

Mark 16:1-8
“Everything God Has Already Done”

April 12, 2020
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This morning, I feel the need to tell you, as I do every Sunday of the year, including last Easter Sunday, that I have no magic tricks to show you today. I have no unique sermon to preach, nothing that you haven't probably heard before, and likely have heard before. Despite the fact that we're pretty sure we already know how the story is going to end—Jesus, dead in the ground, will rise again—it won't be on my account. I can't even get my dog to rise up when I call, let alone a man whose been dead in the grave for 3 days.

I realize this might come as especially depressing news. After all, the days are already feeling all the same. Nowhere to go, no one to see, the curve of sickness, at least in our corner of the globe, still rising. It would be nice to catch a break today, wouldn't it? To have someone throw us even a morsel of hope that we could nibble on. Thought it wouldn't be enough to fill us, the gesture of compassion alone could keep us going.

Well, I do think we can come up with some compassion. But a different sermon with a new twist? A little magic I don't have.

What I do have for us today is the Gospel of Mark. I favor Mark's version of the Easter story. I like all the versions in the Bible. They all strike a chord within me, but Mark plays my song. I think one of the reasons I like Mark's version of Easter is because he was the first to write about it.

It's pretty well agreed upon by biblical scholars, theologians, and commentators that out of the 4 gospels writers, Mark wrote first, somewhere around the year 60, maybe 20 – 30 years after the time of Jesus. At the time, there would have been all kinds of stories about Jesus already in circulation. Judaism has a strong oral tradition, and given this is what the earliest disciples, and some of the later ones too, were reared in, they would have sat around the campfire at night telling stories to their children about the rabbi who once healed the lepers and walked across water in a raging storm once. And the children would say, “Tell us another one. Tell us the one about the time he got raised from the dead.” And the children would feast on these stories like candy, savoring them in their mouth so that

one day they can tell them to their children, who will tell them to their children. But from time to time a child would hear a story and say, "Uncle, that didn't really happen, did it? I mean, it's just the stuff that legends are made of, right? No one actually dies and comes back to life three days later."

So one day Mark decides it's time to put it down on paper, to go on record as a witness to the story. Mark must have known, as we know, that with so many years having passed since that first Easter, it would be a tough sell getting people to buy into a story where a dead man comes back to forgive and bless the very people who betrayed, denied, and killed him. After all, this was 60 A.D., the age of demagoguery, of indifference on the part of the privileged to the plight of the poor; the age where the meek do not inherit the earth as promised, and the merciful are laughed at by the mighty. Yet into this world, into *this* world Mark puts down a story about the victory of the meek and merciful.

Unlike John's gospel in particular, where Jesus is presented as the Word of God who was in the beginning with God and was God, the Jesus of Mark's gospel has a street address. "Do not be alarmed," the young man dressed in white says to the women from inside the tomb, "you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." If the women thought they might have stumbled into the wrong tomb, if they thought this might be a tomb belonging to a different Jesus, there is no denying it now. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. I know, the one who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

I've been telling myself lately, and I think it's helping, I've been telling myself that this is going to be the best Easter ever. Because if I'm honest about it, Easter has never required even half the amount of effort I usually put into it. Don't get me wrong, I love it when Vance pulls all the stops out on the organ on the third verse of "Christ Arose," and my heart thumps and swells at the same time. I love seeing all the pastels and ribbons, and everyone coming out to squish in together in the pews like one great unwashed congregation. Even the front pew gets filled up on Easter. I love seeing how happy all the old folks get when their kids and grandkids all show up to sit with them, and everyone goes home for dinner afterwards. I love how easily joy seems to come to everyone on this day.

But most of all, I love that even without any of these things, Easter comes anyway. In fact, I believe that Easter is at its best when we don't have any of these things. For most of what we know of Easter is what we have made of it. Call it pageantry, call it the performance of a lifetime, call it a victory parade, our history as the church of Jesus has too often included the creation of holidays meant only to put ourselves on display. I don't think it's a coincidence that the dates selected for major Christian holidays tend to coincide with the same dates for non-Christian holidays or festivals. At best, it is the innocent offering of a friendly alternative, a way to say, "If you're interested in hearing another kind of story than the one being told over there, come over here. Our tent is wide and we'd love to hear your story as well." At worst, it is machismo, a way to say, "Your way is wrong. Let us show you a better, more right way."

So, I like Mark's version of the Easter story, because it doesn't leave us with much to work with. There is no congregation, no church, no gathering of the masses. There are just a couple women on their way to the cemetery to care for the dead body of their loved one. There are no hymns of happiness; just the quietness of sorrow. There is no sense in this story that anyone knows what to say or to do. There is only utter helplessness, and a question, "Who will help us roll the stone away?" And it is out of this question that the women receive hope and grace, when they look up and see the stone has already been rolled away. In all their worry over how this day has turned out, over how nothing has turned out the way they wanted it to—their friend is dead, the disciples, afraid that they might be next, have all quarantined themselves—the women discover that God has already taken care of everything. They never needed to do anything to get ready for this day after all. All they needed to do was everything they had already done—get out of bed, head out the door to greet the sunshine, tend to your own grief, tend to the grief of those around you, and tend to the dead.

What they didn't expect, what they couldn't have expected, was that God could show up and work a miracle right there in Nazareth; right there in the very place where life had

turned hard, where all anyone had on hand was death and disappointment and fear, and God said, "I can work with that." And next thing you know, a big stone gets rolled away.

The women, of course, left the tomb and said nothing about it to anyone. They were afraid. And yet here we are 2,000 years later talking about it. I guess it just goes to show that it's okay to be afraid. It won't keep Easter and love and life and good news from reaching us still.

He is risen. He is risen indeed. Thanks be to God!