

Kirby Lawrence Hill                      Abington Presbyterian Church

April 1, 2018                      Easter

Mark 15:42-47

Mark 16:1-8

## STORY WITHOUT AN END

Today is a joyous day. The ‘Alleluias’ ring forth. The hymns with organ and brass lift us up. The choirs and the flowers offer their vibrancy to greet the day. Our Lord’s resurrection, which happened on a Sunday, is the reason our primary time of worship each week is on Sunday morning. And yet, the resurrection narrative we heard from the Gospel of Mark doesn’t quite seem to match the joy of the day. In most Bible translations, the verses after the last verse I read from Mark chapter 16 are bracketed, because there is ample evidence that 16:9 and following was not originally a part of the gospel narrative. We don’t have the original manuscript of Mark. But we do have very early copies, which agree that the last words of the gospel account describe the women, upon hearing resurrection news, fleeing from the tomb, seized by terror and amazement. The words are even stronger in the original Greek: *tromos* – trauma, and *exstasis* – ecstasy. Seized by trauma and ecstasy, we are told they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Perhaps Mark needed an editor to tell him, “It would be better if you didn’t end the story without an ending.”

There is, of course, the chance that the author of what is probably our earliest gospel account was unable to finish the manuscript for some reason. A debilitating illness, a sudden death, or getting imprisoned as a person of faith, are all possibilities. The last section of the parchment could have gotten separated from the rest and been lost. We don’t know. Yet, this is the text as we have it, and its abrupt non-conclusion, either intentional by Mark or intentional by the Holy Spirit, would seem to have something to say to us this Easter Day.

First, it causes us to pause in what we think might be the proper response to our Lord’s resurrection. The first to receive resurrection news had an initial response not of overwhelming joy, but of overwhelming something else. ‘Terror, trauma, amazement, ecstasy, fear’ are the reactions mentioned. Mary Magdalene, Mary the

mother of James, and Salome had been identified as having followed Jesus even from the time of his ministry in Galilee. They were listed as having been witnesses to the crucifixion, although there is no description of their emotions at the foot of the cross. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are described as observing Jesus' body being placed in a tomb hewn out of rock, which then had a stone rolled before its entrance. Mark doesn't tell us what they felt at this point either, but we can certainly imagine the depths of their painful loss. Their admired leader been brutally and unfairly killed. Any sense of hope and joy that had grown during the time of his ministry had been suddenly snatched away.

It sounds as if things had been somewhat rushed on Friday as dusk approached. It was proper to get a corpse entombed before the Sabbath began. The women did not have the opportunity to anoint and honor their Lord's battered body before it was entombed, so very early Sunday morning, just after dawn, the three women go to the tomb. They had not figured out how they would get the large stone covering the entrance to the tomb out of the way in order to carry out their sorrowful task. But as they arrive at their destination they are surprised to find the stone already rolled back. They enter what must have been the outer portion of the tomb and are shocked to see what is described as a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting to their right. He tells them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." He was right about the women's objective. "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him." Yes, they saw where his body had been laid. They saw that Jesus' body was not there. Where could he be? He has been raised? "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." Indeed, Mark had told of three separate times when Jesus had informed his followers that he would be killed, and that he would rise again. But none of those who followed Jesus had comprehended what they had been told. So when what had been predicted occurred, it was still shocking and frightening.

You and I have had much more time to adjust to resurrection news, but there is much we still find frightening, that makes us want to flee. We are afraid of losing control of things, and sometimes afraid that our responsibilities will swallow us up. We are afraid that deceptions will continue to thrive, and we are afraid the truth will

come out. We are afraid that too much will be expected of us, and afraid that we may never really make a difference. We are afraid that death will come for us or for those we love, or even to human life on this world.

After the country of Yugoslavia broke apart in the early 1990's, a brutal war between competing factions began. So many innocent people were caught right in the middle of it. The city of Sarajevo had been under siege for a period of time. Food was scarce and while people were standing in line for food distribution on May 27, 1992, a bomb fell, killing twenty-two men, women and children. The very next day, on May 28, Vedran Smailovic, principal cellist for the Sarajevo Philharmonic Orchestra, took his cello to that bomb crater and he played music. Every day for twenty-two days, at various places right out in the open in his beloved city, he played his cello. He played amidst sniper fire and bombings. He played in the face of death, in the face of war, in the face of violence. <sup>1</sup> I'm sure he was frightened, but he still offered his best to challenge the ways of death.

What is a proper response to resurrection news? At some point, the women must have told of their experience. How else would we have the account that we have? The angel messenger in the tomb told the women to tell the other followers that the resurrected Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee. They would see him there. Galilee is where they were from. In essence, they would encounter the resurrected One even in, particularly in the most familiar places, where they lived and worked and made their homes, where the way of love and justice had been newly taught and lived out. It was time to begin looking for Jesus among the living – not in the graveyard, but in Galilee. Our resurrected Lord meets us even in, particularly in the place of our daily lives leading us to resurrected hope, resurrected purpose, resurrected living, even on this side of the grave. Resurrection becomes more than an event that happened almost 2000 years ago; it becomes a part of our daily experience.

In all probability, the Gospel according to Mark was not the title written at the top of the original manuscript. In fact, many believe the first verse of the first chapter of the work is actually the title of the book, in part because it is an incomplete sentence. That first verse is: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the

Son of God.” That could be the title for the whole work. Then when it ends with the women fleeing from the tomb, seized by terror and amazement, saying nothing to anyone for they were afraid, we are fully aware that the story doesn’t end there. The story without a proper ending becomes the unending story. We look for what comes after the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. Let’s allow the resurrection news to soak into us and to have its way with us. Mark indicates that the story of the good news of Jesus Christ is not finished – that’s what makes it such good news. God’s resurrection work is not finished with the world and is not finished with us. No one is asking you and me to change the world – we just get to be used by the One who already has. By God’s grace, we can take part in the next amazing, frightening, joyful chapter of the resurrection story. Yes, we have our fears, but our fears don’t have to define our lives. Death no longer has the last word about us or this world. Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. The story has not ended. Alleluia!

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.readthespirit.com/explore/vedran-smajlovic-cellist-of-sarajevo-still-moves-the-world/>