Sunday, 4/4/21

**Mark 16:1-8**

**1**When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. **2**And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. **3**They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” **4**When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. **5**As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. **6**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. **7**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.” **8**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.

**Sermon**

Today is Easter, Christianity’s highest holy day, when Christians celebrate Jesus, the Son of God, rising from the dead. The church has long celebrated Easter as a joyful holiday and a celebration of life, with lots of flowers and happy, uplifting music. In some traditions Easter is also the day for pulling your best clothing out of the closet. When I was a child Easter was often a day for visiting my grandparents and getting candy and presents. (Years later I finally figured out what we were actually celebrating.) Modern readers of the Bible have been influenced by the hymns and Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of the Christ*. Sometimes I imagine the Resurrection being accompanied by a bright light as the sun rises, with Jesus walking triumphantly out of the tomb with stirring music playing (sometimes in my mind it sounds like the finale from *The Lion King*). Maybe the disciples gather around Jesus at the tomb, hugging and high-fiving Jesus and each other. Now this scene seems like a fitting way for Jesus to conquer death and secure salvation. It’s a scene that Jesus’s first followers wouldn’t have recognized.

Sometimes serious study of the Bible leaves the reader feeling disturbed. Here’s an example: these eight verses are the original ending to Mark’s Gospel. Biblical scholars believe that twelve verses that narrate Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the rest of the disciples were tacked on later by a different author, probably with the other three Gospels as a reference. Sometimes such details are interesting trivia best left out of sermons, but this tidbit is relevant. Mark ended his Gospel with the tomb empty, Jesus supposedly going ahead to Galilee, and Mary, Mary, and Salome running away in fear. This scene isn’t joyful. Why would Mark tell his story this way? We’re frequently left to figure out what’s going on without any explanation. At this point in the story, Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome arrive at the tomb at sunrise on Sunday. Jesus had been crucified on Friday. Because the Jewish Sabbath begins at nightfall on Saturday and no work of any kind is permitted, Jesus was taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb in a rush. The Sabbath had ended at sundown on Saturday, and these three women are at the tomb as early as they can manage. Mark tells us that they’re bringing spices to anoint Jesus and worrying about moving the stone. They’re here to finish laying their friend and teacher to rest, not to greet their risen Savior. The past week’s events have left them little confidence in any other outcome: Jesus had gone in a few days from receiving a hero’s welcome, to defending himself against the scribes and Pharisees, to a quick Passover seder, to being turned over to the authorities by a member of their group, to being arrested, beaten, condemned by a kangaroo court and the harsh Roman governor, and crucified. Mary, Mary, and Salome are overwhelmed and probably see this early visit to the tomb as part of the grieving process.

When the three women find out that Jesus has been raised from the dead it’s too much for them to wrap their minds around. For him to be alive is too far beyond their expectation, especially after what they’ve been through, for them to accept. It might have helped if, as in John’s Gospel, Jesus himself appeared near the tomb to show his followers that despite the past week’s ordeal he’s not dead. Instead they find a young man dressed in a white robe who points out the empty tomb and tells them to round up the disciples and go to Galilee, where Jesus will be waiting for them. Modern readers expect joy here; instead, Mary, Mary, and Salome run away terrified.

What’s going on in this story? It would be easy to judge these three women, or two imagine that Mark must have gotten the story wrong. Why don’t they do what this young man—most likely an angel—says and go find their risen savior in Galilee? Why be confused and afraid after Jesus told them this was going to happen? But their response isn’t as unnatural as it seems to a modern reader who knows how the story ends. The emotional impact of the past week must have been heavy for the disciples. All the Gospels agree that none of the disciples really expected to see Jesus alive again. Crucifixion is a brutal, bloody way to die; it would be natural to assume that Jesus can’t possibly come back from that experience. The disciples and the crowd had expected Jesus to set himself up on the throne or establish heaven on earth immediately, with his followers being rewarded for their loyalty. When the Romans and the religious authorities turned on Jesus, the whole enterprise of preaching the Kingdom of God fell apart, Peter denied even knowing Jesus, and the disciples ran and hid. The news that Jesus has risen from the dead and is waiting for them in Galilee must have been confusing at best.

It’s easy to relate to how Mary, Mary, and Salome felt. That Jesus is somehow still alive after their expectations of him were dashed seems unlikely. Maybe Peter, who the angel singles out, doesn’t really want to see Jesus again after denying knowing him.

* Their concerns: can this be true? Is Jesus a ghost? What’s he going to say when we see him in Galilee? Are we in trouble? (Peter denied him…)
* Our concerns:
  + Covid, violence, racism, climate change; where is Jesus? Is this world too evil?
  + Have I fallen short?

The risen life that Jesus offers isn’t just life in heaven after death or standing undisturbed in God’s presence now. Jesus will meet the disciples not by the tomb, but back in Galilee where he first met them.

* Where is Jesus found?
  + The disciples had to go back to Galilee, where they met Jesus
  + They’re going back to their lives (in John’s Gospel they meet Jesus while they’re fishing)
  + Jesus is in the midst of our lives
* What does Jesus want?
  + To give us new life now
  + To help us see our lives (families, jobs, etc.) as places where we do his work
  + The Kingdom of God is at hand, close by, involved in our daily lives, making life meaningful

Thank God that Jesus’s abundant life is available to us because Jesus died and rose again, and not because of anything we’ve done to earn it.

* Jesus rose despite the violence of the previous week, found the disciples despite being powerless and even cowardly
* Nothing mentioned about our earning our way into the Kingdom—we’re invited
  + Repentance—turn away from what isn’t life-giving
  + Not perfection
* All of the violence/evil around us doesn’t negate God’s power