

Sermon for Sunday, April 5, 2015
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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It's hard to imagine it, that first Easter morning.
The morning after the Sabbath,
everyone early
to catch up the things they couldn't do
on the religiously-enforced day of rest,
and among them the women.
We last saw them
Friday afternoon,
Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses, and with them Salome,
and some other women
gathered in the background of the crucifixion.
They are described as following and providing for him;
they weren't well known, like the apostles,
weren't deputized with the task of preaching and healing,
but instead permitted to trail along as providers,
and using their connections and resources
however they were asked.
Need your cloak repaired? One of the women can fix it for you.
Not feeling so well? One of the women will have a remedy.
Want something to eat? One of the women can go to the market.
There in the background, following and providing,
all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem,
from welcoming palms entering the city
to the agony of the cross.

And you wonder if it wasn't one of the women
there at the foot of the cross
looking around and realizing
that the disciples had disappeared,
and that no one had thought
of what to do with his body.
They couldn't leave it hanging there to rot;
nor could they let their Lord
be dumped in the rubbish pit;
so they went to someone with influence, someone who they'd heard

might possibly be open
to helping out.
And Joseph of Arimathea went
and asked Pilate for the body,
wrapped it in linen,
placed it
in a rough hewn tomb,
and rolled a stone across the entry.
It was the best
the women could do.

And because following Jesus
and providing for him
had been the focus of their lives
for the best part of three years,
when the sabbath ended,
and the markets reopened,
Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses and Salome
went and bought spices,
and early the next morning
went back to his tomb.
Still trying
to be with him, still trying to provide for him,
worried
that they wound't be able to get inside to anoint him,
but determined to honor him
all the same.

And then they got there,
and the stone was rolled back
and the tomb was open,
and they went in
and saw -
not the body of their Lord,
wrapped in stained linen
-but a young man,
no-one they knew.
Perhaps an angel...?

And he said to them,

"Don't be alarmed; you're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He's been raised; he's not here. Look, there's the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he's going ahead of you to Galilee; there you'll see him, just as he told you."

And they were terrified,
and they turned
and ran away,
and said nothing to anyone.

That's the Easter story
the way that the gospel of Mark tells it.
No appearance of the resurrected Jesus,
no disciples running in excitement to tell their friends.,
just three women,
running away in fear and silence.
And this is how
the whole of the gospel according to St Mark
ends.

A gospel that began
 "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ,
 the Son of God!"
What a failure.

It's not the way we would end the story
if we were writing it.
We'd want something more upbeat,
an ending with a decent payoff.
And that's exactly what Christians have done over the years.
Added other endings
to make this gospel
more palatable.

You'll see it if you look in your bible.
There will be a couple of sentences
with square brackets around them,
labelled
 "The shorter ending."
And a few paragraphs
again with square brackets around them,
this time labelled

“The longer ending.”
Both of them
pretty much identical to the ending
in the other gospels,
making an attempt at resolving
the unfinished business
of Mark’s effort at finishing his story.

But as far as biblical scholars can tell, working from the earliest manuscripts,
the original version of the gospel according to St Mark
ended right here.
With the women running away from the tomb,
and saying nothing
to anyone.
No appearance of Jesus in the garden, no road to Emmaus, no breakfast on the beach.
Just three scared women and an empty tomb.

Mark began by announcing good news;
he ends
with a disaster.

Some people try to redeem Mark’s gospel
but suggesting
that Mark was planning to write another book,
a second part, like Luke did with the book of Acts,
but just never got around to it.
Perhaps Mark was interrupted at his work
and never quite finished.
Or perhaps the scroll Mark wrote his original on
somehow got torn
right at this crucial part
and the final conclusion was lost.

But what if
it wasn’t unfinished
at all?
What if
Mark deliberately ended
his gospel
in this way.

What if this ending
is the good news?

Because Mark isn't writing this
the day that these events happened.
He's writing it
some years later.
He knows, and the people who will read and hear his words know,
that everything the young man had said
was true,
Jesus had indeed risen,
and would be seen time and time again in his resurrection body
by more than five hundred people.
He knows
that we know that,
but he also knows
that the people who saw Christ risen
are no longer alive.
All we have to go by
is second hand stories,
and next to our own experience
they seem sometimes
inadequate.

We're just like the women, hearing a story
that seems unbelievable.
Especially when we know the inexorable reality
of death.

It's the one thing we can't escape,
and not just
at the end of our lives.

Most, if not all of us,
have had some kind of encounter with death.
Most of us
have lost great-grandparents or grandparents or parents.
Some of us have lost babies, their life gone
before they were even born.
Many have lost friends, and relatives.

And some of us
have had to face the dying
well before the death.

And even when
we haven't encountered death directly
in those around us,
we've experienced the power of illness
and destruction
and all the things
that oppose life.

And I suspect
we've had much the same reaction as those women at the tomb.
We want to do something - anything - to help, to care, to make things better.
And we want to run away.

And that's true
not just before death, but after it.
Death is something
that changes our world,
and no matter how prepared we are for it,
we're never ready for what it brings.

And here's where Mark
begins to give us some hints.
The words of that young man,
“Don't be alarmed; you're looking for Jesus of Nazareth,
Jesus is
the one from Nazareth,
a town in the hill country,
a town where
three decades earlier
a young woman
was visited by an angel
who told her
that she would have a son,
Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us.
And another hint,
is it Nazareth, or is it another word

with the same letters,
netzer,
the branch,
the same word used in that prophecy in Isaiah
about the dead stump, and the shoot that would spring out of it,
branch of Jesse's stem,
the Messiah.

And so Mark takes us back, takes us back to the promise
of what God had planned
all along.

A Messiah, one who would come
and redeem the world,
a light in the darkness,
and death would have no dominion over him.

The women run away in silence,
but that is not the end of the story.
That is never the end of the story.

Because there is always another story that follows,
even when we can't quite believe it,
another story
of a God who in Jesus Christ
to redeem the world,
and in his resurrection
shows us the beginning
of a new story,
a story about a shoot of green
that comes from something that looks dead,
about a life that springs
out of an empty tomb,
about our lives
and the wonderful love of God
that brings us new life.
Christ is Risen. Alleluia!