

Telling God's Story, Part III: The One About the Empty Tomb  
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Easter Day – March 31, 2024  
Mark 16:1-8

If you thought that all the things which happened to Jesus during the final week of his life were absurd, then have I got a whopper of a story for you: " As [the women] 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'" (Mark 16:5-6, NRSV).

It makes absolutely no sense that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome would find what they did when they went to anoint the body. They had witnessed firsthand how he'd been murdered in the most brutal way imaginable, and his tomb sealed with a stone so large that it would be impossible for a single person to move it. It is understandable that their reaction to the missing stone and the angel who told them not to be afraid would be one of sheer terror. In that moment, it became crystal clear to them that Jesus had been telling them the truth all along. They knew with absolute certainty that not only has the world been changed for ever, and there might well be a whole heap of trouble for them personally if the wrong people were to get wind of it. And so these women, who are the ones who should be telling everyone else what they found, do the exact opposite.

Along with Mary, Mary, Salome, and all the other players in this drama, we've been through a lot in the last three days. We've retraced Jesus' steps from that last Passover meal, to the garden at Gethsemane, through the narrow, winding streets of

Jerusalem, and up to the foot of the cross. We've walked alongside the ones who were brave enough to stay, and the ones who fled because they feared they might be next. Through it all, we've shared in their nearly unspeakable grief at the murder of their teacher and friend. Now, we can share in their bewilderment and rejoicing that God has used this event to throw a great cosmic banana peel squarely in the path of death as we know it. This slippery offender has moved us from darkness into light, from grief into joy, from death into a whole new kind of life. It is a life where sin no longer has us in its grip and where we have been freed to choose to love beyond our limits.

Mark's gospel actually stops right here, with the empty tomb and the women fleeing in terror. There was originally no epilogue, in which Jesus appears to his friends and finishes the job of equipping them to go and do in his name. If you look at the end of Mark in most Bibles, you'll find that there are actually two different endings. Both of them were likely added sometime in the second century by copyists who didn't think it made a whole lot of sense to just leave it as it was. However, those additions kind of miss Mark's point: the "Ta-da!" moment, when Mary, Mary, and Salome discover the empty tomb is precisely the lens through which we are meant to understand Jesus. Without it, none of the rest of it makes any sense at all.<sup>1</sup>

The women's disbelief is part of a larger, 2-part pattern within Mark. The first part is that those who should understand what's going on, like Peter and the rest of the disciples, and should go and tell other people about it, don't. The second part is that those who do understand, like the demons Jesus silences at the beginning of his ministry and the centurion at the foot of the cross who acknowledges that he was truly

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 147-8.

God's Son, are the least likely to advertise it. The events of the past few days, starting with Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial, and ending with these three women keeping the news of the resurrection a secret, fit this pattern. Mark uses this abrupt ending as an invitation to "... pick up where these women left off and share the good news announced by the messenger at the empty tomb."<sup>2</sup>

This is not the end of the story of what God did through the person of Jesus Christ. It is but the beginning of the good news, which has been picked up and lived out by his followers for the nearly two millennia since it actually happened. And part of that good news is that God's redemption of the world is not a one-time deal. That work still continues with each and every one of us. "... If you wonder why there is still so much distress and pain in the world, it's because God's not done yet. It's only the beginning, and Mark is inviting us to get out of our seats and into the game, sharing the good news of Jesus' complete identification with those who suffering and his triumph over injustice and death with everyone we meet. It's only the beginning, and we're empowered and equipped to work for the good in all situations because we trust God's promises that all will in time come to a good end even when we can't see evidence of that."<sup>3</sup>

And what will WE do when we are sent out into the world at the end of this service as bearers of the good news?

The story of Easter is God's story – and it is ours, too. May God grant us the same boldness as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, Salome, Peter, and all the rest had to join in the ancient proclamation: Alleluia, Christ is risen!

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, "Easter B: Only the Beginning." <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/easter-b-only-the-beginning/> [accessed March 27, 2024].

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!