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Woodhaven Presbyterian Church
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Mark 16:1-8

Fear and Silence

Fear and silence. That is how the original Gospel of Mark ends. It ends with the women being seized by fear and amazement, running away as quickly as they could from that empty tomb, and not saying one single word to anyone about what they had seen and heard. Fear and silence make up Mark's Easter ending.

Now, if your Bible is like mine, you will see two additional endings after verse 8— the shorter ending and the longer ending. More than likely, both of these two additional endings were added to the original Gospel by some of our very early Christian brothers or sisters. Both extra endings do some clean-up work for Mark. Because those early Christians knew what you and I know—that fear and silence are not the most effective ways to end the Jesus story. Fear and silence do not go well with Easter Sunday morning.

Just imagine walking into this sanctuary on Easter Sunday morning to find the lights dimmed, the chancel area devoid of lilies and other symbols of resurrection joy, and all voices hushed. Julie and I come down front to speak. “You need to go home,” we report. “Christ is risen.” And a collective gasp emerges from all who had gathered. Parents are suddenly taking the arms of their children and hurrying them out to the cars so they can rush home and batten down the hatches. And the sanctuary empties and the sound of sheer silence descends. Fear and silence. It is difficult, if not impossible, to imagine. Fear and silence just do not go with Easter morning. And yet, according to Mark, fear and silence dominated the first Easter.

The women had been some of Jesus' most faithful followers up to this point. The other disciples betrayed Jesus and ran from his presence in the Garden, but the women followed him to the cross. They had kept vigil at the crucifixion, praying and weeping as Jesus drew his last breath. They had silently watched Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus' crucified body down off the cross and wrap it in a linen cloth for burial. And they had formed their own kind of funeral procession, slowing walking behind Joseph as he took the corpse to his family's tomb.

And then on this morning, the day after the Sabbath, these same women felt called to continue their care and provision for Jesus. They woke early, brought the appropriate spices, and slowly began their walk to the cemetery. They wanted to clean up his body, to show their devotion to him just one more time. They wanted to try and begin the illusive practice of finding closure—something that we all long for after a loved one dies, but something that rarely comes fully and completely. You never “get over” the death of someone you love. The day does come when you find yourself laughing more than crying at the memories. But you never get over it. You never fully find closure.

But I doubt the women wanted to talk about that. Instead, they did what we all do. They focused on the details. They focused on the checklist of tasks that one does after a death. “Salome, could you make the phone calls to those followers out of town?” “Mary Magdalene, what do you think we should do about flowers or memorial gifts? Have you finished work on the obituary? Do you know the deadline?” “Mary, can you and your son James go through Jesus' few possessions and decide what will be given away and to whom?” And, the most pressing question—“Once we arrive at the tomb, how are we going to roll away that huge, heavy stone?” Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome walked to the tomb, carrying all of the accoutrements of death, with their minds consumed by tasks and by grief.

But I must wonder if mixed in with their deep and profound grief was a small sense of relief. We are probably not supposed to talk about this in church, but you have to wonder if, as they wept tears of grief, they also found themselves sighing some in relief. Let's be honest, following Jesus had gotten harder and harder for them. It was a dangerous time to be a disciple. Threat hung in the air. Crosses were being burned on their lawns and Molotov cocktails tossed through their windows as they slept. And that was only the physical threat that Jesus' followers faced.

It was also just plain hard to be his disciple. He was constantly asking things of them, questioning the ways they had always lived their lives, trying to get them to take risks and to stir the societal pot. His sermons were full of very difficult and complex challenges like "Blessed are the peacemakers," and, "Love your enemies," and "Don't store up for yourselves treasures on earth," and "Keep awake for the kingdom of God is at hand."

Now, don't get me wrong – they, we, loved Jesus and really hoped that he was who he said he was and that he would do as he said he would do. But, that day, the women were on their way to anoint his body and to grieve his death. And those acts meant that starting with that day, they were also off the discipleship hook.

They could go back to the way things had been before they had seen the world through Jesus' eyes. They could go back to making an uneasy peace with the "way things are." The gap between the rich and the poor; the reality of war and violence; the existence of slaves and masters; the everyone has his/her place mentality--- now that their dream of God's reign embodied by Jesus had died, they could go back to life as usual. Was life without the presence of their risen Lord heartbreaking and terribly disappointing? Yes. But was life without the presence of their risen Lord easier? Maybe. If Jesus is in the tomb and the obituary is written, then you go back to living the life of "what you see is what you get—no more, no less."

And what about us? What will happen with us, after the Hallelujah Chorus has been sung and the butterflies have been released? What will we do when the egg hunts are over and we are stuffed with Easter lunch? Maybe we will be disappointed that Easter has come and gone and that another Monday is on its way. I imagine I won't be the only preacher who has a little sigh of relief that we made it through another Holy Week and we can now get back to "normal ministry." Does our dream of God's reign embodied by Jesus get put back in the cupboard next to the ceramic bunnies and old Easter baskets until we pull it out again next year? After today's pageantry and celebration die down, will we make our uneasy peace with the way things are and go back to living the life of "what we see is what we get so how can I get more?" For life without the presence of our risen Lord is heartbreaking and disappointing, but also a little less demanding.

I am sure that if any of those women felt any small sense of relief, they did not let it show. You just don't talk about that kind of thing in church, or in the cemetery. It is not proper. But any relief those women might have felt was sucked right out of their souls when they arrived and found the stone rolled away. Mark says they were "alarmed." That is putting it lightly. They walked into that tomb and found some strange young man sitting there where Jesus' body was supposed to be.

"Don't be alarmed," he proclaimed. "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." What? He's not dead? It's not over? The women stood in that empty tomb holding all the accoutrements of death,

feeling an intense mixture of grief and relief only to hear a startling pronouncement of life. “He is not here,” the stranger says. “He is going ahead of you; you will see him, just as he told you.”

As Flannery O’Connor has written, “He’s thrown everything off balance.” Indeed! And the women could not comprehend what had just happened and fearfully fled from that tomb and Mark claims they said nothing to anyone. And we are right back to where we began. Fear and silence.

But you know what? Mark may have intended his Gospel to end with fear and silence in verse 8, but I do not believe he intended for the Easter Good News to end that way. As a matter of fact, I think Mark fully intended for us to come to the end of his report, put our Bible down, and say to each other, “Well, what are we going to do about it?”

In other words, Mark knew exactly what he was doing. By ending his Gospel with fear and silence, he passed the torch to us. The disciples are locked in a room. The women are running away in fear. It is up to us, now. The Lord is risen and we are the ones to spread that good news. We cannot rely on Peter or Mary Magdalene or anyone else to do the telling. Because of their fear and silence, **we** are the ones called to speak the power of Easter. **We** are the ones now charged with proclaiming that Jesus is on the loose and is still at work just as he told us he would be.

But here is the kicker – in order to overcome the fear and the silence, we are not just called to **tell** the good news of the Easter story, we are called to **believe** the good news of the Easter story. And I don’t mean some intellectual assent to a doctrine of the resurrection. I mean we are called to trust and live the crazy and sometimes unbelievably good news that silence and fear and death are not the end of the Jesus story. Silence and fear and death are not the end of our story. God is not done with any of us yet. God is not done with this world yet. Christ was not just raised as a past action, but Christ **IS** risen. Jesus is currently on the loose in our world. The dream of God’s reign is not over by a long shot.

And sisters and brothers, the **power** of God’s Easter good news will not end after the Hallelujah Chorus has been sung and the butterflies have been set free. The **claim** of God’s Easter good news will not disappear as Easter Sunday gives way to Monday morning and it looks like things are getting back to normal. The **promise** of God’s Easter good news is that because the risen Jesus is on the loose in **our** world, in **our** time, in **our** history, and in **our** lives, things will **NEVER** be back to normal, again. There is no turning back now. There is no getting off that discipleship hook. There is no more living the life of “what we see is what we get.”

We cannot roll the stone back in front of the tomb and keep Jesus contained. Because Jesus, God-with-us, is alive. And he is calling us to move on down the road and join him in proclaiming God’s Easter YES to this Good Friday world. For is a life lived with our risen Lord far more abundant and hope-filled than we could ever ask or imagine? Absolutely.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! No more fear. And no more silence.