

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

April 24th, 2011 (#433a) - Easter Sunday

Title: "Easter Terror"

Text: Mark 16:1-8

The young man, fresh out of seminary, preached his first sermon not only before his new church, but also in front of his mother-in-law, a woman who thought her daughter had not made the best choice for a husband. She was a woman of few words and rather blunt. Over Sunday dinner following church, the young preacher asked his mother-in-law what she thought of the sermon. At that, you could have heard a pin drop. A silence settled quickly over the gathering so everyone could hear her response. *"Well, I thought you had a good sermon, actually several good sermons. In fact, I thought you missed about three good stopping places in your sermon!"*

This morning we are going to be looking at Mark's "sermon", but unlike the young man, there are many who feel Mark didn't even make it to a good stopping place!

Please turn with me this morning to the 16th chapter of Mark's Gospel. Mark chapter 16, beginning with verse 1. Hear God's unchanging Word.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8; NIV) This is God's Word.

Easter begins with fear. At least that's the way that Mark tells the story, with grown women - dresses hiked up to their knees, running in terror out of a cemetery. But that's not the way we remember the story, for our memories have joined the four Gospel and Acts of the Apostle's accounts of Jesus' resurrection into one long story. We forget that Mark offers us no earthquake, no happy reunion with Mary, no wounded hands to touch. Mark has no road to Emmaus, nor breakfast on the beach with the risen Christ. To read those stories you will have to consult Matthew, Luke or John. Mark has only the promise that we will see him, followed by fear, and then ... silence. As Fred Craddock has stated: *"What kind of way is that to run a resurrection? Jesus doesn't even make an appearance!"* What was Mark thinking? And the women run away in abject terror, amazement, fear, and silence.

If I were to go into our community and play a word-association game, and ask people what words come to mind when I say the word "Easter," I really doubt that anyone would give me the words "fear" or "afraid" or "terror." I'm sure that I would hear words like "bunny" (chocolate or otherwise), "bonnet", and "brunch." I might even hear words like "lilies" and "eggs." But I don't think I would ever hear the word "fear."

Mark's ending is as unsettling for us today as it was for those back in Mark's day. What follows - or doesn't follow - in our text has puzzled scholars for centuries. The most ancient and reliable manuscripts of Mark's Gospel end with verse 8. And in the Greek language it lurches to an awkward grammatical stop like this: "*And going forth [the women] fled from the tomb in terror and bewilderment; they said nothing to anyone, they were afraid for ...*". The sentence and Mark's Gospel end with a preposition. [Think what your English teacher would have said about that!] The most important story of the Christian faith just stops, and we are left waiting ... waiting for a wonderful ending with sightings of Jesus and hallelujahs and trumpets and jubilation and a whole host of post-resurrection appearances. But they don't come, at least from Mark's hand.

The English translators solve one of the problems by moving the preposition so that it reads as follows: "*They said nothing to anyone, for [or because] they were afraid.*" As Cynthia Campbell has stated, "*That solves the problem with the sentence, but not with the Gospel.*"

For centuries people have speculated regarding Mark's ending. What happened that his Gospel ended that way? Did Mark suddenly drop dead over the papyrus as he was nearing the end of his manuscript? Or was he simply taking creative literary license? Maybe Mark had to leave, and his secretary thought he was finished, and sent the manuscript on its way. Or maybe the scroll with Mark's writing became so worn from all the reading that the ending frayed and the last lines were lost.

Mark's unusual ending is so disturbing that some people added different endings. The NIV does include one of the four known endings - verses 9 through 20 - with a note that "*the earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have those verses.*" (Note: Two of the "other ancient witnesses" are Clement of Alexandria d 220 and Origen d 254 who show no knowledge of the existence of these verses. [from Bruce Metzger in A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament]).

Does it bother you that there is no definite, conclusive finish to Mark's Gospel, or are you okay with his main assertion: "*He has risen! He is not here.*" You see, most of us like nice, neat endings that tie things up nicely. We like some version of "*and they lived happily ever after.*" But with Mark's unpolished, jarring ending, the terrified women run away and don't say a word to anyone.

In his commentary on the *Gospel of Mark*, the late Donald Juel tells the story of one of his students who had memorized the whole gospel of Mark in order to do a dramatic, Broadway-style reading before a live audience. After careful study, the student had decided to go with the scholarly consensus regarding the ending. At his first performance, however, after he spoke that ambiguous last verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other, the audience

waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for a proper ending. Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, "Amen!" and made his exit. The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively. But upon further reflection, though, the student realized that by providing the audience a satisfying conclusion, his "Amen!" had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the text. So at the next performance, when he reached the final verse he simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence. Juel reports: *"The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious, and as people exited the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the nonending."*

But what if Mark deliberately chose to finish his Gospel this way? **What if Mark didn't want us to read his Gospel and simply say, "Oh, that was a nice story" but wanted us to come to grips with a new reality - a resurrection reality that scares the daylight out of people and causes them to run away in terror?** What if Mark - on this Easter Sunday - wants to give us more than a little boost, a smile and a warm feeling, so that we can get on with our lives just as they are? What if Mark wants our worldview to be turned inside out and upside down?

Why does the resurrection reality cause these three devoted women to run away in terror? What is so terrifying about Easter?

As I was thinking about this, my mind wandered to some recent news accounts that I had heard about where people spoke of the terror they had felt. In New Zealand, people spoke of the terror they felt when the earth didn't stay where it belonged, but instead began convulsing, throwing people and buildings to the ground. In Japan, terror was heard in the voices of survivors of the tsunami when the ocean didn't stay where it belonged. **Is it any wonder, then, that outside of Jerusalem nearly 2000 years ago, these three women experienced incredible terror when a body didn't stay in the grave where it belonged?** We expect what is dead to stay dead!

While the story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the greatest news this world has ever heard, it is also - at the same time - the most profoundly disorienting, even terrifying news. Think about it. Jesus was dead. Crucified. Finished. Defeated. But the tomb is now empty. The news is that he is alive and has gone ahead to Galilee. You don't process news like this in just a few minutes.

Jesus tells us that he is going ahead of us into Galilee ... Galilee where our homes are... Galilee where our work is. Could it be that we are afraid that God is out there and will meet us this day? Are we afraid that God is waiting for us? Maybe we should be.

As Scott Johnson has stated: After all, if Jesus is waiting on-down-the-road in Galilee, you can bet that he has plans for us. No doubt he will ask things of us, the same way he challenged the disciples -- thoroughly mucking up their lives. Uh oh. Perhaps this is the morning that the living God will grab us by the scruff of our souls to propel us into some wild scheme. Maybe this Jesus is like those people you encounter on sidewalks with clipboards and petitions to sign. You there, yes you, I've got your name on my list, now march out into the world and make some kind of holy difference. Maybe that's what scares us. Surely we love Jesus; we go to church, at least once in a while. Yet we really do not want God to mess with us, to make demands on us, to cost us anything. Leave us politely alone -- hands off our career plans and our politics -- oh, and keep your nose out of our approach to doing business and our way of conduct- ing relationships. We

want Jesus to stay where he belongs (a kindly figure who presides over the sweet dreams of children); we don't want him wandering around the countryside, tapping his foot -- impatiently waiting for us to show up. That sort of Jesus is more than enough to make a person afraid. If he is not cold on the slab, if he has risen, well, then, to quote Flannery O'Connor, *"He's thrown everything off balance!"* No wonder that Mark tells us that the women *"fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them."*

Be afraid. **Be very afraid if you plan to leave a resurrection unchanged.** We may not care much for death, but at least we understand it. But if death is not waiting at the end, then everything in life has to change. That's the frightening part.

And I have a friend who found out how true that is. Cancer was ravaging his body, and there was nothing else the doctors could do. The sound of medical equipment and the sight of bags of liquid food hung from bedside stands that were forcing nourishment into his body - that was his life.

One day his doctor walked into the room, and after an examination, asked if he had everything in his life in order, because he wouldn't make it through the night. It was sad, but that is the world we are familiar with.

But what happened that night can only be described as a resurrection for my friend. He told me that the resurrected Christ appeared at the foot of his bed, and he was instantaneously healed.

I asked my friend a number of questions, and then I asked if he had ever written down his story. He told me *"No."* And when I asked why not, he said that it brings back a lot of difficult memories. For months he and his wife had prepared for the inevitable death. They were going through the stages of grief. They were facing reality. And then a Greater Reality showed up at the foot of his hospital bed and turned their lives upside down. *"We had been preparing for death, not life. We were resigned to my inevitable passing. And now life! We weren't prepared for that. And as happy as we were, it threw our marriage into a tailspin. We worked it out, but it was not an easy time in our lives."*

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.

Those 3 women at the tomb that first Easter day long ago finally did find their voices, and they are letting us know the terrifyingly Good News that our familiar world has been turned upside down, that death and evil, mourning and loss and despair, futility and sin, guilt and the grave no longer have the last word because Jesus is alive.

And the story of Mark's Gospel doesn't have an end because it isn't over. Christ has risen! And now he has gone ahead to meet with you where you work, and live, and make your homes. In other words, he is waiting for you in the ordinary places of your lives. And wherever the Risen Saviour is found, well, that place is anything but ordinary. AMEN.

