

Easter is THE celebration day in the church. We've gathered for 2,000 years, ever since the first years after the resurrection to remember. To celebrate. To bear witness. And it is right for us to do that. We put on our Easter bonnets and new outfits. As a kid, it was my favorite day of the year, because I got to wear a new dress and my new patent leather shoes. (slides). We show the world our freshly scrubbed, most celebratory face on this day. (sermon slide) Yet the Easter texts, while they bring out the best in God, don't bring out the best, necessarily, in people. Thomas doubts. Peter denies Jesus, not once but 3 times. And all of the followers flee.

And then there's the women. Our silent and terrified women will flee in terror before our text is done. But they haven't fled yet. As Jesus is dying on the cross, Mark tells us the women were looking on from a distance. (15:40) And as Jesus is buried in the tomb, the women were there too. **"Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid."** (15:47)

So, after the Sabbath, the women head to the tomb at first light. And notice what the women bring with them as they head to the tomb—spices with which to anoint his body. They don't bring Jesus a sandwich and a change of clothes. They are not looking for a risen Jesus. They are looking for his body. Their trip to the tomb is a last act of devotion to the man they had supported and followed. As they were coming to make peace with the death of Jesus, they were also making peace with the death of God.

Some commentators have argued that the fact they were coming to anoint a dead body indicated an act of faithlessness on their part. And perhaps so. But where were the rest of the followers? And really, what were those women, on the first Easter, supposed to expect?

Yes, Jesus had told them about what was going to happen. But how could they wrap their minds around that? Resurrection of the dead was a belief held by some Jews, but it was never about the resurrection of one person. It was about the resurrection of all followers at the end of days. How were they supposed to imagine this?

And, quite frankly, we've had 2,000 years to wrap our minds around it, and it still seems like staggering news.

Mark's account of Easter morning is noticeably different than the other 3 gospels. Jesus makes zero resurrection appearances here. He isn't mistaken for the gardener, as he is in John's gospel. He doesn't walk on the road to Emmaus, as he does in Luke. He doesn't appear to the disciples or to the crowds.

We just have a messenger in white, sitting in the tomb, waiting for the women to arrive. And like all heavenly messengers, or angels, this one tells the women not to be afraid. That doesn't seem to work so well. But it doesn't deter the messenger. He tells them, **"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. 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."**

Mark doesn't see the need to prove the resurrection for doubting Thomases. Yet the man with the message offers the women words to point them to belief. He reminds them of the reality of the death **"He was crucified and there is the place where they laid him"**. But he also points out a new reality. **"He has been raised. He is not here."** And then he reminds them of Jesus' own words to them. After the Last Supper, Jesus told the followers, **"But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."**

He gives them the information they need to know the truth.

And their response?

"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."

And here Mark ends his gospel. In the Greek, it even ends with a preposition, causing Mark's 8th grade grammar teacher to hang her head and weep!

Your bibles have some other verses after this ending—both a shorter and a longer ending. But scholars agree that these endings were added on by editors trying to help Mark out. "Surely he couldn't have meant to end there?"

Yet, it appears that he did.

And as much as we want to immediately flip through our bibles to read another ending to the story, we should try to sit with what Mark has given us, as uncomfortable as it may be. Because Mark's story defies our attempts to control it, "reiterating as it does the utter failure of Jesus followers." Here's the good news, my friends. "Only God's faithfulness will complete this story."¹ Peter will deny. Thomas will doubt. Followers will flee. The women will be silent. We will add our failures to the list as well.

And yet, God's faithfulness will win out.

Because 2,000 years later, we are still telling the story. Peter may have denied Jesus, but he went on to lead the church. Thomas goes on to take the gospel to South Asia. The followers become the church. And the women apparently tell

¹ Beverly Roberts Gaventa in Feasting on the Word, Vol 2, Year B (WJK, KY 2008) p. 357.

someone the story. Because Mark writes it down. And we still gather to tell the story.

So, let's spend some time with the terror and amazement. There are plenty of reasons we can imagine for the terror and amazement. Perhaps it is the natural response to seeing an angel in the tomb of your beloved friend and leader. Perhaps it is the only appropriate response to the good news, giving God room to create a holy moment.

Or perhaps the women had come to the tomb that morning with a sense both of sadness and relief. Perhaps, as they were devastated at Jesus' death, maybe they were also relieved. Because, even if they didn't fully understand what Jesus had been telling them, it was becoming clear to them that following him was going to make some big demands of them. Perhaps "they had approached the tomb with a reverent grief, masking a deep relief that they were no longer burdened with the challenge of costly discipleship."²

This wasn't a relief they would have celebrated, because it revealed their own fear and weakness. Because the truth is that we believe and celebrate the good news of God's gracious love for creation, even as we fear what that will demand of us.

So perhaps, when they hear the messenger's words, "he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. Just as he told you," they realize that their relief was short lived. Their challenge of discipleship is still before them and will be more demanding than they had previously been able to grasp. God is not, after all, dead.

One of my professors, when he was in college in Memphis, TN in 1964, was with a friend, waiting "nervously on the edge of their campus, anticipating the arrival of an African American student from elsewhere in the city. On the day before, an interracial group had participated in a nonviolence training workshop led by the Rev. James Lawson. From that meeting had come a series of plans for interracial groups of students to attend worship in all white congregations the following day. So it was that the two white students awaited the arrival of their African American colleague, with whom they would attend worship in a white congregation, unannounced and probably unwelcome. In some small way, it represented a youthful intention to take the cost of discipleship with new seriousness, amid the justice challenges of the civil rights movement.

"For reasons unknown, the African American student never made it to the rendezvous point. To be sure, the cost of discipleship for that student was by

² D. Cameron Murchison in Feasting on the Word, Vol 2, Year B (WJK, KY 2008) p. 356.

all odds higher than that for the two white students. But what is known is the almost shameful relief the two white students felt as it became clear that they could refocus their plans and attend worship elsewhere that day without risk.”³ Yet, his “shameful relief”, like the women’s terror and amazement, did not have the final say. He went on to become a minister in the Presbyterian Church and a professor to seminary students, sharing his love of the gospel and commitment for social justice with those he meets.

Friends, Mark has ended his gospel, by sending us out to Galilee, in our terror and amazement, to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ. As we leave here this morning, I invite you to consider the cost in your life to following a man who defeated death. Because when we experience the faithfulness of God that completes this story, we are reminded that we are called to faithfulness as well. We are called to love even when it will make our lives uncomfortable and puts them at risk. We are called to stand for justice, not just in what we say, but in what we do. When we become part of God’s family, we are called to see the people we meet as brothers and sisters, even, especially, the people we don’t want to call family. We are called to get past our terror and amazement and speak of the amazing things we have seen and to share GOOD NEWS of God’s love in a world that is sorely in need of comfort, blessing, and love.

As we go out into an Easter world, where death has been defeated, let us live in hope. Because living in the reality that ***God’s faithfulness***, not ours, is what will complete this story allows us to move past our terror and amazement. Like Peter, we can live past our denials into stronger discipleship. Like Thomas, we can live past our doubts into the confidence to share the good news in foreign lands. Like the women, we are free to live into the confidence to tell the story we have been given. “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, to Boise, to Kuna, to Meridian, just as he told you.” Amen and Amen.

³ *ibid.* p. 356.