

Mark 16:1-8

“Do not be afraid...He is risen. He is going ahead of you.”

The Sabbath day has passed and it is the dawn of a new day. All the Gospel accounts of Resurrection Day include the witness of the women who were the first to discover the empty tomb. Early on the first Christian Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb to carry out the last offices for Jesus and embalm his body with spices.

These women were among the brave ones who watched Jesus die his agonizing death, and who followed his lifeless body to mark the place where it was entombed. Three days later, as they enter the open tomb they see a young man dressed in a white robe sitting there and they are frightened. He tells them Jesus is not there: “He is risen.”

Their witness of the empty tomb is a message of good news to be proclaimed. The young man instructs the women to go and tell the disciples, gathered around Peter, what they have seen. Jesus is going ahead of them and will meet them in the place of his early ministry in Galilee: “there you will see him, just as he told you.” Hearing these words, the women flee from the empty tomb in terror and amazement, too afraid to tell anyone.

The earliest manuscripts of Mark's gospel end here with the empty tomb and terrified women. Mark shifts the burden of understanding and believing to those who hear his gospel. We know from the other gospel accounts that the men were hiding in the upper room, afraid to be seen in public for fear of being recognized and suffering the same fate as their fallen leader.

Convicted as a felon, and silenced once and for all as a heretic, Jesus of Nazareth died in agony, apparently abandoned by the God he had proclaimed, abandoned by the disciples he had spent years teaching and sharing his life. Now they were nowhere to be found. With his death, the cause of Jesus, the mission of Jesus, the validity of Jesus, also died. He had been exposed as a fraud, a holy fake, a disturber of the people. And when his lifeless body was laid in the rock tomb, the Jesus movement appeared to be every bit as dead as he was. So what happened?

The disciples certainly weren't anticipating the resurrection of Jesus. With Jesus being so cruelly tortured and executed, no one would have thought God would miraculously raise him to life. If anything, “Jesus on the cross showed that he had been a false prophet, cursed and rebuked by the God of history. The cross of Jesus was bound to strike an educated Greek as barbaric folly, a Roman citizen as sheer disgrace, and a devout Jew as God's curse” (Hans Kung).

How could any kind of a beginning come out of such a disastrous end, let alone a beginning that would change the world? How did this Jesus, executed as a heretic and a seducer of the people, come to be known as “Lord”? How could a condemned criminal and disowned prophet be revered as “Savior”? How could a blasphemer come to be called the “Son of God”? How could such an utterly defeated group of disciples emerge courageously proclaiming Jesus as the “Good News”?

The Easter faith of the earliest Christians came not from logical argument or belief in philosophical abstraction – but from experience. The evidence is that these early Christians did not doubt that they met Jesus again in some kind of earthly presence. They were convinced they were not seeing a ghost. It’s a mystery, defying rational logic, but the reality of their experience was powerful inspiration, sufficient to send them to the ends of the earth with the message of the Good News.

The truth is that without the resurrection we wouldn’t know about Jesus. If his story had ended with the crucifixion, he simply would have been forgotten, just another Jew, another messiah, crucified by the Roman Empire in a bloody century that witnessed thousands of such executions. Indeed, without the resurrection we wouldn’t be celebrating Easter for there would be no abiding community to remember his saving death.

With the events at the empty tomb we have witnessed through Scripture, we too 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. Now the message of the angel at the tomb is addressed to us: “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is risen! Go quickly and tell his disciples! Indeed, he is going ahead of you!”

We too, stand in awe of God’s presence among us in the crucified and risen Lord who goes before us. He goes ahead of us, leading the way, showing us the path forward, giving us courage to persevere. There is no pain, no humiliation, no setback we experience that he has not borne to give us hope.

So, Easter isn’t only about lilies and tulips, chocolate bunnies and color-dyed eggs. It’s about hope, promise, and a future with stones rolled away. On this holiest of days, the holy messenger says to us what he said to Mary Magdalene and the others, “Don’t be afraid. He is risen. Go tell the others. He goes ahead of you. Go, tell the Good News.” Alleluia, Christ is risen!

Resources: Synthesis, 2015, 2018; David Lose, 2015; Marcus Borg, John Crossan, The Last Week, 2006; Dennis Jarry, 1997; Hans Kung, On Being a Christian, 1974.