

AFTER THE STONES AND SPICES

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

There is something seriously wrong with the story we read today, the one from Mark's gospel. Maybe you noticed it. His is a story without a resurrection appearance. There's an empty tomb. There is a young man who tells the women that Jesus has risen, but there are no sightings to confirm the testimony.

Instead, Mark's gospel ends with the women running from the tomb, seized with fear and trembling, unable or unwilling to say anything to anyone for... and that's the actual word on which Mark's gospel ends, the word *for*... for what? For fear, for excitement, for joy... we don't know. The gospel doesn't actually finish; it just stops.

Matthew and Luke and John all have elegant endings. Much more refined and satisfying than Mark. In their versions, Jesus walks through walls and greets the Twelve at table. Jesus meets Mary in the garden and calls her by name. He invites Thomas to touch the nail prints in his wrists and see that it is he. He even walks on the road to Emmaus with two travelers who recognize him when he breaks bread with them in the evening. But none of those stories come from Mark. I wonder why?

Some people think Mark had a heart attack and died, his magnum opus unfinished. Others suggest that the brittle manuscript of the original papyrus got broken off at that point and the last page or two have never been found. Some think the manuscript got burned up in a fire, and we have only those parts that survive. Some say that Mark meant to finish the gospel but there was a knock on the door, a commanding interruption and he was never allowed to finish. All very interesting, but none of them certain.

Mark's Easter story begins at dawn. The Sabbath is over. The women are making their way to the tomb carrying spices and ointments to anoint Jesus' body for burial.

As they made their way, they questioned among themselves how in the world they were going to roll the stone from the entrance. Would they be strong enough to push it aside so that they could get in? Or could they find someone to help them roll it away?

When they got to the tomb, the stone was laid aside already, and entering, they found a young man dressed in a white robe sitting in the darkness as if he were waiting for them.

"Do not be afraid," he said. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Go and tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you into Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

You might think that they would be thrilled with this news, drop the spices and run with eager anticipation to tell all that they had seen and heard. But instead, Mark tells us, "they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

Now don't get me wrong, I don't fault them for being frightened. I mean put yourselves in their sandals, you go looking for the body of a man you love whom you last saw lifeless on Friday, and now some stranger is telling you he has been raised from the dead. Who wouldn't be afraid?

The whole town was on edge. The disciples were in hiding. The Temple guards were on red alert. The Roman soldiers were keeping a lid on troublemakers. Who wouldn't be afraid? Nobody should fault them for their fear.

On the other hand, shouldn't they have been at least somewhat prepared for this? After all, Jesus had predicted that the Son of Man would be betrayed into the hands of his enemies, and suffer, and die, and then on the third day be raised from the dead.

But no. They didn't connect those dots. They ran from the tomb, for fear and trembling had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

Their silence is especially strange when contrasted with the rest of the gospel. Throughout Mark's account whenever a demon is cast out, or a healing takes place, or some miraculous thing occurs, Jesus sternly admonishes everyone not to say anything about it. In Galilee he heals a leper and warns him to go home and say nothing to anyone on the way. And what does he do? He runs around and tells everybody what happened!

Jesus goes to the Sea of Galilee where the crowds press in on him, and he heals many of diverse diseases. He orders the unclean spirits to keep silent, but not before they have proclaimed in a loud voice that he is the Son of God.

All throughout the gospel he tells those whom he heals to keep quiet, and instead they run out and tell everybody what has happened to them; the priests and the Pharisees, and the folks in town, the bystanders in the synagogue, everybody's aunt and uncle and third cousin, they all hear precisely the thing Jesus has said not to say.

Then along comes this story today where the women are instructed to go and tell the disciples and Peter about everything they've seen and heard, the most amazing good news you can imagine. And what do they do? They clam up. They run from the tomb tongue tied, because fear and trembling have seized them; and they say nothing to anyone because they are afraid.

Now we know intuitively and empirically that this silence didn't last. One of the women, probably all of them, finally found their voice, they broke the silence and let it slip out, "You'll never believe what happened up at the tomb this morning!"

But if you have only Mark's gospel and none of the others, you don't know that for sure, except for the fact that we're all sitting here today, hoping against hope that what they didn't say and eventually did, is true. That God's love is greater than death's power. The good news that Christ is risen, risen indeed.

Now just about everybody's Bible carries a longer ending to Mark's gospel, another eleven verses that describe some resurrection appearances that sound vaguely like the resurrection appearances in Luke's gospel, with a weird allusion thrown in, translated from a West Virginia dialect no doubt, that references snake handling.

But in spite of that, every reasonable modern scholar says that the longer ending comes not from Mark's pen, but someone else writing a century later. It's as if the early

church couldn't sit still with Mark's abbreviated way of doing it, so they had to improve on him and add a resurrection appearance or two for good measure. Sort of like adding a few brush strokes to the Mona Lisa.

But every respected scholar today says the 8th verse is really where Mark stops.

Which leaves me wondering... if this is where Mark really wanted to end, with no resurrection appearances, no ghostly apparitions, no floating through walls or risen Jesus stirring the disciples an Easter morning fish fry by the Sea of Galilee, then what is the purpose of this unfinished way of telling the story?

Well one way of telling any story is for the storyteller to tell you everything, the meaning of the symbols, the moral of the story, the allegorical equivalents that answer any ambiguity. You know, the sea is life, the whale is death, Jonah represents the poor sot like us who disobeys divine commands. It's very linear. This is somebody else's story. It happened long ago and far away. It's not going to happen to you.

But another way of telling a story, I think Mark's way of telling the gospel, is to leave the ending unfinished, so that *you* have to get into the story yourself and go back to the start and read the story again, now seeing yourself in what is happening, and in light of the ending, to see Christ present in the world as well.

If Christ is risen, as the young man in the tomb says he is, then we know how the story comes out because the risen Christ is in it, not as a memory of the past, but as a living presence here and now.

The angel in the tomb, after all, instructs the women to, "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."

And where is Galilee? Where life is lived and the gospel unfolds. That place where baptism and repentance start things rolling. Where disciples respond to the invitation to "Come, follow me." That gritty place where people who are sick cry for healing, and the hungry beg for food, where terrorists and soldiers and corrupt politicians and tax collectors skimming off the top are in power. Galilee, that familiar place where life is lived; the scene of God's most impassioned intervention.

Ched Myers writing about Mark's ending says,

It is Jesus who has the final word and the final act. ...The end is truly not yet. ...In other words ...the narrative, which appeared to have ended, is beginning again. The story is circular!¹

My friend Tom Are, pastor at the Village Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, tells a story of his children's love of a book called *The Napping House*. In this house everyone is sleeping. There is a snoring granny, a dozing child, a dog, a cat, a mouse, and one guest who is always awake – a flea. Tom's children liked the flea the best. With each page a new resident of the house is introduced. The dog dozes, the cat naps. And the illustrator has placed the flea on every page, but you don't see it the first time through; it's just a flea. But the second time through (as well as the next bazillion times) you can spot the flea on every page. It's never in the same place, but it's always there.²

"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." The thing that Mark wants us to see for ourselves is

that once you know that Jesus is the risen one, the second time through (as well as the next bazillion times) you can spot him on every page, you can see him in every day, because you know where the story is going, it is going toward him. And he leaves us signs that we are on the way.

He is there in the bursting forth of life this time of year, not as the annual seasonal change from winter's dullness, the pinks and lavenders and whites of the bulbs coming up. If Easter were only a celebration of the vernal equinox, you wouldn't need a resurrection. The bunnies and chocolate eggs would be enough.

But rather the changing of all of the seasons gives testimony to a divine intention, imprinting the genetic code of the universe on the rhythmic movement of the Creation. So every spring comes as resurrection, every summer as growth, every autumn as dying, an outward and visible symbol of the inward and spiritual truth that even the earth itself knows, that life moves into death, and death into life.

God is present in our world to insist on "Yes," every time the world imposes its "No." Can't you see God present when a child is born, when a word is formed and spoken? There in a surgeon's skillful hands, an actor's art, a storyteller's skill. Found in the tumor that is shrinking. Evident in the embrace of love, manifest in the baking and breaking of bread, triumphant and reassuring in the face of death. He promises to go before us into Galilee, to meet us on the way, and wait for us, there.

One of the people I greatly admire, William Sloane Coffin died on Wednesday. He was an irreverent patriot, an eloquent preacher, and a necessary prophet. You can say a lot of things about him, and he was not without controversy as any Yale graduate knows, but one thing is for sure, he was never more eloquent than upholding the faith on any Easter morning at Riverside Church. On one such Sunday, he said,

We are on the road to heaven if we walk today with God. Eternal life is not a possession conferred at death; it is a present endowment. We live it now and continue it through death. With God, "time is eternity in disguise. (Heschel)³

That is, I think, what Mark wants us to know, that we are on the road to heaven if we walk today with God.

The good news of this Easter day is not just that *he* might live where *we* live, encouraging as that is, but that *we* will live where *he* lives and there, he waits for us. In that gracious Galilee, where he has gone before us, we will see him, just as he told us.

That place where children are blessed, and where the last are first. Where the hungry are filled, and the thirsty are refreshed. There, the outcast is welcome, the broken are mended, the sinful are given a new day. There, the great stones covering the gaping tombs have been rolled away, and there is no more need of spices for anointing.⁴

The world is so alive with God at times, I often wonder if we are not almost halfway there, if we will only notice what we are seeing on every page, in every day.

There is so much in the world that is discouraging these days. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue, the terrorism invades even mosques and temples, the Security Barrier is going up in Israel, Palestinians have elected a government that is a pariah, Iran

celebrates what it calls *progress* toward a nuclear capacity. Every day somebody gets shot on the streets of our city, and children die of neglect, and SWAT teams keep watch on us in subway stations, the poor beg for food, and every chemotherapist in town is overworked.

But in the face of all that, all that is discouraging and downcast and bodes death, comes good news of life, so good that it can transform the way we look at the world, because we have a glimpse of where we are going, and where he has already gone. We may have come with spices and ointments, but at the tomb the stone has already been rolled away.

“Do not be afraid,” the young man tells us. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Go and tell everyone that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him, just as he told you.”

The world’s “No,” has become God’s, “Yes.” And we do know how the story comes out! Good news today. The Lord is risen, he is risen indeed. Alleluia.

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¹ Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) 398-99.

² I am grateful to Tom Are for this illustration which is reported in his paper given at the Moveable Feast, 2006.

³ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) p. 170. Dr. Coffin’s parenthetical reference to Heschel indicates that he is quoting the late Rabbi Abraham Heschel, but there is no further citation given.

⁴ I have borrowed some of Tom Are’s phrases in his paper in this paragraph. The references are found in his Easter paper on this text.