

Grace Episcopal Church, Galena IL
April 5, 2015
Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Text: Mark 16: 1-8

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.

Alarm. Terror. Amazement. Fear. (Or, perhaps, you would prefer Eugene Peterson's *The Message*: taken aback, astonished, beside themselves, stunned. Not words we would think of on a bright Easter morning. But words clearly descriptive of the reaction of the three women as they discover that the stone is rolled away, and that Jesus' body is missing. Even with the angel's declaration that he was raised and had gone on ahead, they do not run back to the disciples in ecstasy and celebration. They flee—a fitting reaction to terror. And Mark's gospel, as terse at its ending as it is at its beginning, leaves us right there—in the fear and amazement of the three women who went at dawn, carrying precious oils, to properly—and lovingly—prepare Jesus' body. Three women, including his mother, who focused their grief on that great, heavy stone—how they would be able to roll it away by themselves. When they find the tomb open and empty, they flee. And Mark's story ends. Unlike the other gospels, there is no joyous reunion with Jesus. No appearances or teachings. No “show and tell” or breaking of bread. Just the promise that he waits for them in Galilee. And instructions to go tell the others. Instructions that, in their fear, they ignore.

What do you suppose the fear was about? Beyond the immediate shock of the unexpected? Were they afraid the body had been stolen—by the Romans or the Temple authorities? Were they afraid that they would not be believed, but simply taunted as hysterical women? Were they afraid that all of this—Jesus' ministry and message—had just been a big joke? But no, they had seen him nailed to the cross. They had seen him die and his body taken down from the cross. They had even seen him laid in the tomb. There was no mistaking that he had been tortured and killed. This was not some kind of magic—a last-minute deliverance and disappearing act. Not magic—but something they had not seen before. Something—well—unnatural. Something for which they would have no immediate words. It would take time to sink in.

We have lost the terror and amazement of Easter morning. We have heard the story so many times that it has lost its shock value. We simply celebrate with song and flowers, bells, ritual and rejoicing. But, then, we know the ending. We have centuries of words and traditions that they didn't have. We see through very different eyes than eyes of fresh grief and bewilderment. Yet, I'm not sure that we are any more able to explain what was happening than they.

We know some things. We know that being raised, resurrection is not the same as being revived, coming back to life. Having one's breath and heart beat return and resuming life-as-usual. It is not like Lazarus or those people we've read about in our daily newspapers who were clinically dead and revived.

We use metaphors and examples from nature that we can see and touch: the icky caterpillar, the plain cocoon/chrysalis that becomes a beautiful butterfly. The ugly bulb with papery skin and scraggly roots that grows into a breathtaking and fragrant daffodil. A plain oval egg that hatches into a fuzzy chick. These help—they show us how life can be transformed into another more lovely form. But this is still not the same—this resurrection cannot be felt and touched (at least, not anymore), so we question and wonder. Or simply accept it as a mystery that cannot be explained.

The Resurrection—Jesus' overcoming death, rising from the tomb is the central proclamation of Christianity. It is what matters—what we hold onto when life gets hard and confusing. Just think for a moment of the words we use when one of our community dies—words of assurance and hope—"I am the Resurrection and the life." "In God's house are many dwelling places. I go to prepare a place for you..." Must we be able to understand it? Must we be able to interpret it in order for this new thing—this promise—to be true?

Easter is more than the coming of spring, though spring does bring new life in an ever-repeating, certain cycle. Easter is more than colored eggs and Easter bunnies. It is more than decorated churches and Easter breakfast! Easter is even more than the assurance that death is not the end of the story, though it is, indeed, that. How is it that the Good News of the Resurrection tends to dwell almost entirely on what our destiny will be in the next life? What about this life? For those in ancient Galilee? For the cloud of witnesses through the centuries? For us in our place and time?

Mark left us in the midst of the women's fear and trembling. It is an abrupt ending to this gospel. But we remember that Mark's gospel began abruptly too—"the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, son of God." There were no birth stories here, just the baptism that began Jesus' ministry. The entire gospel has a sense of urgency, of getting the story told. It is enough, I think—ending with the empty tomb and the angel's message—"do not be afraid—he is not here—he is raised. Tell them he is going ahead of you into Galilee—as he told you."

Mark's Good News, you see, is not only Jesus' Resurrection, His overcoming death. The Good News is the entire span of the Incarnation—God's being with us in human form to show us the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom inaugurated through Jesus' life and ministry on earth. It is the teaching and the healing. It is the shared community, the meals and the laughter and the tears. It is how those who surrounded him were given eyes to see God in a

new way, a glimpse of the Kingdom through Jesus' eyes: a life unlike the present. And then, the death and Resurrection—like what my high school band director called “the stinger.” That last brilliant note at the end of something like a Sousa march. A vital note, but not the whole song.

So, maybe that was a part of the women's fear. They might have begun to remember some of Jesus' teachings. And realization might have dawned about what meeting Jesus in Galilee might mean for them. For it would not mean an ending-- Mark did not say "the end of the Good News of Jesus Christ, son of God" for it is not the end of the Good News but a new beginning. A beginning that would require them to carry it on to the ends of the world. Without Jesus' physical presence. They would be the bearers, for there was still much work to do. They would not find the Roman Empire gone. They would not find all illness and injury cured, all poverty and hunger and injustice abolished. They would not find the promised reign of God fulfilled, nor do we. For they—and we—must be part of its realization. Galilee awaits. The world awaits. We await.

In my imagination, I see the three women fleeing, then slowing. Not returning to the others right away, but going for a nice cup of tea, or coffee, or whatever it is that women did in their time when upset. Talking, sorting through their experience. For, at some point, they must have regained their voices. Otherwise, how would we know the story?

And then, they went back to Galilee, back to where this journey all began. But it was not back to the beginning, picking up where they had left off. A new chapter would begin. We know they went, even if Mark's gospel doesn't say so. We know because the story has not ended or been lost through time. And isn't it wonderful that they did! That they trusted enough to carry on. Because of their love and trust, we are able to know that Jesus lives! We may experience the presence of the risen Christ right here among us when we gather in worship, but not *just* here. We may experience Christ's presence when we meet each other in town, in our homes, in the hospital. And when we feed the hungry, care for the sick and imprisoned, welcome the stranger, and tell the stories, carrying the joy and the hope of the Resurrection right out of these doors and into the world in every way we can! That is the Good News! Death has lost its sting. And so has life, as desperately as it continues to need healing.

Jesus lives, my friends, and we know that because he lives, we, too, shall live. Live and keep the story alive, not just in our hearts but in our actions, in our love.

Alleluia. Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Thanks be to God!

Amen.