more was written, or should have been, but because there is more to come. With Mark’s ending everything is wide open.

The young man in the white robe says to the women: “. . . you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.” (Dismissively.) Clearly, that’s not what’s important to this messenger, here. He wants to get on, and quickly, to what really matters, which is this: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

He is going ahead of you to Galilee. Back to where we started from, back to where we met Jesus. To begin again at the beginning; maybe this time in a new way. Maybe this time seeing more clearly, understanding more what this way of being his disciple is.

This is not a one-time thing Mark is showing us and inviting us into, something neat and tidy and all wrapped up—“Christ is risen, he appeared to lots of people, everything is okay now . . . what’s for Easter dinner?” This is a process, a journey, a Way. It takes us round, and round again. We follow him through Galilee, see his power over sickness and demons and death, over wind and waves. We follow him on to Judea and Jerusalem and the cross. And maybe this time round we will see him holding the life of the world, in love, the life and love that the world cannot hold for itself, for fear, self-interest, or indifference.

Now, at the end, he has been raised. He is not there in that place of death. He is calling us to come after him, back to Galilee. In the beginning, “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.’” (1:14-15) “Repent;” that is, turn around, change direction, go back, back to Galilee: see, and believe.

The Way is open to anyone and everyone. As Peter preached it to Cornelius—a Roman centurion!—and his household—Gentiles, all: “God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.”

There is room for all comers; and people of all sorts do seem to come. While those we would have expected to stand by Jesus fell away from him and fled, abandoning him in his time of trial, there were a handful of most unexpected persons who at some point moved toward him. None of them was able to stay with Jesus throughout his Passion, but each one did what he or she could.

One welcomed Jesus into his home in Bethany, where an unnamed woman anointed him with precious oil in an extravagant outpouring of love. “She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial,” Jesus said (14:3, 8). A total stranger in town from North Africa, who happened to be passing by, carried the heavy bar of Jesus’ cross. He was forced to do this by soldiers. But Mark knows his name, and the names of his sons. It’s a good bet that they have now become part of the community of Jesus’ followers.

At Golgotha, there was the centurion standing guard, who saw how Jesus died and said, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” And there was Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the council that unanimously condemned Jesus as deserving death. Joseph claimed his body, at great risk to himself, wrapped it in a linen cloth, laid it in the tomb and rolled the stone against the entrance. (14:64; 15:42-46)

A most unlikely and, you might say, random group to throw in their lot with Jesus. To them, add Paul, who rightly points to himself as a most unlikely apostle: “unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.” And yet, here he is, and he can rightly say, God’s “grace toward me has not been in vain.”

And here we are, in our own way also a motley crew, each one led /drawn by God along the peculiar path and through the entrance suited for us, to hear the astonishing good news on this Day of Resurrection.

The stone is rolled away. The way is wide open. He has been raised and has gone before you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you. The disciples haven’t showed up yet, and the women have fled. Who will go back to Galilee now? You have only to step out into the space, onto the Way, and turn and follow him, out of fear and into new life.