

He Goes Before You

Rev. Chandler Stokes

Mark 16:1-8



Easter Sunday

April 5, 2015

Scripture Introduction

I think it's hard coming in here with all this ebullience—if you come through these doors, as I know so many of you do, with burdens and insoluble struggles that many of you feel alone in. And Mark is described as the gospel with “no resurrection appearance of Jesus”—how is that good news? How can this particular gospel offer a word of risen hope? How can it kindle a vision of God's deathless love and presence?

Mark's Gospel is in part a mystery. As in all mysteries, there are clues along the way to the final denouement. Mark leaves clues. In a very strange passage in chapter eight, Mark tells us:

Jesus took a blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?” And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.¹

Why would it take Jesus twice to heal this man's blindness? It's a clue to what we're about to hear.

Scripture

16 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.² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.⁶ But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; 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.⁷ 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.”⁸ 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.²

* * *

I love this particular story of the resurrection, this one that *Mark* tells. Though difficult, it puts us right there in the women's footprints.

Part of what I love about this gospel is that the women *don't* see Jesus in *this* story of the resurrection. All they have is the word of someone who *tells* them, “He is risen.” That's just like us. *We* didn't see him there at the empty tomb either. That puts us on the same footing with them. That's where *we* live, with just words—like all of these we're saying this morning. All we have is a word that someone else has given us.

¹ Mark 8:22–25.

² Mark 16:1–8.

He Goes Before You

Like the women, someone *did* tell us; somewhere along the journey, someone told us, “He is risen.” But everybody is relying on a word. The idea is difficult, but compelling.

And the women are afraid. That fits too—we’re also afraid.

There’s quite some debate about the women’s fear. It’s not out of ignorance that they fear. They are afraid because they *do* understand.

What is it that he says that so frightens them? Well, the young man in the tomb *doesn’t* say, “You’re looking for Jesus. Oh, he didn’t really die; Jesus is just gone off to heaven; you’ll see him there.”

No, he says, “You’re looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He died. Look, there is the place where they laid him.” He makes it *clear* that Jesus died. On Easter morning, he says that death has not been taken out of the equation. Thursday’s betrayal, Friday’s crucifixion, Saturday’s long silence—these were not illusions. Those powers were not just erased. As John’s gospel has it, Jesus still bears the scars of death. That could frighten them.

But, as surely as he says that Jesus *died*, the young man says definitively, “He has been raised; he is *not* here.” He says, “You are looking for Jesus, who was killed. Yes, he died, but he is risen. *And...* he’s gone to *Galilee*; you’ll *see* him *there*.” That could frighten them too: to go back to Galilee. I think there’s enough disquiet to make one tremble in these things they understand: that he really died *and* that he sends them to Galilee.

But do they see the whole vision of what he’s saying?

He died, *but* he has been raised. And, Galilee, that’s a hard place. *But*, You’ll see him *there*. You’ll see him there.

I’ve been thinking a lot about the mystery of seeing as I watch my granddaughter, Molly, grow up. She’s all of 18 months old now.

A few months ago, she saw books as something just to chew on, to teethe on. She was devouring her books—literally. Now, she sees the pictures on the page, and she knows what words get said for each page. But I’m sure she doesn’t see the little black squiggles at the bottom—that is, the printed words. I don’t think she even sees them. And she sure doesn’t read them yet. Now, I’m fairly confident that someday she will read, and *when* she does, she’ll *see* what was there all along. The words won’t suddenly appear out of nowhere. She just won’t be blind anymore to *what’s been there all along*. It’s not that the words aren’t clear. They are readable. She just doesn’t have the *insight* to see what’s there. When she does, she will see more of what’s really out there.

One of Molly’s books is called *The Napping House*. Maybe some of you know it. Each page introduces a new person in the house. First grandma snores, then the child dreams; the dog dozes; the cat naps. And finally, the wakeful flea bites the mouse, which results in, one by one, everyone being awakened.

He Goes Before You

Now, the first time through, you don't see it. The illustrator has drawn the flea on *every* page, but it's tiny, so you miss it. However, like every good children's book, you go back a second, and a third, and a bazillionth time. And somewhere along the way, you spot the flea.³

Some Native American traditions call this "looking twice" at the world. Jamake Hightower, a Blackfoot Indian, put it this way: "You must look at the world twice if you wish to see all there is to see."⁴ He means that interior vision allows one to see truly. What's on the inside, our insight, allows us to see what is really there. Just as Molly will need some insight about reading in order to see the words. The vision behind our eyes changes what we see in front of them.

There's a mystery film called *The Sixth Sense* that employs this device: you don't see what's right in front of you until you get a certain insight. It's a suspenseful film and well-told. And if you haven't seen it, I'll tell you when to plug your ears to avoid the spoiler.

A little boy named Cole is referred to a psychiatrist. He's living in terror—and is not getting on well. The psychiatrist, Malcolm, is also going through a difficult time. Shortly before Cole meets Malcolm, one of Malcolm's former patients, whom he was unable to help, shows up in his house and shoots Malcolm and himself. After that, Malcolm's wife seems to be withdrawing from him and becoming increasingly depressed. Later, when Malcolm meets Cole, because he sees similarities between Cole and the former suicidal client, he takes Cole as a patient. Slowly, Cole reveals the source of his terror. He says, "I see dead people, walking around like regular people." He explains to Malcolm that these people don't know they're dead, and they ask him to do things for them. It frightens him. Malcolm encourages Cole to continue to interact with these ghosts, to try to help them. And as he does, Cole's fear begins to dissipate. Then comes the twist. As Malcolm struggles now to heal his relationship with his wife, an insight finally comes to him. (*Now, if you don't want to read the spoiler, skip to the next paragraph.*) Malcolm discovers that he is dead, and Cole is the only one who can see him. It has been Cole helping him, as he has the other dead people, that finally releases Malcolm.

(*You can start reading again.*) Then, the director takes you back through the movie, showing scene after scene that makes completely different sense, with the eyes of your eyes opened, with the insight that helps you see what was there all along. And that insight changes the whole story.

Just as Molly will need some insight in order even to *see* the words on the page, what we see behind our eyes affects what we see in front of them. Vision comes from within, true vision, vision that sees the depth of reality, comes from behind the eyes.

³ Although I have firsthand experience with this little book (no kidding!), my dear colleague, Tom Are alerted to me to its theological relevance in a sermon, delivered at Village Presbyterian Church in Prairie Village, Kansas, on April 8, 2012, and I and this sermon's conclusion owe a great debt to Tom.

⁴ Jamake Hightower, *The Primal Mind: Vision and Reality in Indian America*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 75, Cited in Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1993), pp. 55-56. The idea to "look twice" is inspired by her essay, "Imagination," in that book.

He Goes Before You

And the community of faith, as we are gathered here this morning, is called to kindle and cultivate that vision within us. That's what the women at the tomb were being called to—to go and tell, as are we. “Faith is the enduring ability to imagine life in a certain way”⁵—to imagine it the way it truly is.

It may surprise you to learn that Mark's gospel uses a device very similar to the one used in *The Sixth Sense*. Mark's gospel is intended to be read twice; it is structured like a chiasma. Scholars have illuminated this dimension of the text for some decades now.

At what appears to be the end of the gospel, the young man says, “He goes before you to Galilee. You'll see him *there*.”

And “there”—Galilee—is where the Gospel of Mark began; that's where Mark's *gospel* starts: in Galilee. That's where we are sent back as readers.

Now in *The Sixth Sense* I was fooled, but some really smart people (like Sherrill Vore) figure out the insight well before it's revealed in the film. As in all mysteries, there are clues along the way—as in Mark. Remember our strange passage about the man who can't see? Why would it take Jesus two attempts to heal this man's blindness? It's a literary device, preparing us to take a second look at the gospel, until we see everything clearly. This is Mark's way of preparing us for the word of the young man who will send us back for a second read, a second look. Follow Jesus back to the beginning, and there you will see him, risen.

Now all of the gospels recognize the challenge.

In John, Mary is actually looking at the risen Christ and doesn't see, doesn't recognize him. She does a literal double-take. Looks twice. In Luke, the disciples walk alongside the risen Jesus on the road and don't know that it's him. And at *table* they do their double-take, look back at their scene on the road, and think, “Didn't our hearts burn within us?” Mark sends us back to read the whole gospel again, this time seeing Jesus throughout as the Risen Christ. It's not that Mark's gospel contains no resurrection appearance of Jesus. The whole gospel, read the second time through, is a resurrection appearance.

What do we see when we read the text a second time, with our eyes washed with this insight? We see the risen Christ where we saw Jesus. As before, he calls disciples to follow him. He calls them into the ministry, the healing, the teaching, the loving, the battling with demons. He calls us into the fray of Galilee, where one spent her whole living on physicians, and another was paralyzed by guilt, and another lost a child and mortality and worry loomed. That's what *was* in Galilee. And now he sends back into that fray.

We know Galilee. That's where *we* came from this morning—Galilee, where we're up at two o'clock in the morning, visiting medical websites, not really wanting to learn what's there, and yet we can't keep from searching. It's where you are without her, where, since she died, you're lonely in a way you have never known before, and you worry about emptiness in the days ahead. Galilee is where you lie awake at night

⁵ James Whitehead, “The Religious Imagination,” in *Liturgy 5* (1985), pp. 54-59, cited in Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*, p. 44.

He Goes Before You

worrying over a child who can't seem to find her way home, where you are struggling to hold on to a relationship that has withered and mostly seems to be about apathy.⁶

And on Easter morning the young man says, "He is risen, and he goes before you to Galilee. *There* you will see him..."

What do we see in the second look? The Good News of Easter sends us to *our* Galilee and back into the fray. But Christ sends us this time with an insight that will let us see what's been there all along: that we don't go alone. When we go back into the fray, he's already there. He goes before you. And he has already won.

Resurrection eyes are what the gospel gives us: to imagine, to envision, to carry within us, behind our eyes and into our hard Galilees, the insight that He is risen, and love will not die.

Yes, he was dead, but he was raised. "His death scars are permanent, but he is not dead. God did something in that tomb that didn't erase the powers of Good Friday, but they will not win, because love will not die."

Though you may tremble, he goes before you. In the face of persistent fear, we are to imagine that "somehow Jesus destroys, or at least enables us to push through, the fears to take the journey to Galilee. Jesus believed he could push our fears far enough aside that we might arrive and meet him there. He had enough confidence in that *to go ahead of us* and wait."⁷

It is always something of a death when we realize we failed to be the parent we wanted to be; or that losing our job eats at our soul more than seemed possible.

"But for Mark, Jesus' resurrection is not *just* about life beyond the grave; it's about life in Galilee. *Resurrection means that life in this world is no longer controlled by death.* Death and its minions—*anxiety, grief, and fear*—these have lost. Love has been breathed to life again and let loose in the *world*."⁸ He goes before you.

Love is victorious over death *now*. Easter is not just about your life beyond the grave. "Resurrection means that *no matter what has died* in you—hope, love, marriage, joy, friendship"⁹—in Jesus Christ, God is bringing you back to life in Galilee.

The wonderful, amazing news is this: he sends us right back into the fray and goes before us.

⁶ Much of this paragraph is a paraphrase of a section in Tom Are's sermon, cited above.

⁷ Tom Are, unpublished paper for the Moveable Feast: January 2006—San Francisco, California.

⁸ We now shift into a section that is greatly informed by Tom's April 8, 2012 sermon. This and the preceding paragraph are pretty close quotes from it and from another source that I cannot lay my hands on. This last page goes in and out of Tom's verbiage and mine—it's difficult to precisely notate. Needless to say, I owe Tom a great debt for the final way I found to say this.

⁹ *Ibid.*

He Goes Before You

So “whatever burden you carry, whatever weight is in your soul, new life is waiting in Galilee, in those very places you are sent back to—*that’s* where new life is waiting, in our city, in our homes, in our real lives. That’s why the messenger says, ‘He goes before you to Galilee; *there you will see him.*’”¹⁰

And he sends us with new insight, with resurrection vision, with the eyes of faith, so that we may recognize him when we see him. Look twice. He’s been there all along, but maybe now we can see him.

Look for that, and you may discover that resurrection, like a wakeful flea, has been there all along—on every page of your life.¹¹ Resurrection has already happened.

Now, just like the women at the tomb and just like the disciples, all we’ve got are these words. But unless you closed your “ears” for the whole message, you’ve heard the spoiler, you know the good news, the vision is yours, and it will change what you can see. As the community of faith, we are gathered here this morning with all our words to kindle and cultivate that vision within us.

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

¹⁰ Tom Are, *Op. Cit.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*