

The Great Vigil of Easter – Mark 16:1-18
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

“And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

The ending of Mark's Gospel narrative can seem rather disappointing, especially if you compare it with other Gospel accounts of the Resurrection. It's just not as exciting or detailed as the others. There's no immediate proclamation about what the women discovered, and there's not even a post-resurrection appearance by Jesus. The Gospel accounts do share a few similarities: The scene takes place in the early morning on the day after the sabbath, and Mary Magdalene is one of the first to witness the empty tomb. But all of the other details that create for a dramatic reading are missing. There is no earthquake. We don't watch an angel roll away the stone and sit on it. The angelic messenger is not wearing clothes that are dazzling and his appearance is not like lightning. There are no guards who faint. And we do not hear how or when the first female witnesses tell the male disciples about the empty tomb so that they can come to see for themselves.

All we get are the basic facts from a young man dressed in a white robe. In trying to calm their fears, the angel acknowledges that the women are looking for the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, and explains that Jesus has been raised from the dead. The reason why Jesus is no longer in the tomb is because he has gone ahead of them to Galilee. The women are directed to tell the other disciples, including Peter, that Jesus will meet them there as he promised. Come and see. Go and tell. That is the basic directive conveyed to the women, and it was Jesus' basic directive for discipleship. But instead of fully entering to this directive immediately, the women chose to linger in the space between, “Come and see,” and “Go and tell.” After coming and seeing the place where Jesus had been laid to rest, the women felt

the need to pause in silence, and consider all that they had seen and heard. They weren't yet ready to "Go and tell."

For those of you who are introverts, like me, this is totally understandable. The women have made an unexpected and amazing discovery. When they arrived to anoint Jesus' body, not only was the stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, they found a different man in the tomb, and he was alive! Of course they were disoriented by what they encountered. They arrived at the tomb with feelings of sadness and grief -- were met with shock and awe -- and left with terror and amazement. They had arrived to perform one sacred task, and left with a holy directive to undertake a totally different one.

After such an awesome experience, one might expect the women to be silent, at least initially. Perhaps they needed time to process what had happened and to share among themselves what they were thinking and feeling. Perhaps they needed to ponder questions, revel in amazement, and bask in the wonderment of mystery. For how does one share about the inexplicable? How does one explain about the resurrection?

The topic of the Resurrection, or resurrection in general, is one that the faithful still ponder even as we recite the Nicene Creed on Sunday mornings. But Jesus himself didn't make a habit of explaining the resurrection. At one point in his ministry Jesus did have a conversation with the resurrection-denying Sadducees. He briefly reminded them of when God spoke to Moses in the burning bush and spoke about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the present tense, as *living* not *dead*.¹

¹Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, NRSV augmented 3rd ed., New York, NY: Oxford University Press (2007), 81 New Testament, n. 12.26-27.

Jesus pointed out that “if Abraham, Isaac and Jacob mattered to God – and they certainly did – they matter to God for ever. The same is true of all of us.”² And while we are comforted that we matter to God always and for ever, the concept of for ever is also difficult to explain and understand.

Instead of talking about eternal life, Jesus offered glimpses of hope and new life by ministering to those who were usually not offered honor, dignity, and respect. He fed the hungry and healed the sick; he ate with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners. He taught about God’s love and offered unconditional love wherever he went. And when people’s lives were healed through his healing touch and words, they wanted to share about their new life with others. They wanted to share about their foretaste of the resurrected life. Even so, Jesus asked them not to tell others, because a fuller understanding of the resurrected life was yet to be revealed through him.

Eventually the women did share with the other disciples the message of Jesus’ resurrection and his promise to meet them in Galilee. But if early audiences expected to hear dramatic details of that blessed reunion in Mark’s version of the story, they probably left the performance somewhat disappointed. Many ancient scribes must have agreed that the ending to Mark’s Gospel left something to be desired, for two other options are now offered in our Bibles. However, they tend to borrow from other Gospel narratives and may not truly honor Mark’s understanding of the Easter message.

Mark’s narrative offers a distinct perspective on resurrection through the angel’s two-part message to the women. First, the angel specifically asked the women to share Jesus’ message with the disciples and Peter. Why, might you ask,

² <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/the-foundation-of-our-hope>

was Peter named apart from the disciples? Was there some question about Peter's role as a disciple because he denied knowing Jesus three times after his arrest? Apparently, by calling out Peter by name, Jesus communicated a message about God's abiding faithfulness and reconciling love. Jesus demonstrated God's faithfulness as he led the disciples in his earthly ministry. He did not admonish them when they did not appreciate his parables, or when they did not understand after telling them -- for a third time -- that he would be handed over to suffering and death and would be raised on the third day. Jesus was faithful in teaching his disciples to be faithful, even when others were not.

The second part of the angel's message communicated Jesus' promise to meet the disciples in Galilee after he was raised. Jesus' promise of a reunion turned out to also be his promise of reconciling love with all disciples, even those who denied or deserted him. The women were told that the resurrected Christ had gone ahead to Galilee – the safe and familiar region where Jesus began his ministry with them; where he healed the sick and exorcized the afflicted; where he fed thousands; where he taught about loving neighbors, strangers, and enemies. Galilee was where many women, including Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome, began to follow Jesus and support him in his ministry all the way to Jerusalem. All the way to the cross. All the way to the tomb. Now they are being invited to return to the place where they started their ministry with Jesus, and begin their shared ministry anew.

There Jesus will invite the disciples to carry forward his mission and ministry in their everyday world. By meeting people in their grief and disappointments, and accompanying them through times of fear and wonderment, the disciples will be leading all toward newness of life.

As 21st century disciples, we, too, are invited to meet the resurrected Christ in Galilee. We, too, are invited to begin anew and proclaim God's reconciling love for the world. We may be stunned into silence when we first experience an unexpected or inexplicable empty tomb. But as God's messengers we are invited to greet one another with the good news of Christ's promise of new life: to meet one another wherever we are on our journey, and to renew each other with hope for healing and faith in reconciliation.

Although we may not immediately accept the full directive to "Come and see, and Go and tell," Jesus waits patiently for us to enter into discipleship as we are able. We may not know how to handle every unexpected encounter, but we can have faith that, by God's grace, our relationships with one another will be resurrected with new hope and new life. In the end, we may not fully understand *resurrection* and *for ever*, but we can trust that we are always being transformed by the reconciling love of God in Christ.

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