

Sermon for Easter, April 1, 2018 – “Continuing the Story”

Easter, Year B – Text: Mark 16:1-8

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Mark’s account of Easter is a story that leaves us wondering and longing for more. It ends with silence rather than “Alleluia!” “Alleluia!” wasn’t the word the women said at the end of their long night of waiting. Nor is it what they said when the Sabbath was over as they made their way to the tomb. They’d been there on Friday when Jesus died and the sky turned dark at midday. Mark remembers all three women by name; Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. They looked on from a distance when Jesus was crucified. Mary Magdalene had been there when Joseph of Arimathea wrapped Jesus’ lifeless body in linen and laid Him in the tomb. They asked a pressing question as they walked toward the grave, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they neared the tomb they saw that the stone had been rolled aside. But even then, they didn’t shout Alleluia. Even after they heard the young man in white tell them that Jesus had been raised they didn’t shout “Christ is risen!” That’s what we **want** them to say, but they didn’t behave as we would have liked them to. They fled from the tomb for “terror and amazement had seized them.” The words are even stronger in Greek; *tromos* (from which we get the word trauma) and *ecstasis* (from which we get the word ecstasy), so a more accurate translation would be that “trauma and ecstasy had seized them.” They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. Mark’s Gospel ends in silence and Jesus never appears. But people couldn’t stand the silence for long. It didn’t take long for others to add new endings. Endings where Jesus did appear to Mary Magdalene, and finally to the eleven disciples. Those endings are usually printed in italics or in brackets in most Bibles. People couldn’t stand the silence. Besides, the women must have told somebody or Mark would never have known the story. What if Mark wanted to end with silence? Surely, **he** knew the story. He’d heard the story passed down from those who knew Jesus to those who now gathered in Jesus’ name. Mark wrote his narrative so the story would live beyond that generation of eye witnesses. Mark wrote in a time of trauma, shortly after Roman armies had squashed a Jewish rebellion destroying the temple and much of Jerusalem. Jews were killed by the thousands and those who followed Jesus from Nazareth were increasingly persecuted. Mark wrote this Gospel for those who’d never seen Jesus nor heard Him speak. Mark’s silence is for them. A silence that honored their present trauma. This is a silence that also acknowledges how impossible it is to put ecstasy into words. Mark’s silence is also for us. Of all the Easter Gospels Mark’s story invites us to stand where those first trembling witnesses stood. Those three women didn’t see Jesus. Neither do we. They didn’t hear Jesus call their names. Neither have we. They weren’t invited to touch His wounded hands. Neither were we. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, they are our silent sisters. The narrative, the story, is left for us to complete.

As Joan L. Mitchell writes in her book, *Beyond Fear and Silence* “...the silence of the last disciple characters surviving in the narrative bring the readers and hearers...to their own thresholds of faith to the limit of words to speak the unspeakable and to the limit of human experience to trust Who or What is beyond death. In [their] silence, the narrative still calls the disciples of the next generation to speak for themselves and bring the gospel into dialogue with their lives.” These three women are our guides for telling the story and speaking words of faith. They help us bring the Gospel into dialogue with our own lives. Mark couldn’t have done this because he didn’t know what our lives would be like.

Between the women's experience at the empty tomb and Mark’s writing we can be sure that these three women **did** speak or we wouldn’t know the story. They went back home to Galilee as Jesus had invited them. Whatever they said to the disciples their testimony was

shaped by those two words, trauma and ecstasy. This wasn't a testimony so absolute that it cancelled other possibilities. This wasn't a word that demeaned the experiences of others. This wasn't a witness that proved they were right and everyone else was wrong. The testimony that grew from their silence was always invitation rather than coercion.

The question for us then is this, Can we tell this story? Can we? It seems to me that in order to answer that question we need to look again at the beginning of Mark's gospel. The **very** beginning, chapter one, verse one, because that's where things get really interesting. It's here you begin to realize that when Mark says, "This is the beginning of the good news..." he doesn't mean just this one verse. He doesn't mean **just** chapter one, verse one. He's talking about his **whole, entire gospel**. All sixteen chapters are just the **beginning** of the good news because the story doesn't end with Jesus' resurrection. No, it continues, moving forward, all the way up to our own day and time! Still, Mark's original abrupt ending made early Christians **very** uncomfortable. So much so that they felt the need to add not just one, but two endings, the shorter ending, and the longer ending, a total of 11 verses in all.

All this gets me to thinking, isn't life sometimes like this? Aren't we often tempted to "fix" bad endings? Of course, we are! It's understandable, even reasonable. But, that's not always our call is it? Sadly, no, it isn't. But the reason why is because the God that we worship is the God who meets us, the God who meets us precisely at the point where things seem the worst. And, God meets us there not merely to fix the situation and give us a happy ending or to simply repair our brokenness and make us feel better. No, God meets us there to redeem us! God meets us there to turn what looks like an ending into a new beginning. God meets us there to take what looks like failure and offering it back to us an opportunity.

Let me repeat my earlier question, and here brothers and sisters is the thing, Can we tell this story? Can we? Can we tell others that God meets us at the point of brokenness? And, not just be with us but also do something **amazing**? We may not always see it. We may not always understand it, but God will be there. Can we proclaim that this story doesn't end where Mark or any of the others left off, but continues into our own lives? Can we invite people into this story now to take up their parts and carry on with the witness to the crucified God? Can we tell people that we still live, that we still love and struggle and die and hope by faith alone? Can we tell people that sometimes all we get is the word, the difficult, challenging, yet hopeful and faith-generating word, that Jesus is risen?

So, what do you think, folks? Can we tell this story? Can we? I'd imagine that there are people in our own lives who desperately need to hear it. If we won't tell them, who will? As Paul told the Romans, echoing Isaiah, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, they stand beside us today. In their silence they remind us that the life of faith is shaped by trauma and ecstasy, by trembling and amazement. Brothers and sisters, the silence at the end of Mark's gospel is forever waiting, waiting to be filled in by people of every generation. It's waiting now for us!

Christ is risen indeed!

Thanks be to God!

Amen and amen.