

***The sermon preached on April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021 – Easter Sunday – based upon Mark 16:1-8 entitled, “Is it True?”***

This seems like a deeply unsatisfying ending for Mark’s Gospel. We want to holler, “Come on Mark, finish the story! Tell us some joyous stories like you get in the later Gospels about Jesus appearing to his disciples.” We know at least this much: eventually the women did tell somebody, otherwise we wouldn’t have a story at all.

Some theorize that some further piece of writing on Mark’s part got lost somewhere along the way. Apparently early Christians were unsatisfied with the ending we have. An early Christian scribe sought to improved Mark’s ending with his own version – if you look in your Bible you will probably find a footnote that explains how this ending wasn’t included the oldest surviving manuscripts and it doesn’t sound like Mark.

I think this is the ending that Mark intended, and in a little while I'll return to why I think that.

First, though I’d like to ask the most basic of questions – the one I suspect deep down all of us have gathered here to ponder: Is it true? I don't mean the precise details of the various stories you find in Mark's Gospel and the other more familiar stories – details that are filled with contradictions across the Gospels. I mean, the basic underlying proposition which is that the tomb was empty and Jesus rose from the dead.

The first thing to be said is that I can't prove to you that it's true. Each of us has to decide that for ourselves.

But if you are inclined to think this is just a fairy tale somebody made up, because of course people don’t just come back from the grave, why should Jesus be an exception? I can offer a couple of things for you to consider that might lead you to question the certainty of your doubt.

First, one thing all four Gospels are consistent about is that it was women who were the first witnesses to the resurrection. This is significant. In the patriarchal culture in which Jesus lived women weren't considered credible witnesses. According to Jewish Law, women weren't allowed to testify in court because they were viewed as being inherently unreliable. So, it stands to reason that in those days if somebody was going to make up a story to deceive people, well, they certainly wouldn't have women be the ones who find the tomb with an angel delivering a message about Jesus’ resurrection. That, in itself gives the story the ring of authenticity.

And secondly, and more significantly by all counts the movement Jesus started with a small group of disciples -- well it should have come to an end just when their charismatic leader got utterly humiliated, nailed to the cross. The followers, none too impressive to begin with, were left consumed with fear and for good reason – if they don’t lay low and keep their mouths shut they, too could get executed. And it wasn’t just fear they were dealing with – there was grief, despair, and -- especially for the male

disciples -- guilt and self-contempt because they didn't exactly behave courageously when the you-know-what hit the fan.

In those days would-be messiahs with personal charisma came around pretty regularly, catching enthusiasm but when the would-be messiahs died, the movements died with them. But that wasn't the case with the Jesus movement. In short order it took off like wild fire. How did this happen?

This much we know – somehow the character of the followers of Jesus dramatically changed. They moved from fear to courage and faith, from despair to joy and hope, from self-preoccupation to a far greater capacity for love. We are left to explain how this happened because, as we know dramatic changes in character in mid-life don't occur that often.

The consistent explanation the followers of Jesus gave for this change was that they had experienced Jesus' alive again – that his love and grace took hold inside them in a way that was transformative.

If the empty tomb was a lie intent on deceiving people, well, that simply wouldn't have had transformative power. You can suggest that there was some sort of mass hallucination, but that too seems hard to explain the transformation of their character.

As I said before, what I've just offered you doesn't prove anything, but again -- if you're inclined to write the resurrection off as a bunch of baloney, well it gives you something to think about.

But I want to take some time to consider the strange reaction of the women that ends Mark's Gospel. Why did they run from the tomb in terror and initially not tell anyone?

Well, I can think of two reasons, and perhaps both in play.

First, there would I think necessarily be an aspect of terror involved in a direct encounter with the holy in such a way that rocks your world, challenging all your assumptions about the nature of reality. That's what the often-used phrase "the fear of the Lord" is getting at.

But here's the second reason, and it'll take a more time to explain.

Clearly both male and female disciples deeply loved Jesus.

He was somebody who -- If he wasn't a threat to your authority and status as he was to the religious authorities – drew people to him by his profound capacity for love. If a person was privileged to spend extended time with Jesus, it would be hard not to come to feel a deep love for him. The disciples witnessed his extraordinary spiritual power – the capacity to heal the sick and cast out evil spirits that tormented people.

But here's the point I would make: loving the guy and believing everything he taught was reality based aren't necessarily the same thing. *(Those of you who are married*

*know well this distinction.*) If you read the Gospels carefully what you see is that though the disciples had great love for Jesus, they didn't really fully buy into this kingdom of God he kept talking about, where the only currency that matters was love. I think they considered it a beautiful idea and tried hard to catch on to what it meant, but frankly they knew the "real world" we have to live in which turns life into a great competition where the strong will trample on the weak and it would be foolish to base all your actions on this notion of the kingdom of God where all that matters is love.

You see the diversion of their beliefs from that of Jesus emerge most clearly when he first tells them how he must go to Jerusalem where he would be rejected by the religious authorities, handed over to the Romans, suffer and die. All the disciples were horrified by such seemingly crazy talk. Peter immediately tried to take Jesus aside to talk him out of such nonsense, which evoked such a strong reaction from Jesus that after that – well frankly they were afraid to discuss the matter with him.

Everything was going so well in Galilee. They could see how it would all play out. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem he would call out the people in power for the ways they were oppressing the mass of people both spiritually and economically. In the face of threat Jesus posed to their authority, powerful people would quickly be intent on taking him out. The crowds would initially rally around Jesus but when they realized he wasn't going people to be the warrior king messiah they were looking for to drive out the Romans and the corrupt religious authorities, they would turn against him. This was going to end badly.

And so the disciples dragged their feet as they followed Jesus making his way to Jerusalem. They loved the guy. They looked up to him. They were going to try as best they could to hang in there with him and hope against hope that somehow things would turn out well when they got there. But frankly, it all seemed pretty crazy.

But when Jesus did indeed get arrested and nailed to the cross it proved to them that in the end this kingdom of God he talked about -- this nothing but love life -- it had always been foolishness.

And so as those women came to the tomb that morning to anoint Jesus' body for a proper burial their hearts were broken with grief, they were overwhelmed with despair, and yet they were also in some sense "off the hook." They now knew the truth, and the burden was lifted of having to "deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow." They were free to let that go.

And so perhaps the message of the angel on a certain level scared the hell out of them. They weren't off the hook. Perhaps they initially fled from the tomb with terror and told no one because the sudden realization that the kingdom talk wasn't just a nice idea, it was truth terrified them. This truth they were placed a great, weighty claim upon their lives.

And so my initial question: Was it true? takes on another dimension. There can be a

reason to want to believe the resurrection of Jesus wasn't true because believing this allows us to view our lives as our personal possessions – something we are free to do with as we choose. There are consequences to this belief that aren't what you would call "easy."

Jesus made it clear, life in the Kingdom of God involves being the servant of all – not something with which I'm altogether comfortable. I can't claim Jesus is my risen Lord and think that some people are unworthy of love and care. Hate in my heart isn't something I'm permitted to be at ease with. I can't pass judgement on people because the risen Lord is the one alone who sits on the judgement seat. I can't refuse to practice forgiveness, or allow my heart to stay hardened when someone wounds me, as people are prone to do. I can't say Jesus is my risen Lord and then set my heart on money and power and status. I can't tolerate injustice that oppresses people as though some people didn't matter to God.

I'm not allowed to interpret Easter as simply the assurance that I need not fear death; Easter puts a claim on me.

When I breathe my last breath I believe I will be received into a lovelight beyond any I have known in this world. But I also believe that God will present me with a question: what did I do with the life that God gave me to live? In God's presence my entire life will be reviewed, and I will experience the impact my life had on the people God gave me to interact with. Where I showed kindness, I will experience the impact it had on those who received it. But where I was cruel, petty, or too preoccupied with myself to notice the suffering of those in front of me – when I lived out of harmony with the deepest reality of life which is love -- I will feel that impact on others as well. In the context of love, there will be a searing pain involved – the pain of a purging fire.

To return now to the original question of why Mark chose to end his Gospel so abruptly it's worth noting that he begins his Gospel in a somewhat peculiar way as well. "The Beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ the Son of God." (Mark 1:1) It's not even a full sentence, rather more of a heading. What exactly does he mean by "the beginning" of the Good News? The first chapter? No, I think he meant his entire Gospel is "the beginning."

So with his abrupt ending, I think Mark intended to put the onus on you and me to write the ongoing story with the way we respond to story he has told us. Will we take up our cross and follow – seeking to live out a life of servanthood to all – not just some? Will we take up the difficult work of learning to love more like Jesus loved, knowing that in doing so we will be coming more closely in alignment with the deepest level of reality? Will we grow in our attentiveness to the people we encounter in the course of our lives as worthy of our concern? Will we practice forgiveness? Will we speak the truth boldly where there is injustice while at the same time refusing to commit violence?

These are the implications of professing Jesus our risen Lord. In our attempts to live in harmony with the Kingdom of God we will stumble time and again just as Jesus'

disciples did in Mark's Gospel. But the angel at the empty tomb reminds us of Jesus' promise to go before us – which is to say, when we stumble, he will be there to help us up off the ground to try again.