

Rev. Natalie Perl Regan
March 31, 2024
Mark 16:1-8

He is Not Here

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you,
O God our rock and our redeemer.

Happy Easter!

So, the story we just heard perhaps was not the Easter story you were expecting. Mark's Gospel does not give us the fanfare we have been experiencing in the music and lessons in this liturgy or the clear message found in other Gospels.

Mark does quite the opposite - he leaves us hanging; with questions; unsettled.

The ending of Mark has been controversial from the beginning. So much so, that a second ending was tacked on near the end of the second century to Markan manuscripts, and then a third ending two centuries later that mirrors later Gospels, with appearances by Jesus in the garden, and a more immediate understanding and sharing of the resurrection by his disciples.

The original ending of Mark is stark; it is jarring. And it is supposed to be.

Mark is doing what he has done throughout the Gospel; he tells us about Jesus and calls us to a respond today, right now. We are not to be passive listeners to this story.

It can be so tempting to sing our alleluias and hunt for Easter eggs, head off to brunch and eat our candy – hopefully with only solid bunny ears – and to miss the invitation that is before us - an invitation to respond to the Good News that Mark offers us, an invitation that will lead us to transformation through the power of Jesus' resurrection.

In today's Gospel, we meet the same women who had been at the foot of the cross on Friday on their way to Jesus' tomb too - Keep in mind they witnessed up close

the brutality of Jesus' unjust murder at the hands of their religious leaders and the Roman empire and saw the disciples abandon Jesus.

They knew what Jesus had preached – that he would rise....but given the finality of his death, it would seem impossible to believe it to be true. And perhaps we can relate to their desolation – at times in our lives when we have experienced life-changing loss, or witnessed (again and again) the ravages of poverty and war in the larger world, or the ravages of addiction, dissension and destruction closer to home. It can seem impossible to believe that there could be another way;

It can be hard to hope.

I imagine the women coming to Jesus' tomb were in a fog of grief and despair, going through the motions to do the only thing they could: to honor Jesus one last time by anointing his body.

Imagine their shock, seeing that the tomb was open; the stone had been rolled away, and a messenger of God telling them "HE IS NOT HERE; he has gone ahead to Galilee." After the absolute devastation...after the trauma they witnessed and experienced, **what did that mean to them, to see the empty tomb; to hear those words? That Jesus is not bound by the violence put upon him?**

What does that mean to us - the empty tomb; to hear those words?

We have heard iterations of the Easter story so many times, it can lose its meaning. But Mark does not allow for that. He brings us into the story, describing the women, the most faithful witnesses to Jesus, the women's response to this as: Terror and amazement seizing them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Terror, amazement, and fear make sense. The women could not wrap their heads around Jesus' death and resurrection. It must have felt like whiplash.

I am not sure that we can so easily wrap our heads around it either. The empty tomb and the angel's announcement is something we need to continue to sit with, to ponder, which is why we have fifty days of Easter to celebrate and unpack what the resurrection means.

What does it mean that our GOD was willing to become one of us and become powerless and die a terrible death?

What does it mean that God is bigger than the desolation and despair, the betrayals, the losses, the broken hearts and bodies in a broken world – that through Jesus, there will be wholeness and healing and new life available.

What does it mean for us that Jesus goes before us preparing a way that we cannot see – and will conquer what seems unconquerable to us?

[Another question]

When was the last time you have been seized by terror and amazement, and even been afraid that good news could be true?

Maybe it was when you got the dream job or into the college of your choice; or when you made the team or got the part; maybe when being found cancer free after months of grueling treatments; or learning that you were going to be a parent or grandparent for the first time. When the hope of hopes in your life were on the cusp of being realized.

Knowing that if these hopes were realized, life as you knew it would be changing, and you would necessarily change with it. And change can be terrifying, even if it is good.

I wonder if this is a little of what the women in Mark's Gospel may also have been experiencing – that if what they had been told by Jesus, and now the angel, was true -their lives were about to change irrevocably, even moreso than when Jesus was alive because now anything was possible and they were called to respond.

What will we do with this news?

The news that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the destructive forces in our lives, our world,

will never have the last word. That nothing is impossible for our God. That God so loved the world, that he gave his only son so that we might have life and live it

abundantly.

What will we do with this news?

Will we share it?

Will we follow Jesus to Galilee, whatever that might look like for us, and allow our lives to be transformed by the reality of his resurrection; giving ourselves over to His way of life in the shadow of the cross?

Maybe we could do with a little bit more amazement and awe today; a little less chocolate. Maybe we should be a little afraid – for if our God can do this, can rise above the power of violence and destruction and despair, we have hope that we and our world can be transformed even in the most desolate places; and what's more, we can participate in that transformation with Jesus who is going ahead of us, who is preparing the way. Which will mean that we will change and continue to be changed irrevocably.

Mark, puts us right alongside the women at the tomb–

Bringing our sadness and struggles and despair, our limits and our desire for control...and we are invited to see and respond to what they have found – and to hear the words of the angel:

“Do not be alarmed; He is raised; HE IS NOT HERE, HE IS GOING AHEAD OF You.”

What will you do?

Happy Easter!