

Sacred Friends
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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April 12, 2020

Mark 16:1-8

I was looking forward this year to preaching from the Gospel of Mark! It's a story that ends this week pretty much the way it began - with mystery and suspense. And, then, the last four weeks happened, and I'm not sure anymore how comfortable I am with suspense, either in my life, or in the lives of people I love.

I could use a straightforward win for the good guys, but that's not quite how Mark chooses to tell it.

To be fair, there is very little about Jesus' death and resurrection that is neat and tidy. Such a violent end necessarily leaves people with loose ends. And, trust me... there are a couple of really big ones in our gospel story today.

So, in the previous chapter, the eleven remaining disciples have run off. Jesus had been killed by the empire, with the support of some in his own religious community.

To add to the indignity of it all, he doesn't even have a tomb of his own to be buried in. Thank goodness that Joseph of Arimathea was willing to step in him his own empty tomb!

In the modern day Jewish community, it is tradition that there are three people whose call it is to care for your body after death. These anonymous people are responsible for the ritual bathing, saying prayers and accompanying your body through the mourning process. They are called the "Hevra Kedisha", or "sacred friends".

Now, the interesting thing about this custom is that no one - not you, not your family, knows the identity of the three. All that you know is that they are from your community, and they know you.

Why can't you know ahead of time? Because it's the greatest mitzvah there is. If no one knows you've done it, then you can never be repaid for it.

So, the three women were there with Jesus as he died. He didn't die completely forsaken. But then there was the sabbath, and danger from the authorities. So they did not have the opportunity to prepare his body immediately.

It was an act of fidelity to make their way to the tomb early Sunday morning, thinking of practical things like rolling the heavy stone away. Despite the danger and great mourning, they still felt called to ritually prepare his body for burial.

At least there's that. The sacred friends – the women - showed up.

But come on Mark... we need a little more joy than that.

The next part of the story seems a little more promising. There's a young man in white, which is a sign that he might be an angel, but we don't know for sure. The first thing he says is "Do not be alarmed." Some translation substitute "afraid" for "alarmed".

We know from the Christmas story in Luke that an angel saying "do not be afraid" is a good thing – a sign of reassurance.

And I totally need to be reassured, so now I am listening to this angel really closely and waiting for the good news.

Jesus has been raised. He is no longer in the tomb. Wonderful! Alleluia. A resurrection! That is exactly what I need to hear.

Then, the angel tells the women to go tell Peter and the others that Jesus will meet them back in Galilee, where his ministry got its start – that's where they will see him again.

So, what do they do? Tell everybody, right? Wrong. They freak out and don't tell anybody. And, that's where this resurrection story ends, with the words *"they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid"*.

Now apparently, some ancient Christian scribes were a little unsatisfied with this ending. Scholars tell us that if we look at the oldest manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark, verse 8, which is the last verse in our reading today, is where the entire Gospel ends.

In the original, it's a cliff hanger.

But, starting around the second century, readers seem to get increasingly nervous about this ending. So, they embellished the story.

First, somebody added a part where the women stopped being scared and told Peter like they were supposed to.

OK, I guess that's some closure.

And, then another scribe, maybe having read the more upbeat resurrection stories of Matthew, Luke, and John, figured it would be good to add a little more. *Hey guys, let's have a resurrected Jesus show up again like he does elsewhere!* So they added that scene in Mark.

But my favorite addition to the end of Mark is by far the strangest thing I could imagine. Somewhere along the line, somebody decided that what the resurrection really needs is more miracles.

So they added that true followers of Jesus will be able to carry dangerous snakes around and drink poison. And they'd be able to perform more run-of-the-mill miracles like healing the sick just by laying hands on them, too.

Poison-drinking, snake-handling, and faith-healing! Oh my.

Now that sounds way more like a victorious resurrection in the face of death than just three terrified women running out of a tomb. That's how you tell a story about Resurrection!

It also sounds like the strangest reality TV show we could make on Netflix (Take that, Tiger King!)

I can't really blame the scribes who added these endings to the original story. I understand this impulse to add more exciting bits, all good storytellers are known for embellishing a little.

And what could be more exciting than snake-handling and poison-drinking?

After such a grueling and tragedy-filled week, both in the gospel and in real life, don't we all hope that something good will happen here with these women at the tomb? Sometimes even good news can be too scary to share.

But take a minute and think about it.

Those women, they must have told someone, or else the movement would not have continued.

If the women were the only witnesses to the Resurrection and they didn't tell anybody, how did the author of Mark know about it in order to write it down some 40 years later?

If the women didn't tell anybody, how did Paul know about the Resurrection to write about it in his letters to the Corinthians, letters that he wrote about 20 years after Jesus died?

If the women were so scared that they never told anybody, how are you and I singing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today"?

They must have told someone.

So what this tells me, is that even on our worst weeks, when tragedy has struck, when we feel terrible, when our trust has been betrayed, and we are afraid and full of anxiety,

even on these weeks where we cannot bring ourselves to speak of the Resurrection that we have seen, there is still hope that we can bear witness to New Life on another week.

The Good News is still the Good News, even if we're too scared or full of dread to tell it right off.

Even if we need to take some time to share what we've seen.

Even if we're worried no one will believe us, the Good News is still the Good News, and the Resurrection is still the Resurrection.

What this story tells me is that we still have chance to speak of God's work in our lives and in our world, even if we have run out of the words to speak about it today.

So if today doesn't feel right, maybe we can tell our Resurrection story tomorrow. Or, the next day. Or the next time we can see each other face to face. And what a day that will be!

In the meantime, the angel is still right there by the tomb, reassuring us.

Do not be afraid. Jesus has been raised. You will see him again. You just have to go back to that first place you saw him. He is going ahead of you. But, don't worry. You'll see him again, just like he told you.

And when we're less afraid, we'll tell the story of the Resurrection, too. We'll let our alleluias loose, too. Just keep making steps in faith to the next good thing.

If those women could do it, so can we. Christ has Risen! Christ has risen indeed. Amen.