

RCL|Narrative|Evangelio|Index

Commentary on Mark 16:1-8

Paul S. Berge | 1 Comment

The Sabbath day has passed and it is the dawn of a new day.

That for which there was not time to carry out before Sabbath began will now take place. The anointing of Jesus' body for burial will be carried out on the first day of the week, however, before we continue we need to recall an earlier event in Mark.

We noted in our study of an alternative text for Palm Sunday (Mark 14:3-11), that a woman came into the house of Simon the leper and poured a flask of costly ointment of pure nard over the head of Jesus as he sat at table. There was a protest by some to what was considered an extravagant and wasteful act, and they reproached the woman when the ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor. Jesus interpreted her response differently, "She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burying" (14:8).

We followed the events of the passion narrative from this point, knowing that Jesus' body has already been anointed for burial and the nard poured over his head was an act signifying the honor of anointing a king. Thus we have known throughout these chapters that Jesus is the King, the anointed Messiah of God's own choosing. He is the "King of the Jews" as Pilate questions Jesus (15:2, 9, 12) and the soldiers taunt (15:18). The ironic sign on the cross over Jesus reads, "The King of the Jews" (15:26). The final mocking of the chief priests and scribes ironically proclaims that God's Messiah is indeed the King of Israel: "Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, that we may see and believe" (15:32).

The evangelist now brings us in the early dawn hours on the first day of the week to the tomb where Jesus is buried. The Sabbath has passed and Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bring spices to anoint the body of Jesus.

The evangelist reminds us of the importance of time: "And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb" (16:2). Greek is an exacting language and has the literary quality of drawing readers or hearers into the immediate presence of the text. The resurrection story is such an example. The New Revised Standard Version text of Mark 16:2 reads: "And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went (Greek: "they come") to the tomb." The literal reading of the Greek text would be to translate as a present tense event, "they come." In Greek this is known as the historic present tense with its purpose to draw you as the reader or hearer into the present time of the story. We, too, become witnesses, even participants with the women, in the action of coming to the tomb.

On their way, the women discuss the difficulty of removing the stone covering the entrance of the tomb (16:3). Another historic present tense verb draws us into the narrative again: "When they looked up, they saw (Greek: "they see") that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back" (16:4). Listen to the details also drawing us into the tomb: "And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were amazed." (Greek: startled or awestricken) (16:5).

Once again we are drawn into the drama of the young man's assurance: "But he said (Greek: "he says") to them, 'Do not be amazed/startled/awestricken; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified'" (16:6a). The message we hear is the heart of the Easter proclamation then and now: "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him" (16:6b).

The witness of the empty tomb is a message to be proclaimed: "But go, tell" (16:7a). The two imperative verbs convey an ongoing action and immediacy to the commission. The audience is the disciples, with Peter singled out as a spokesperson in the Gospel of Mark. Jesus is already going on ahead of them to the place of his early ministry in Galilee: "there you will see him, just as he told you" (16:7b). During the Passover meal Jesus recalled the prophetic words of Zechariah: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered" (14:27, see Zechariah 13:7). The shepherd who has been struck in crucifixion is the risen Lord in Jesus' words of promise: "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (14:28). The disciples are the sheep who have been scattered in the traumatic events that led up to and followed Jesus' crucifixion. The crucified and risen Lord comes among his followers as the shepherd who goes before the sheep (16:7).

With the events that we have witnessed at the tomb, we have been drawn into the early dawn hours of a new day. With the women, we have come to the tomb and the discovery of the large stone rolled away. The message of the young man is addressed to us. We too have received the commission to go and tell. Finally, we understand the response of the women fleeing from the tomb "for terror (Greek: trembling, fear) and amazement (Greek: extasis: literally ecstatic or ecstasy) had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8).

The response of the three women to the promise of the young man in Mark's resurrection story is not unlike the response of Abraham and Sarah to the promise of the three messengers: "I will surely return to you in due season and your wife Sarah shall have a son" (Genesis 18:10). At age ninety Sarah responds with laughter. The LORD repeats the promise to Abraham while Sarah denies her response of laughter, saying, "'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid" (Genesis 18:15).

The response of Sarah, "for she was afraid", and the response of the three women, "for they were afraid," reflect the presence of the living LORD. In the barren womb of Sarah the LORD promises life in the son she will bear. At the empty tomb the young man proclaims the promise of Jesus' lordship. Jesus will go before his followers to Galilee. The two stories in Genesis and Mark share a theophany (Greek: "an appearance of God"), a manifestation of God's living presence. We, too, stand in awe and ecstasy of God's presence among us in the crucified and risen Lord who goes before us.

See also the narrative lectionary podcast with Rolf Jacobson, Craig Koester, and Kathryn Schifferdecker on this text.

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A Working Preacher User (April 04, 2012 at 12:08 PM)

Nicely said, Paul! I can hear you speak this and it gives me chills! Thank you again for the living word!

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