

Mark 16:1-8^{vii} ^{viii}

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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 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. 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.” 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.

^{vii} About the Alternate Gospel: Mark 16:1-8

Most scholars agree that Mark’s account of the empty tomb concludes the earliest version of this gospel, a suitable capstone to a pithy telling of Jesus’ life, teachings, and deeds that leave his first followers puzzled, sometimes terrified, and often amazed. Mark wants his hearers to understand that even Jesus’ death is fundamentally counterintuitive. Instead of a body, the women find an empty tomb. Instead of the Romans and religious authorities — the powerful of the day — winning, God and everyone who thought they had lost have won instead. Rather than being dead, Jesus has risen to new life. Instead of ending, the Gospel is only beginning. As Mark introduced his account, this is only “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God..”

The angel in the empty tomb inform the women that Jesus has gone out ahead of the disciples to Galilee. The clear implication is that the mission of the Gospel is to continue in the Easter life, and the ongoing work of the Risen Christ is carried forward by his followers.

^{viii} Reflection and Response

If we hear the Easter story often, it loses its surprise. The zinger becomes familiar, the words worn. To restore our appreciation of the feast's meaning, it may be helpful to think of an alternate ending to the story.

For example, reflect on this series of "what ifs?": What if the whole scenario ended on Golgotha, and all farewells were final? What if a rock sealed the tomb with a heavy "thunk," and it never re-opened? What if Mary arrived in the pre-dawn darkness and sat staring bitterly at a granite slab? What if Peter and John, exhausted, slept late that morning, then woke to face a dispirited and disillusioned group of disciples? What if they fought over the leadership roles, venting their frustration and disappointment on each other? What if the little band called Christian died out with the last apostle?

Do these hypotheses stir in us a sense of tragic loss? Perhaps they help us realize how drastically different human history would have been if the "what ifs" had been true. They also prompt us to wonder how different our own experience would be without the resurrection. We may know intellectually that Easter marks a new creation and that the evangelists announce a new beginning for the human race this day. But what does that news mean in our daily lives?

Those who entered the empty tomb found no trace of Jesus. Everything associated with his death has been abandoned, even the grave cloths. We can learn from this action that those who would follow Christ must also abandon that which is death-dealing: habits that kill the body and relationships that kill the soul, the violence of weapons and harsh words, money and energy expended on destruction rather than creation. We may be sad, but we cannot be hopeless because that is an affront to our risen Lord. By defying death, he gave us grounds for an unending and unlimited hope. He deprived the cynics and the pessimists of any truth in their viewpoint because he disarmed the ultimate evil: death. Anxiety about lesser enemies seems trivial in comparison.

With four words, John shows us the proper response to such a revelation: "he saw and believed." The empty tomb calls us to trust God in any situation that seems dead-ended. The psalmist uses the image of the rejected stone becoming the cornerstone to show how God can bring surprising reversals out of that which appears to be lost.

Paul teaches us how the Easter message can lift our sights. Because we are destined for eternal life, it is silly to waste our time and talents on that which is merely transitory. When, inevitably, we must fuss with the things of this world, we can do so with humor and detachment, knowing how ephemeral they are.

As we return to our routines this week, will the Easter celebration make a difference? If we plod through our duties doggedly, skeptical that we can ever effect change, then we are living as though Easter had not happened. If we resume habits that are slowly killing us physically or spiritually, then we act as though the sad "what ifs" came true. But if we eagerly launch a week filled with potential, beauty, and challenge, hopeful about our ministry and committed to our risen Lord, then we have truly invited Christ to easter in us.

Quietly consider:

How can I believe in Jesus' presence in the "empty tombs" of my life?