

For...

Mark 16:1-8

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 9, 2023 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church



¹When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶But 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. ⁷But 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.” ⁸So 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. (Mark 16:1-8, NRSV)



A mother loses her daughter after she dies from injuries she received from a terrible car accident. The calls from friends start coming in, friends with messages of comfort and support. But one call stands out, a call from a friend who also lost a teenager child in an accident some years before. Her advice was simple: “Stay busy”. If you stay busy, even with the ordinary activities of life like household chores, the tasks can give your mind a respite from the all-consuming grief.¹ It’s advice some of us may have received when we faced a season of grief and loss. It’s advice some of us may have given to others. Whether or not that’s good advice, and many would argue that it’s not, busyness is one natural human reaction to profound and painful loss.

The loss that Jesus’ disciples experienced that Friday could not have been more profound or painful. They had lost somebody extremely dear to them. And not only that, all their hopes for God’s restoration coming through Jesus as the Messiah died on the cross. And not only that, he had died the most excruciating and shameful death possible. And not only that, most of

them had deserted him in his greatest hour of need. It’s hard to imagine the grief.

Jesus’ lifeless body is laid in the tomb late that Friday afternoon, just barely before the Sabbath began at sundown. There wasn’t even time to properly prepare the body for burial. And the problem with the Sabbath, of course, is that it was the one day of the week a faithful Jew *could not* stay busy. We don’t often think about what that Saturday must have been like for this group of disciples, but one thing we know is that they couldn’t try to distract themselves with activity. They had to sit in their grief. Everything had just been lost, and the escape of busyness was not available to them.

It’s no wonder that these three women, as John points out, went out immediately that Saturday evening when the Sabbath ended at sunset to buy spices. They were probably outside watching the sun set, and then hurrying off to the market the moment it sunk beneath the horizon. And then they are up very early that Sunday morning, just as soon as there was enough light for the task at hand. The sun in Israel rises just about 6:00 a.m. that time of year. It’s a very peaceful time of day. I’m up at that time often walking in our neighborhood and on the river. You can barely hear a sound, even in our noisy society. I imagine that their walk to the tomb that morning must have been hurried, but silent.

If they talked at all, it was only about the stone that blocked the entrance to the tomb. John tells us in the previous chapter that at least two of these women were there when Jesus was buried on Friday, meaning they knew not only where he was, but how securely his body was sealed in that grave. In those days tombs had no doors, only an opening like a cave. In the front there ran a groove where a circular stone, likely the size of a cart-wheel, was rolled into place to seal the tomb. Three women did not have the strength to move it aside. But they were in too much of a hurry to wait around for the men to get up and join them. Or maybe the men refused to come. What was the point?

¹ Cited from Harriet Hodgson, “Does Staying Busy Get You Through Grief Or Lead To Avoidance?”, *Open to Hope*, June 29, 2012. Read the post at

<https://www.opentohope.com/does-staying-busy-get-you-through-grief-or-lead-to-avoidance/>

Perhaps they would find some strangers passing by who were willing to help them.²

The fact that they were going to prepare the body of one who had been crucified was unusual. This was a means of execution that carried with it extreme shame and dishonor, so much so that there typically was no effort to afford the dignity of anointing to such a person. On top of that, spices never would have been used in this instance. When the Jews anointed a dead body in those days, they used oil – think about the way Mary anoints Jesus’ feet earlier that week and he declares that she has prepared him for burial.³ Only the body of a king would be prepared with spices like this. The fact that these women do this at all, and then take the extravagant step of using spices instead of oil, tells us a great deal about the reverence they had for their dead rabbi.⁴

When they arrive at the tomb, a surprise is waiting for them, the first of many that day. The tomb is wide open. Perhaps we don’t give this much thought, but imagine holding a graveside service in a cemetery for a loved one on a Friday, and then coming back to the gravesite three days later to bring flowers to lay at the tombstone and finding the grave dug up and the casket wide open. I do not think your reaction would be, “How convenient, now we can put the flowers right into the casket!”

The first reaction of these women was not, “How convenient, somebody has rolled away the stone for us.” Neither did the possibility of resurrection cross their minds. We need to understand this. There is nothing in any of the four Gospel accounts that even hints at the possibility that even a single one of Jesus’ followers anticipated he would come out of that tomb. And that’s actually quite surprising because Jesus plainly told them on several occasions that this is exactly what would happen. The very night of his arrest, just days before this, Jesus had told them, **“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”**⁵ Considering how clear Jesus was about the way things would unfold, you would think his followers would have been camped out at the tomb Saturday night, as eager as shoppers outside of Walmart on the eve of Black Friday, watching the tomb in anticipation for signs of life.

Name one time when Jesus did not follow through on something he said he would do. It never happened. And there is a lesson for us here. We also hear the promises of Jesus. Can we learn to live with

expectation and anticipation of seeing each and every promise fulfilled? When we face death, can we be filled with joy instead of fear, people prepared to die because we know that in death we will find life beyond what could be imagined in this world? When we approach God’s Word in the Bible, can we anticipate that it is living, that God will speak to us through it in powerful and relevant ways? When we go through spiritually dry seasons where we do not sense the presence of God with us, can we nonetheless live with the confidence that he is indeed there, that he will never leave us or forsake us? When we fail in our sin yet once again, can we repel the onslaught of shame and guilt, and instead trust that Jesus’ promise of forgiveness is as good as gold? Jesus wants to set us free to live as if his promises will all be fulfilled, even when it appears there is no possibility that will be the case. If he says the dead will rise from the grave, then the dead will in fact rise from the grave.

It’s hard to imagine what these women are thinking as they enter through the open tomb. Remember, at least two of them were there on Friday when Jesus’ cold, mangled and lifeless body was laid to rest in that place. They know exactly where that body will be. But when they enter they see that space empty and, instead, a man dressed in a white robe sitting to the right of where the body once lay. Mark is careful to note the position because the right hand side was the side of both authority and favor. The scriptures often declare that in glory Jesus sits on the right hand of his Father for these reasons. 1st Peter 3:22 declares that Jesus **“has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.”** The clear implication is that this man, whoever he is, is favored by Jesus and has the authority to speak on behalf of Jesus.⁶

The women, as you might imagine, are alarmed. An angel, which this clearly is, was enough to terrify anybody. Remember that old television show, *Touched by an Angel?* Please. Nobody wants to be touched by an actual angel. In fact, every time somebody in the Bible encounters an angel, the reaction is always the same – pee-in-your-pants, run for hills, kind of terror. It’s why angels are always telling people “Fear not!” And when you add to this encounter the fact that the tomb has been violated and their master’s body is gone, it’s no wonder these women are terrified.

Then the angel speaks. **“Don’t be alarmed,”** he tells them, the introductory words of every angel. Then he

² William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible: Mark* (The Westminster Press, 1954), 387.

³ See Mark 14:3-9

⁴ Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Eerdmans, 1993), 989.

⁵ Mark 14:28. See also Mark 9:9-10. This and all biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁶ Gundry, 990.

utters what might be one of the most hard-to-believe sentences ever spoken in human history. **“You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified...”** That part is believable. But then this, **“He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him.”** Understand the claim. This is not another resuscitation like Lazarus. Remember him? Jesus busted him out of a tomb after four days of rotting, but eventually Lazarus died again and ended up back in the grave. No, this is resurrection. Not only is Jesus no longer there in the grave, he’s never again going back into the grave. His body, though still his physical body, has been transformed, the first example of God’s plan to restore humanity. No more pain. No more sickness. No more growing old. Nothing but health, and vibrancy, and life. The scars are still there, but they are the last ones he will ever receive.

The more I thought about it, when the angel tells these women not to be alarmed, I think he is referring to himself. Don’t be alarmed *by me*. I’m not so sure he expects it’s even possible for them not to be alarmed by the news he brings. How could they not be alarmed? He tells them to go and share this news with the others. And as they go, Mark tells us that they literally fled from the tomb. They couldn’t get out of there quick enough. We are told that terror and amazement seized them. That word “terror”, in the original language, literally means that they were quaking and trembling.⁷ The word “amazement” implies a “displacement of the mind”, a bewilderment.⁸ In other words, they simply cannot comprehend what it is that have just seen and heard. You have to watch a really well-done horror movie to see this sort of reaction.

But here’s what’s important. I don’t think that these women are demonstrating some lack of faith by their response. Instead, I think they are displaying what is a perfectly natural and expected reaction to what has just happened. I like how commentator Robert Gundry puts it, “Their flight and dumbfoundedness do not characterize them as disobedient so much as they characterize the news of Jesus’ resurrection, going ahead, etc., as overawing.”⁹ It is a possibility they clearly never considered, and one that they even now cannot begin to comprehend.

But shouldn’t they be joyful? Shouldn’t there be laughter and celebration? This is good news beyond their wildest dreams! Their master, their savior, has conquered death itself, our greatest enemy! So why are they fleeing in terror and amazement? Why? Because they understand what we often fail to understand,

which is that if the claims of Easter are actually true, while joy and laughter may eventually come, if we truly understand what it is that Jesus has done, then terror and amazement will always be our first reaction. For this reason, Lord help us if we trivialize Easter and make it mostly about magical bunnies, and colored egg hunts, and family reunions, and paying our respects to the guest of honor for an hour in the morning. Please hear me, it’s not that there is anything wrong with any of that. I love a good Easter egg hunt as much as anybody! But I’m afraid that the church is often in danger of taming Easter, making it pleasant and harmless.

American author Annie Dillard once put it this way,

Why do people in church seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?... Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return.¹⁰

It’s a hard word to hear, but we need to try to be open to the fact that she just may be speaking the truth. When in your life have you had a reaction to the news of the resurrection that even slightly resembled the reaction of those three women that morning? Because of the circumstances that day, it’s understandable that we might not react with that level of terror and amazement. I get that. And yet I know Annie Dillard’s words convict me, because too often I approach this resurrected God who conquers even the grave with far too much nonchalance and familiarity. Could it be that we have yet to truly comprehend the claim that the angel made that morning in the empty tomb? What should our response be to the news that a once-dead Jesus is now alive, and alive for good?

Most of your Bibles include more verses in Mark’s Gospel beyond what we read this morning. However, there is likely not a single reputable New Testament scholar alive today who believes that the verses that follow verse 8 were a part of Mark’s original Gospel. Those verses about Jesus’ other appearances to the

⁷ <https://studybible.info/strongs/G5156>

⁸ <https://studybible.info/strongs/G1611>

⁹ Gundry, 1009.

¹⁰ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk: Expeditions and Encounters* (Harper & Row, 1982), 40-41.

disciples, and his ultimate ascension to heaven, are not found in any of the earliest and most reliable manuscripts. This last section also doesn't have the style and content of the rest of Mark's writing. That doesn't mean that they aren't recording actual events. They probably are, events that we know happened because they are recorded by Matthew, Luke and John. But Mark didn't write these verses. Nobody argues that today.¹¹

There is some argument among scholars, however, as to whether verse 8 was Mark's intended ending, or whether the original ending has been lost. Some argue that there must have been more, that Mark wouldn't possibly conclude his Gospel by having women run off in fear and never getting to the parts where Jesus actually appears to them. That's the best part! Right? And yet, it's not as if Mark keeps the ending secret. In the angel's words alone, not to mention all that has come before in the previous 15 chapters, we have been told all we need to know about the fulfillment of Jesus' mission.

Other scholars have decided that verse 8 is exactly where Mark intended to stop. In the end, their reasoning has convinced me. Even if there was more to Mark's original Gospel, it has been long since lost. And would the Lord actually allow that to happen to his Word? I can't believe that he would. I think what we have is what the Lord intended us to have.

Now, admittedly, Mark's ending has that 'to be continued', sequel sort of feel. I remember going to watch Peter Jackson's brilliant re-telling of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. Unlike *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *The Hobbit* is one book so I assumed it would just be one movie. When it ended only partway through, I was left wholly unsatisfied. Now I had to wait a whole year for the rest of the movie. I couldn't believe it when I learned there were actually three parts!

What sort of ending is this to the good news about Jesus' life, death and resurrection – **“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.”** Isn't that also a wholly unsatisfying ending? New Testament scholar Eugene Peterson points out that in the original Greek the sentence ends with the word *gar*. This is a small transitional word that always leads to something else, a syntactic hesitation that gets us ready for the next

statement. It's a throat-clearing word that tells the reader that something is coming next.¹² It's a lot like the word “therefore”. That means that the literal ending of Mark's Gospel is, “They were afraid therefore...” Could you end a story with any greater lack of resolution?

The thing is, this is not uncommon in the Bible. I think of the story of Jonah. That whole brilliant story ends with the pouting prophet being rebuked by God, and we are never told how Jonah responds to the rebuke. You almost expect the book to end with, “To be continued...” It's a set up for a sequel, but there is no sequel. And think of Jesus' parables. How often did he end them without resolution? Arguably his most famous parable, what we call the Parable of the Prodigal Son, ends as the father in the story goes out to the resentful older brother and invites him into the party that has been thrown in honor of his redeemed younger brother. But that's where the parable ends. So what happens next, Jesus? What does he decide? Does he go in? Does he walk away? You can't end the story there! But he does. Why?

Why? Because we are now supposed to write the ending. Because the story is still being told, and now we have a chance to be written into it. Because the Gospel message doesn't end with resolution, but invitation.

Maybe this is the ending we should have expected from Mark all along. After all, he opens his Gospel with these words, **“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”**¹³ There is more to the story, a lot more! This is just the beginning. And so what I think we are being invited to do here is to write our own ending, *to write ourselves into the story*. I suspect that's what some in the early church actually did, and their endings were stapled on to the end of Mark's Gospel and included, with footnotes, in our version today.

All this leads to the main question I want to leave you with today. However it is that you got here this morning, whatever was your reason for choosing to begin this Easter Sunday in a church service, after you have come face to face again with the radical claims of the Christian Gospel, so succinctly summed up in the words of the angel that first Easter morning, what is your response? If it is true that the very Son of God actually did come to live among us as one of us, and actually did die on a cross to forgive us, all of us, and

¹¹ To read one scholar's explanation, see Paul Carter, “What Do You Do With The End Of Mark's Gospel?”, *The Gospel Coalition Online*, June 25, 2018. Read the article at <https://ca.thegospelcoalition.org/columns/ad-fontes/what-do-you-do-with-the-end-of-marks-gospel/>

¹² Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Eerdmans, 1992), 196.

¹³ Mark 1:1

actually did rise from the dead three days later to launch God's mission of making everything wrong in the world right again, what is your response? How do you finish the story?

I have come to believe that if Jesus had not literally risen from the dead that morning we would never have heard of him, and would certainly not be gathered here this morning. You may not know this, but that there is actually an overwhelming amount of well-documented evidence that his resurrection was a historical event. If you've never done the research, I encourage you to do so. For one, nothing short of resurrection could ever have filled these despairing men and women with such radiant joy and flaming courage.

Now to be clear, if you do study this and follow the evidence, you will not find proof, because the most important things in life can never be proven. Faith is always required in such matters. But the evidence is strong, and certainly far outweighs the evidence against this claim. And I believe that those who do seek after the truth, open to whatever it is they might discover, will ultimately be led to this conclusion. Of course, for those who are not open to the truth, but only their version of it, no amount of evidence will be enough.

If it is true, if what the angel said that morning actually happened, then Jesus is not just some fictional figure in an old book of fairy tales, or even some long-dead historical figure we look to for inspiration. If it's true, then he is the Lord of the universe, and alive and present among us today. All life flows from him and back through him. No life ultimately exists apart from him. And his resurrection points to the fact that he didn't just come to die for our sins, but also to live within and through us.

Therefore... What is your response? It will reveal everything about your faith, or lack thereof. If it is true, then our lives from this point forward will be filled with wonder, and joy, and unending gratitude, and willing obedience, along with a healthy amount of holy fear and trembling. But if we do not believe it's true, then we simply hear the story, even respectfully, but then walk away largely unchanged and go back to our minimal lives.

Mark will not write the ending for you. The yes or no is in your hand. He will not push us or twist arms. It was never Jesus' way; it will not be his way. He simply hands us the unfinished scroll and pen and says...you finish it.¹⁴

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read the passage from Mark 15:1-8. This is likely a very familiar story. Anything you notice for the first time? What stands out to you?
2. Do you think this is how Mark intended to end his Gospel, with the women fleeing in fear?
3. Jesus told his disciples repeatedly that this would happen. Why do you think not a single one of them anticipated the empty tomb? How did they miss it?
4. Has the reality of the resurrection of Jesus ever filled you with wonder and fear, or anything close to that?
5. Consider what Annie Dillard says (see the sermon for the full quote) about the danger that church is becoming a community of "cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute." Is this a legitimate concern?
6. How would your life be different today if what we read here in Mark is just fiction, and Jesus never did rise from the dead?
7. And what if Jesus only died on the cross for our sins, but was never raised to life? How would things be different? What was uniquely accomplished through the resurrection?
8. If we are, in fact, being invited by Mark to finish the story, how do you finish it?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why did Jesus not only have to die on the cross but also rise from the dead? What was that also necessary?

¹⁴ I'm borrowing shamelessly from Peterson, 196.