

O Healing River: Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8 by Patty Friesen (April 1, 2018)

When Joseph of Arimathea rolled the stone against Jesus' tomb, all the hopes and dreams of the disciples slammed shut with the stupefying crunch of a prison door. The only lifeline we have now is the simple fact that the same three women who observed Jesus' crucifixion in Mark 15:40, also saw where Joseph put him in 15:47 and appear now at the beginning of chapter 16. Charitable women's guilds of Jerusalem were known to be present after executions in order to assure proper burial. The three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Salome were attempting to salvage some dignity by re-burying Jesus according to custom.

It is a risky act for these women to demonstrate solidarity with so notorious a political dissident and they come with merely the numb duty of last respects and the emptiness of hopes crushed. This seems to be the last pitiless leg of Mark's journey with Jesus, ending at the cemetery of the disciples' dreams. Cruelly, even this last act is denied by the realization that they couldn't roll the stone away by themselves. What a bitter ending to an already disastrous week.

Verse 4, "But" and every important verse in the gospels begins with but – when they looked again, they saw that the stone which was very large, had been rolled away. The verb to look again or see again was used by Mark in his healing stories of the blind men. It is now revealed here as the expression of spiritual sight – or bifocal vision of faith – seeing clearly beneath what seems to be right in front of you. They saw the stone. They looked again and by grace with bi-focals, the stone was already rolled away.

Improbably the tomb, and with it the Jesus story has been reopened. Tentatively and still looking, they entered the tomb and saw again with spiritual bi-focals a “young man” dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side and they were alarmed. This mysterious young man, is sitting at the right hand of the empty grave, at the right hand of the resurrection as authority and witness to the resurrection. The right hand of Jesus that the disciples coveted throughout their time with him is the place that Jesus himself now occupies beside God. And he is dressed in a white robe – likely the same linen that Jesus was wrapped in but no longer needs, and it is the same colour as Jesus robe when he was transfigured on the mountain, the same white of the martyrs robes in Revelation.

Is this possibly the same “young man” who ran away naked at Jesus’ arrest in chapter 14? If so, this same young man who is a symbol of running away naked has been transformed to discipleship and martyrdom. It is this powerfully symbolic figure who tells the women, Do not be alarmed. You are looking – meaning physically looking for Jesus the Nazarene who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him. (They - meaning the authorities - who have not had the last word on Jesus’ death) But, go tell his disciples and Peter he is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see or have spiritual insight or faith to see him as the risen Messiah.

Jesus has risen, or has gotten up, the very same verb used to describe six previous healings where the people Jesus healed rose or got up. The disciples are told to meet him in Galilee – the place where they were called, named, sent and taught by Jesus. The story that appeared to have ended is beginning again.

Verse 8, 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. This is a reverse of the

healing stories where the healed ones were told not to tell anyone and they told anyway. Now the women are told to tell the disciples but they said nothing. Really? We suddenly freeze in our readerly tracks. After the promise of a new beginning, is this fearful silence the final betrayal of Christ?

This sudden ending to Mark has spawned much consternation. It was believed that the real ending was lost but scholars have decided this was it. Mark ended the resurrection story right here at verse 8. It is a brilliant literary tactic in which the reader must come up with the ending to the story. I've always hated unsatisfying endings and this one especially. I need a neat, convincing conclusion to Mark's gospel and so did many others who filled in the gaps with verses 9-20 but Mark wants us to wrestle with the original ending of ambiguity.

We should not be surprised that the women were overcome with fear. The disciples are always described as fearful. As current disciples reading about this, Mark wants to know if we too will flee the resurrection out of fear or will we believe it and follow? Michael Pahl writing in the Canadian Mennonite last week reminds us that Matthew 28:17 says the disciples worshipped the resurrected Christ but some doubted. Some doubted. Even after everything they had witnessed, even with the resurrected Jesus standing in front of them. This suggests that however vital the resurrection of Jesus is to Christian faith and life, there is room among followers of Jesus for diverse understandings of Jesus' resurrection, even for those who doubt whether it really happened at all. So why is Jesus' resurrection important? First: Jesus' resurrection is Jesus' vindication by God. The powers that be had given their verdict on Jesus: guilty, shamed, cast out and executed. However by raising Jesus from the dead, God reverses

that verdict: Jesus is declared righteous, worthy of honor, brought to God's right hand and given true life. Jesus is who he said he is and given that authority by God and represents the epitome of God's power and love.

Also, by resurrecting Jesus God, God affirms the essential goodness of our bodies, the goodness of the created order, the goodness of human existence and human history. This means that salvation is not some kind of disembodied ideal, escaping our bodies for some heavenly paradise. Jesus' resurrection affirms that God's desire in salvation is to restore humanity and creation to God's original intention, all things experiencing justice and peace and flourishing life, heaven come down to earth.

We may not understand entirely what resurrection means but if we have understood the Jesus story, we should be holding fast to what we do know: that Jesus still goes before us today, summoning us. And that is the hardest ending of all: an unending challenge to follow him anew – every day. Because that means we must respond. A neat closure to the story would allow us to remain passive, the story would be self-fulfilling, in no need of our response. The power of Mark's Gospel ultimately lies not in what it tells the disciples or us as readers but what it asks of us. The Jesus story begins with follow me. In the center of the story lies the question, Who am I? and at the end it invites us to follow Jesus again, He is going ahead of you to Galilee.

Much ink has been spilled as Christian apologists sought to defend the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus against critics. Doubtless, such a defense prompted the writing of the last eleven verses of Mark, but the proof of the resurrection lies squarely in our ability to follow Jesus. Our discipleship, our following Jesus as closely as we can is the genuine witness to the risen Christ and for me the most convincing proof of

all. Somehow the women overcame their fear and found the courage to tell. Somehow the disciples followed Jesus to their own martyrdom in the early church. Somehow we all have got to figure out how we are going to follow in our daily lives and testify to the truths we are experiencing as well as the doubts and fears.

Let's pray...Risen Christ, the vacant cross and empty tomb show us that the love that suffers is the love that saves. So fill us with joy and faithful witness that the world may know that you are not a dead hero we commemorate but the living Lord we worship, to whom be the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.