

Message for Resurrection of Our Lord, Year B (4/4/2021)
Mark 16:1-8

Every Easter, my joy is tempered a little by doubt. Doubt and jealousy. Our triumphant hymns and floral displays and holiday feasts match the tone of the Easter stories in the other Gospels – the risen Lord appears to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb and speaks her name,¹ fleeing disciples suddenly recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread at Emmaus,² skeptical Thomas gets the chance to touch his wounds.³ But, I've never had an experience that comes even remotely close to the bodily appearances recorded in scripture. I wish I had been there to see the risen Christ for myself. But since I wasn't, I have to rely on the witness of others, filtered through old stories and songs, and buttressed by the faith of my forebears and fellow saints today. **For us, there's no certainty of the resurrection, only a promise.**

That's also true, by the way, for the faithful women who approach the tomb early on Sunday morning in the Gospel of Mark. There are no resurrection appearances in Mark's version of Easter; from the moment that Joseph of Arimathea seals him in the tomb on Friday, Jesus is absent. **How remarkable that of all the Sundays for Jesus *not* to appear in the gospel story, it's this one.** "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified," the mysterious messenger tells the women. "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the

¹ John 20:16.

² Luke 24:30-31.

³ John 20:27.

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.” No risen Christ, just this strange statement from a strange man. That’s all the assurance the women get on Easter morning. “So 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.”

That’s the last verse of Mark’s Gospel. It’s so abrupt, so jarring that by the second century, editors had already tacked on supplemental endings based on other traditions. But, **in Mark’s tradition – in the earliest narrative of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection – it’s fear and speechlessness. The end.**

And, while others may deem it incomplete, that’s precisely why I love this story of Easter. I identify with Mary, Mary, and Salome in Mark more than I do with the characters in the other Gospels. They attend closely to the events of the prior week, standing at a distance from the cross as Jesus slowly suffocates and bleeds out, and following Joseph to see where he lays the body. No doubt it’s a solemn Sabbath. I imagine there isn’t much to say as the women sit with their trauma, their hearts broken and hopes shattered. I imagine they’re mostly wordless as they build up the courage to do the only thing they know to do in that moment, to show up once more to the place of death.

Jesus’ other followers have scattered, but these women love Jesus enough to return to the tomb in order to anoint his body. **They love him enough not to**

turn away from their grief, but rather toward it, to face again the devastating outcome of his story.

So, their fear and speechlessness in response to the news of the resurrection is not inconsistent with their state of mind already. And, although fear is often associated in the Gospel with a lack of faith, to my mind there's nothing faithless in the women's reaction. **Trauma takes an enormous emotional toll, so fear and silence are only natural. The women at the tomb can't be expected to shed their grief and anxiety at the slightest possibility of good news; they can't just flip a switch from pain to joy. If anything, this unexpected turn of events compounds their uncertainty, raising more questions than it answers.** "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That's the case for us, too, when things fall apart and we're still taking stock of the situation. Sometimes there are no words.

But, could it be that the women's speechlessness on Easter morning is the very soil in which the promise of resurrection can take root? Anglican priest Tish Harrison Warren writes:

There is little that requires less of us than simply sitting in silence, doing nothing. It is prayer for the castaway who has forgotten the language of faith. In a sense, it's easy. Yet sitting in silence is an exercise in tolerating mystery. It reminds us that there is a limit to the power of words and to human reason....

To be a Christian is to sit, however uncomfortably, in mystery, in something that we can never quite nail down or name.⁴

⁴ *Prayer in the Night: For Those Who Work or Watch or Weep*, 111.

Warren attests that when her own confidence fails, silence is the only way forward: “Sitting wordlessly before God allows space for the real work to begin in my heart.”⁵

“They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Of course, the women must have eventually said something to someone. Otherwise, there would be no Gospel of Mark. Still, their testimony and the testimonies of others who encountered the risen Christ are just that: testimonies. We who’ve been drawn to Jesus down through the centuries have had to depend on the words of others as much as the women at the tomb depended on the words of the heavenly messenger: “He has been raised; he is not here [in the place of death].”

And, like the women at the tomb, we lean on the promise of resurrection together, not alone. **In the end, faith is not an achievement of the confident few, but a gift to the hesitant many. That’s why we treasure the testimony that we’ve inherited; that’s why we fall on the words of the storytellers and songwriters when we don’t have words ourselves. In the absence of certainty, the promise will have to do.** So, hold tight to that promise again this Easter morning, friends, even as you hold tight to each other. Alleluia! Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!

⁵ Ibid. 110.