

FEAR FACTOR

Sermon by Margaret F. Beamguard

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, TN
April 16, 2006

Resurrection of the Lord
Mark 16:1-8

Alleluia! Alleluia!! Alleluia!!!
Christ has risen! Alleluia!! Amen!!!

On Easter Sunday, our Alleluias are our right response to the news that Jesus who was crucified, has been raised! When we hear that news, we respond rightly, **BOLDLY** with Handel's Alleluia Chorus - thank you choir! We respond with Trumpet blasts and hearts full and lifted high. We respond with a swell of joy!

We do *not* respond like the women in Mark's gospel. Their disappointing response was to flee: for it says when they heard that Jesus had been raised and was headed to Galilee, "terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, . . . for they were afraid." . . .

. . . alleluia?

This is how Mark ends his gospel: with flight and fear. Mark offers us no earthquake, no happy reunion with Mary, no wounded hands to touch. Mark offers us no Great Commission, no road to Emmaus, no breakfast on the beach with the risen Jesus. You will have to consult Matthew, Luke, and John for those tales. There is only a promise that we will see him, followed by fear and then silence. What kind of way is that to run a resurrection? Jesus doesn't even make an appearance!

Mark tells the resurrection in just five verses.¹

The stone has been rolled away, a young man in white is seated inside on the right, the women are alarmed. The Easter message they receive is brief: do not be afraid; Jesus was crucified; he was placed here; he is not here now because he has been raised. Then they receive an Easter commission: go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee; in Galilee they will see him. And the women flee in terror, amazement, fear and silence.

Several ancient versions of the Gospel attempted to solve this problem by adding another ending. The alternate endings are right there in your Bibles. But you can tell, even in English that the writing style does not fit with the rest of Mark. These endings were penned by another hand - by someone who wanted a more satisfactory conclusion. The best and earliest Marcan manuscripts end right here, in verse 8.

Did our author succumb to his own mortality and suddenly drop dead over the papyrus?

¹ Craddock, Fred. "He is Not Here" *Christian Century*, April 5, 2003

Perhaps Mark was simply taking creative literary risks, like a first century James Joyce or e.e. cummings? Maybe his arthritis finally caught up with him, and he just couldn't write another Greek letter. My real gut feeling, though, is that this is simply how Mark wanted to tell the story.

Mark's version of the story confronts us with the Resurrection's fear factor. He wanted to leave the reader suspended right where the women were: terror, amazement, and fear. Admittedly, this fear factor is an element of Easter that is frequently missing from our Easter celebrations.

Presbyterian Minister Craig Barnes, writes:²

“We think of Easter as a time for bunnies and little chickens, colorful eggs, and little girls in cute new dresses. But we ought to be thinking about grown women, with their dresses hiked up to their knees, running with terror out of a cemetery. . . . The way Mark tells the story, Easter is the frightening part. . . . Along with Joseph of Arimathea, we had put Jesus into a tomb – wrapped, signed, sealed, and delivered. But when we got a good look into the tomb this morning, everything was unwrapped. Nothing was as we expected. Nothing is as it should be.”

“We may not care much for death, but we understand it. But if death is not waiting at the end, then everything in life has to change. That's the frightening part.”

We'd like to believe that we can have resurrection and still have the world stay the same. We'd like to have Easter brunch and bunnies and still have our world unmoved by resurrection. We are amazingly well adjusted to the same old world, where all that lives, dies. Even the good get it in the end. It may be sad, but it is our familiar world.

I've never shared this with anyone before - but there was a brief, frightening moment before they closed my father's casket, when I saw his eyes fly open. Of course they didn't really. But it was so real to me that my stomach dropped and my mouth went dry. In the next second, I was staring at his drawn face, painted with rouge. I'm sure a psychologist would have a field day trying to help me work through that. I think it was my own subconscious, refusing to let his eyes be forever closed in my mind, but whatever.

The point I really want to make about this is – I've never told anyone about it before. Who dares to speak of such things. You might start to thinking I've lost my mind. From time to time, though, I do think of it. I wonder - what if - what if the resurrection of the dead were to happen right before my eyes. What if this man, who I knew to be dead, whose own cold hands I touched, shouldered his way out of that gray casket and embraced me again? As happy as I would be about that, it scares me.

It is frightening. We live in a world where we know what to do with the dead. A plot must be purchased, a hole must be dug, a marker must be engraved, probate must be initiated. I don't know what to make of resurrection when I'm staring into a casket. There is the empirical evidence of death - cold and gray. We expect what is dead to stay dead.

I suspect, ultimately, that is our problem.

² Dr. Craig Barnes. “Happily Ever After?” The National Presbyterian Church, Sunday, April 23, 2000.

I think that was the problem for Mary Magdalene and for Mary the mother of James and for Salome as they stood before the tomb. They had just been wondering how they were going to move the heavy stone in order to tend to their grim duty.

But the stone had already been moved.

The grave had flown open.

Except for them it was no trick of the imagination.

It was real.

Terrifyingly real.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the greatest – but also the most profoundly disorienting, even terrifying – news the world has ever heard. Think on it. Jesus, was dead. Crucified. Finished. Defeated. But the tomb is empty. He’s alive. He’s gone ahead to Galilee. You don’t absorb that in one minute.

The women went to the tomb, wondering how they would move the stone so that they could preserve for a little longer their beloved teacher and friend.

We too, tend to our own tombs. Each day, preservatives in hand, we set out to refresh the things that we have hidden in them. We push aside the heavy stones, so that we can coddle our old grudges. We go through the door of death to revisit with our old griefs. We enter the dark chamber to inhale the sour odor of our old regrets. We roll away the cold slab and fearfully gaze upon our mortality.

It is scary to let those things go. Because I think we often make the mistake of thinking that our grudges, griefs, regrets, and fear define us. And to let them go means that we have to let loose of our crutches and dependencies. And that is terrifying. And hard.

Good thing it is not up to us. God has done it for us.
Christ had risen! Love and life are on the loose!

The grave has flown open, these things of death and have been released. Which means you and I are free. Free from grudges and griefs. Free from regrets. Free from death’s sting.

When the women heard this news they were stunned silent. The thing they had come to do - to preserve death - could not be done. There was nothing left for them there. Their purpose had been taken away. The women had gone to confront death, but instead they were confronted by life. They were disoriented. And they fled in a moment of confusion and fear and didn’t mention what had happened to a soul.

alleluia?

Mark’s gospel can be frustrating for those of us who like matters tied-up neatly and who are uncomfortable with ambiguity - especially on Easter Sunday. But maybe that is precisely Mark’s goal. Mark has not simply recorded the events of the resurrection, but has left open to us, his

readers, the possibility of experiencing it.

We know that at some point the women find their wits and their tongues again, (we do have the gospel accounts after all) and we are invited to find ours. And our timid alleluias, swell into Handel's chorus.

We look for an end to Mark's gospel, but he teaches that there are no more endings. Not really. Not if death really has lost its sting. Not if Jesus has gone ahead into the grave. Into my father's grave, into my grave, into yours – gone to claim back our life.

Mark catches us up in a story that has only just begun. The Easter Story, the Resurrection story, is about life. Life everlasting. Life that begins anew right now and does-not-end.

We are invited into the future - to Galilee, to go see Jesus. He has gone ahead of us. Geographically speaking,³ Galilee is in the northeast corner of Palestine but it can be found everywhere that the spirit of the Risen Christ is found. On Friday's at noon Galilee becomes the People's Table. Galilee is the hospital room where visitors have arrived. Galilee is D'Iberville, MS where more volunteers have shown up. Galilee is the home where the grieving laugh at old memories. Galilee is Kenya where children receive medicine and books. Galilee is where 8th graders come professing their love of Jesus before a community of faith. Galilee is where we find the risen Christ.

We are an Easter people. And the terrifyingly good news is that Christ is alive, saving people from a living death and offering life in all its fullness. The old life is behind us, a new life has already begun. Jesus has rolled away the stone for us.

Children of God, emerge from the tomb and live!

alleluia. ALLELUIA!!!

³ Joanna Adams "Good News Indeed" The Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago, April 20, 2003.