

Easter B Sermon
Mark 16:1-8
March 31, 2024

“Terror and Amazement”
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [Jesus’ body].² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.⁶ But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”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.

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And that’s where the story ends. In fact, that’s where the Gospel According to Mark originally ended: *“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 not how we expect the story to end! Mark’s gospel is the oldest and the sparest and the simplest of the four gospels. There are no angels in this story—just a young man dressed in white. There is no dramatic rolling away of the stone. There are no chance encounters with the risen Christ in the garden. There’s no

Easter joy. In fact, there's no risen Jesus in Mark's gospel, just terror and amazement and silence.

It's Easter! Where are the trumpets, choirs, organs, and brass? Where is the jubilant proclamation of life's triumph over death; the unfettered enthusiasm of the first witnesses to the resurrection? Not here. No one makes a peep. No Peeps on Easter. And that is a sad thing, indeed. Just terror and amazement and silence.

It's no wonder that the monks copying this story in the centuries after Mark first wrote it decided to add a few verses to the end—something, anything to soften the blow that the original author intended for their readers. The silence was too deafening so they inserted a bit about Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, and to a couple of travelers, and finally to the disciples whom Jesus scolds mercilessly for their lack of faith and then promises that those who believe will be able to cast out demons, speak in tongues, pick up snakes, and drink poison without being hurt.

That's all just a little too weird for me. Weirder even than Easter silence. I'll stick with Mark's ending—Mark's ridiculously anti-climactic ending to what is one of the most important and epic stories ever told—just terror and amazement and silence.

To be honest, though, I hate cliffhangers. I hate movies or books that lead you on for hours, building to their epic climax only to drop you gently over the edge of a cliff and into the nothingness. It's kind of like when the greatest sci-fi epic ever, Star Wars of course, ended the original trilogy with a bunch teddy bears doing the chicken noodle dance. It's just so unsatisfying! C'mon Mark, what were you thinking?! I expected more from you! The fact is, though, I think Mark's author expects more from us...

From the beginning, the author is honest about the scope of their work. In chapter 1, they state that their gospel is, in fact, only “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.” Mark's gospel is just the beginning...

According to the author, the women at the tomb—Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, and Salome—they leave that place in terror and amazement and go forth to tell no one. And that’s the end of Mark’s story, but Mark’s story wasn’t for them. It’s for us. Imagine for a moment that you’d just heard or read Mark’s whole story for the first time, in one sitting. You hear of Jesus’ baptism by John, his teaching and preaching, healing, and wonder-working. You learn of his passion for the poor and marginalized, his skepticism of religious authorities, and his challenging vision of the kingdom of heaven supplanting the empire of Rome. You learn of his betrayal, his trial, his suffering, and his death. Finally, you hear of his empty tomb, and the ones who see it firsthand, and leave it once again to tell no one.

How would you react, I wonder? Would you be inspired by the tale and eager to tell others? Would you be incredulous at the inaction of these first witnesses? Would you be filled with terror and amazement and silence as they were? Or would their inaction agitate you to do something about it; to succeed where these first witnesses did not?

That, I think, was Mark’s purpose in writing this cliffhanger of an ending—to provoke their readers and hearers into action—into living and loving and proclaiming resurrection in and with and for the world.

Mark calls this “the beginning of the good news of Jesus” because the rest of the story is still being written, being lived and proclaimed into being by the ones who hear or read this testimony and then act on it. It’s the beginning because the Jesus story, the resurrection story doesn’t end with the silence of those first witnesses. It doesn’t end with the fearful absence of Jesus’ closest friends. It doesn’t end with death on a cross, or burial in a tomb, or even with Jesus’ resurrection. That’s just the beginning.

The rest of the story is for us to write—for us to imagine, to experience, and to live this Easter Day and every day as we too bring resurrection purpose to tired and ineffective institutions and organizations; as we

bring resurrection promise to the people—the young and old, families, couples, and singles—to the people on the margins of our society and our communities; as we bring resurrection love to those in need of basic necessities and basic human dignity; as we bring resurrection possibility to the tired and hurting earth itself. The rest of the resurrection story is for us to write.

Let us go forth this day in the bright light of the resurrection, to live resurrection, to proclaim resurrection, and to bring resurrection to the dead and dying places in our communities, in our country, and in our world. May it be so, for Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia and amen.