

Tell Everyone!
A Sermon for Every Sunday
The Resurrection of the Lord
Mark 16:1-8

The traditional Gospel reading for Easter Sunday is John 20:1-18, where Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb early on the first day of the week, while it is still dark. You know that story. It's a good one. Mary comes to the tomb and finds that the stone has been rolled away, and so she runs back to tell the disciples, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him!" Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, come running to the tomb. The other disciple gets there first and looks inside but doesn't go in. Peter, impulsive as ever, goes on into the tomb and sees the linen wrappings lying there, empty, and the cloth that had been around Jesus' head rolled up and lying in a place by itself. Then the other disciple comes into the tomb and sees what Peter sees but unlike Peter he believes, that is he believes that Jesus has risen, and not that his body has been stolen, and this is even before they understood the scripture that said Jesus was supposed to rise from the dead. Maybe that's why Jesus loved him so much.

At any rate, the disciples return to their homes but Mary stands there just outside the tomb, weeping. Finally she looks inside and sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They ask her why she is weeping and she says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him." When she turns around she sees Jesus standing there, but she doesn't know it is Jesus. She thinks it is the gardener. He asks her, "Why are you weeping.

Whom are you looking for?” And she says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” And that’s when Jesus says, “Mary,” and when she hears that voice pronounce her name, as she has heard it so many times before, she knows who it is. Her heart leaps and she says, “Rabbouni!” which means “Teacher.” Apparently she runs to embrace him because Jesus says, “Don’t hold on to me, because I haven’t yet ascended to the Father, but go and tell my brothers, ‘I am ascending to my father and your father, to my God and your God.’” And so Mary goes and does just what Jesus has told her: she tells the disciples,

“I have seen the Lord!”

It’s a good story, isn’t it? A great story. It’s the surprise ending of the greatest story every told. Which is probably why John 20:1-18 is the suggested reading for Easter every year and not Mark 16:1-8, not even in this year when we have been reading through that Gospel. Mark also tells the Easter story, but he tells it in a much different way than John does, and most would say a much less satisfying way. In Mark’s version it is Mary Magdalene, and Mary the Mother of James, and Salome who come to the tomb on the morning of the first day, after the sun has risen, and on the way they wonder who will roll the stone away. But when they get there they find that it has already been rolled away, and when they peek inside they see a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side. “Don’t be alarmed,” he says (which was probably necessary). “You’re looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He’s not here. He’s been raised from the dead. Look, here is the place where they laid him.” And sure enough, there is that empty place where Jesus’ body had been only the night before. The man in the white robe says, “Go and tell his disciples, and Peter, that he is going on ahead of you to

Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” But instead of going and telling his disciples, these women went out and fled from the tomb, “for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).

Can you see why we don't usually use this version of the story at Easter? There is no appearance of the risen Christ in this version. There's not even an angel, not by name, anyway. Just a young man in a white robe who tells the women that Jesus is not there. And then, when he tells them that Jesus has been raised, and that they should go and tell his disciples, the women don't do it. They are seized by terror and amazement. They flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone, because they are so afraid. Well, what kind of Easter story is that? It seems incomplete, unfinished, and so, through the years, well-meaning Christian writers have tried to finish Mark's Gospel for him. In my study Bible there is something called the “shorter ending of Mark” just after verse 8, and a “longer ending of Mark” just after that. The shorter ending doesn't even sound like Mark, which may be why it is omitted from most Bibles. It says, “And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.”

The longer ending (verses 9-20), which you probably have in your Bible, looks as if it has been pieced together from all the other Gospel accounts. There is a section in which Mary Magdalene goes and tells the other disciples (who are mourning and weeping) that Jesus is alive, much as she does in the Gospel of John. There is a section in which Jesus appears to two disciples who are walking in the country, much as he does on the road to Emmaus in the Gospel of Luke. There is a section in which he tells his

disciples to “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news,” which sounds very much like the Great Commission from Matthew’s Gospel. And then there is a section in which he says something about picking up serpents and drinking poison that doesn’t sound like any of the other gospels at all. It doesn’t even sound like Jesus. The footnote in my Bible says that although this longer ending has been around since the late second century, “it is missing from the earliest, most reliable Greek manuscripts.” In other words, some of those well-meaning Christian writers have tried to finish Mark’s Gospel for him because the way he left it seemed incomplete. But biblical scholars agree that this is the way Mark left it, right there at verse 8. They believe it was Mark’s intent to end his Gospel with women fleeing from the tomb, seized by terror and amazement, and saying nothing to anyone because they were so afraid. The question is why. *Why* would Mark end his Gospel this way?

I have a theory.

According to reliable sources it was the composer Franz Liszt whose clever wife used to get him out of bed in the morning by playing the first seven notes of a scale on the downstairs piano: *do re mi fa so la ti...* And then she would go back to the kitchen to finish cooking breakfast. Poor Franz would try to ignore it but finally he would have to throw on his robe, stumble down the stairs and play that last note: *do!* But at least by then his breakfast would be ready.ⁱ There is something in all of us—not just composers—that craves resolution, completion, something that cannot abide the unfinished work. If you don’t believe it try singing the first part of “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” but leaving off the last note, like this, “Christ the Lord is risen today! A-a-a-a-le-lu-u...”). Do you see how you just have to put that final note on it, how you

have to resolve the tension in some way? I think that's what Mark was doing! I think he was telling the story of Easter with the ending left off so that, just like Franz Liszt, his readers and hearers would have to tumble out of bed on Easter morning and finish it. If these women wouldn't tell anyone Christ had risen, then somebody would have to do it, and that somebody (Mark might say with a wink) is you.

This is especially interesting when you compare the ending of Mark with other parts of the Gospel, in which Jesus often warns people not to tell anyone who he is or what he has done. In chapter one he cleanses a leper and then, "after sternly warning him he sent him away at once, saying to him, 'See that you say nothing to anyone'" (1:43-44). In chapter five, after raising Jairus's daughter from the dead, "he strictly ordered [her parents] that no one should know this" (5:43). In chapter seven he heals a man who can't hear or speak, and afterward orders the crowd to "tell no one" (7:36). Along with those healings there are exorcisms, where Jesus' casts out demons and unclean spirits who seem to know exactly who he is: Jesus of Nazareth, "the Holy One" and sometimes even "the Son" of God (1:24). But Jesus commands them to "be silent" (1:5), forbids them to speak (1:34), and sternly orders them not to make him known (3:12).

And then, in the middle of the Gospel, something happens. Jesus takes Peter, James, and John with him and goes up on a high mountain where he is transfigured. His face begins to shine and his clothes become dazzling white, whiter than anyone on earth could bleach them. Suddenly Moses and Elijah are standing there with him, and a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him!" It is as close as we come in this Gospel to seeing a vision of the risen Lord, and if Peter, James, and John had any doubts before about who Jesus was, they

couldn't doubt it now, could they? And you can imagine that they can hardly wait to get down the mountain, to tell everyone what they have seen and heard. But as they were going down the mountain Jesus ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, to tell no one—that is—*until* the Son of Man had risen from the dead. “But,” he might have said, “when that day comes tell everyone, tell the whole world who I am!”

Which makes the ending of Mark's Gospel that much more strange. Jesus has said, “Don't tell, don't tell, don't tell,” but now that he has risen from the dead there is no reason not to tell. So, the young man in the white robe says to the women, “Go! Tell everyone!” But “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” [hum a low, somber, “A-a-a-a-le-lu-u...”]. It's strange, isn't it? When Jesus told the leper not to tell anyone that he had been cleansed the leper went out and proclaimed it freely, spreading the word so effectively that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but had to stay out in the country (1:45). When he healed that man who couldn't hear or speak he told the crowd to keep quiet, “but the more he ordered them the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, ‘He has done everything well!’” (7:36-37). So, when Jesus healed people and told them to say nothing they said everything, but when these women were asked to tell everyone he had risen they didn't tell anyone. They were afraid. Which means that if this story is going to be resolved, if it's ever going to have a happy ending, it will be up to us. So, sing it with me:

“Christ the Lord is risen today! A-a-a-a-le-lu-u-ia!”

—*Jim Somerville* © 2021

ⁱ Rick Steves' *Europe 101*, p. 493.