

### *Finishing the Story*

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 16:1-8** 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. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup> They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup> When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> 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.

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The Easter account in the Gospel of Mark may be the least often read and least often preached passage about the resurrection. Let me show you why. If you take the Bible that is in the pew rack and turn to page 1584, you will find Mark's account of the resurrection in the sixteenth chapter of Mark.

A few minutes ago we heard Susan read the first eight verses of this chapter. We heard how three women went to the tomb. But instead of finding the body of Jesus, there was a young man there who told them that Jesus was risen and that they should go tell his disciples. Then verse eight reads, "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." (Mark 16:8 NIV) They said nothing to anyone. Now, we've been taught that double negatives are bad grammar in English. But in New Testament Greek, double negatives are proper. They emphasize and reinforce the negativity. In the Greek it says, that the women said "nothing to no one." But verse ten says that Mary Magdalene went and told the disciples. It's really odd that right after emphatically saying that the women didn't tell anybody, two verses later we're told that Mary Magdalene went and spread the news. As it turns out, we're pretty sure that verses nine through twenty were added to Mark's gospel at a later time. Here are some of the reasons why that seems to be the case.

There's the blatant contradiction between verse eight and verse ten. In the very oldest manuscripts we have of Mark's gospel, verses 9-20 do not appear. What's more, early church leaders like Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian never make any reference to those verses. "More significantly, Eusebius and Jerome both say that all of the manuscripts known to them end at 16:8."<sup>1</sup> It has also been noted that the vocabulary and style of verses 9-20 are quite different from the rest of Mark's gospel.

As an aside, I'd like to point out that verse eighteen is the only place where snake handling is mentioned. That suggestion is something that a lot of people would be willing to give up. So, for several reasons, we will only look at verses one through eight.

There are several things in this story that don't get enough notice on Easter. All four gospels say that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on that Easter morning. Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that Mary, the mother of James, also went. Luke says that Joanna was there. Mark lists Salome as one of the women. The first people to come to the tomb were all women. On Thursday night in the Garden of Gethsemane, the men had run away. On Golgotha, as Jesus was dying on the cross, the women were there. The women were more present and more faithful than the men.

It's odd that the witnesses to the death and to the open tomb were women. You see, "In Jewish law, women's testimony was not accepted in court" because, according to Josephus, women

were considered to be rash, foolishly bold, and not of a serious nature.<sup>2</sup> If one were concocting a story, one would supply witnesses that were more acceptable than women in that culture. One of the startling things about the followers of Jesus was the regard and respect that women were given. One of the things that shocked people about the Easter morning story was that women were the first to be entrusted with the message that Jesus had risen.

Go to Galilee is the message. How would the disciples hear that message? Having deserted Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, would they expect an angry rabbi, there to point out and condemn their unfaithful behavior? We know, not from Mark, but from other writers, that forgiveness and restoration, mercy and grace, lay ahead, but did they? Galilee is where it all began. Galilee is their home. Perhaps return to Galilee means more than just going back to a geographical spot. Maybe it also means go back to the beginning. In returning to Galilee, do they begin again? Is the implication that they are to go home and live the life that Jesus taught them as they wandered around Galilee? Perhaps, "By following Jesus back to Galilee, the disciples [are to] begin their mission where Jesus had begun his."<sup>3</sup>

The women have been more faithful than the men. But here at the tomb, terror and amazement seize the women and they said nothing to no one. In the end, no human beings are completely faithful. Some time or another, fear gets a grip on each one of us. There are no heroes among the disciples as Mark tells the story. Even Jesus' resurrection is no guarantee of faithfulness, not even for the women at the tomb. For them and for us, the struggle to be faithful disciples continues even after the resurrection.

Far too often, we don't seem to talk about anything except that the tomb was empty. We tend to focus on the startling news of the empty tomb, and that is startling and scary. But we often overlook something that is more important. On Friday afternoon, Jesus had died. He was dead and buried. Their teacher, their leader, their constant companion was gone. Now the tomb is empty. What does an empty tomb mean? If you went to the grave of a recently buried relative and you found the grave dug up and an empty casket, you'd think someone stole the body! There are stories from history of grave robbers who dug up bodies for early medical study of anatomy. An empty grave always means that someone has stolen the body! The Gospel of John tells us that was exactly the reaction that Mary Magdalene had. "They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him!" An empty tomb is shocking and it's upsetting, but it isn't unique. No, the unique news is that Jesus is risen and that he sought and found the disciples after his resurrection. They didn't find him. He found them. It isn't that we believe in an empty tomb, but that we trust in a living Christ! – a Christ who seeks us and wants us!

We can find comfort in the fact that despite the significant shortcomings of his followers, Jesus did not need to come again and choose a new team of disciples. He could use them – and he can use us.

It's so difficult to read Mark without calling to mind the additional stories that Matthew, Luke, and John tell us about Jesus and the disciples after the resurrection. We find that Mark's story of the resurrection to be open-ended and abrupt. As Mark tells the story, the three women are told that Jesus is risen and given a message to take to the other disciples. Then the women ran away that morning, telling no one. We're left hanging. We're like a child in our parent's lap, being read a book. At the end of a chapter, our parent lays the book down, but we beg, "No, tell me more. Don't leave me hanging like this!" Mark is an astute writer. He knows that what happens next involves the reader. Will the reader also walk away and say nothing to nobody? An empty grave means that someone stole the body. Will we say differently? Like the first people who read Mark's gospel, we, too, have heard the story. We, too, have been told that Jesus is risen. Go back to Galilee. Go back to the beginning. Hear the teachings of Christ again in your memory. In our time, in our words, and most of all, in the testimony of the life that we lead, now it is up to us, to tell the story and keep it alive.

The men among the disciples have failed, “the women have failed. But we have heard the proclamation: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised. He is going ahead of you into Galilee; there you will see him,’”<sup>4</sup> Begin the journey of discipleship again. That is the calling of Easter, which Mark sets before us. Each of us, in the life we lead, will write our own ending to Mark's gospel. Will we be silent? Will others see the love and mercy of Christ in our lives? What ending will we write? Amen.

Sisters and brothers,  
Hear the good news!  
He is risen!  
Fear not!  
He is with us, now and always!

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<sup>1</sup> William C Placher, *Mark – Belief: a theological commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 239

<sup>2</sup> William C Placher, *Mark – Belief: a theological commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2010) p 243

<sup>3</sup> Pheme Perkins, *The Gospel of Mark, NIB, Vol. VIII* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1995) p731-2

<sup>4</sup> Charles L. Campbell, *The Lectionary Commentary, The Gospels* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2001) p 285