

They Said Nothing?
Mark 16: 1-8

"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."¹ That is not exactly the Easter ending for which we have been waiting these six weeks of Lent! Terror and fear, silence, running away. Yes, they had been told that Jesus had gone ahead to Galilee. Yes, they had heard Jesus speaking of his return. Still, death is so very final, and it had been such a tumultuous time for them all. Of all the followers of Jesus, it was the women who had been the most consistent - the ones who were always there, quietly supporting Jesus, taking care of him, watching as he died while the others hid in safety from the Jewish and Roman authorities who had conspired to kill Jesus. In all four gospels, it was the *women* who were the first to the tomb and discovered it empty, Jesus inexplicably gone. But in Mark's gospel, the ending is vague. Jesus makes no appearance at all. As suddenly as Mark's gospel begins with an adult Jesus stepping seemingly out of nowhere into ministry, it comes to a grinding halt with even more unanswered questions. And the women - Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome - were terrified and ran for their lives.

Now before we become all righteous thinking there is no way we would run in fear, no way we would question what Jesus said about coming back, no way we would *not* celebrate and rejoice that Jesus had risen, think for a moment. The last few months had become a nightmare with Jesus and his followers fleeing village after village because of threats on their lives. Not only were the Jewish authorities condemning Jesus, his teachings, and his actions, the Romans were none too pleased with him. There had been that last week in Jerusalem, each day holding a drama of its own as Jesus' lessons and deeds became more intense, more vehemently vocal and daring. Then the unimaginable happened as one of their own betrayed Jesus, turning him over to be tried and sentenced, condemned to death. Finally, they stood in silence and watched

¹ Mark 16: 8 NRSV

the horror of a brutal crucifixion of their beloved leader and friend. They had endured multiple assaults on their safety, their security, their very lives - and on their hearts and souls. This was not at all the ending they expected when they first began to follow the carpenter from Nazareth who spoke of lifting the heavy bonds of oppression and injustice, of a grace that would bring wholeness to the most broken, of new life and hope in a world that seemed so dark and foreboding. After all, if one of their closest companions had turned against Jesus, were there others who would do so? If their own people had turned against them and participated in Jesus' execution, would the same thing happen to them? If the Romans, the ones who had the power to enforce the death penalty, had intervened and agreed to crucifixion, would they do so again? Fear and running away seem like a most logical response after the trauma they had experienced.

Mark's gospel does leave us hanging in an uncomfortable suspense. The resurrection, this glorious Easter morning, *is* the center of our faith as followers of Jesus. As portrayed in Mark's gospel, though, it is certainly not a satisfactory conclusion to the life of Jesus Christ. On its own, on the surface it appears to leave us little to claim and embrace with hope, little reason to make this the root of our belief. Well, it might be the end of the book, but it is only a chapter in the story of God and God's beloved creation. We know from the other gospels that Jesus did indeed appear to his followers, talking and eating with them, continuing their relationship. We know that, with the rush of a mighty wind, the Church was blown into existence becoming God's presence in the world. We know from the Acts and the epistles the growing pains of the early Church as they struggled to become community and a living faith in the way of Jesus. Because of those other writings, we do have a fuller picture of what would follow the fear and confusion of that first Easter morning. But what if we were to let Mark's abrupt conclusion stand on its own? What if we were to let the discomfort and unanswered questions settle down around us? This awkward ending, with seemingly nothing that could adequately serve as the foundation of faith, is actually the opportunity for an amazing experience. You see, this gospel of Mark is our

invitation to enter the story, one that is still unfolding today. The answers we so desperately seek are not present in Mark, but possibilities and hope overflow in abundance. Mark's gospel does not merely urge us to re-tell the story of Jesus but to step into it, claim it, make it our own, and then live it. Mark's gospel was not simply a story about how Jesus lived so long ago but how we are to become that story in our living today. We are a resurrection people, and within us now is the story of redemption and hope for all creation.

As the followers of Jesus discovered, despite our best plans, life does not always turn out as it should. Sometimes it hangs very dismal and heavy on our hearts and souls. There is pain and sorrow of unimaginable proportion. We cannot begin to comprehend how evil and lies not only exist but thrive in the world, seeming victors over goodness and truth. Justice is an elusive dream at best. No, this does not appear to be in any way the hope of which Jesus spoke. Yet, Mark's gospel serves as a reminder that the story is not yet complete and that we have our own chapters to write. This ending that leaves us squirming calls to us to join the dance of God and God's people as we not only look to a day of hope but begin to make it reality in our own living today. We now hold God's story in *our* hands and in *our* hearts. We are not only an Easter people; we become Easter for the world.

In Jesus of Nazareth God encountered the vulnerability of humanity to speak to us of God's faithful presence in the world. In his living Jesus embodied God's grace and illustrated for us what that looks like in a world that can be so cruel and judgmental. In his dying Jesus showed us that love is a force that is more powerful than even death. Easter comes around each year to demonstrate to us that the hope of resurrection and new life is present here and now. Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, a tattooed recovering addict who seems a most unlikely candidate for being a minister, said in an Easter sermon, "It happens to all of us... God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig

for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over.”²

And that is the Easter story – Jesus pulling us out of wherever we might be and pointing us to life more magnificent than what we could ever imagine. Easter is not the end of the story of Jesus Christ; it’s only the beginning. Not just for the women who went to the tomb that morning, not just for the disciples who would meet Jesus in Galilee but for people through all ages. Jesus is calling us forward to explore, to discover what life in God’s creation can be.

Too often in the Christian faith we point to the resurrection as the goal of the story of Jesus Christ or even to the point of salvation – or some other milepost such as confirmation, joining a church, even ordination - as the culmination of our own faith journey. However wonderful those times may have been – and they all are – that’s not what Easter is about at all. Easter is about moving forward, about God through Jesus inviting us to step into the future. Easter opens the door for the Church, the Body of Christ.

So on this glorious Easter morning we come together to celebrate the discovery of an empty tomb but we also are rejoicing that God’s future is stretched out before us, calling to us to step into a new journey, the journey of the Church. Like the disciples who were almost destroyed by Jesus’ death only to later meet him in Galilee, we, too, find that we are not trapped by our circumstances, by what is happening to us and around us. For each of us, for all of us, there is more to the story, there is life.

Easter is our invitation to continue the story. It will be replete with adventure and life beyond our imaginings. It will often call us to leave what is familiar, to turn away from what is accepted by society, and to seek another path. It is shaped by God’s own self-giving love found in Jesus of Nazareth, the risen Christ. As the bewildered women stood before the empty tomb,

² Nadia Bolz-Weber. *Pastrix: The Cranky, Beautiful Faith of a Sinner and Saint*. Jericho Books. 2013.

a youth told them, "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."³

But, go - that is what we are to do now. Over the centuries there have been attempts to nicely wrap up Mark's gospel and provide it with a more palatable conclusion. Yet the lack of details and the preponderance of unanswered questions are precisely the gift of the Easter story. Through those ancient words, God trusts us with the story and invites us to look at a world filled with all God's infinite possibilities. The story of Easter should leave us not with a sense of accomplishment, victory, and finality but with a hunger for more, a deep desire to discover our place in God's ongoing story of hope and grace. Easter is who we are now. We are to live Easter in our own lives as individuals, as a community of faith, as the Body of Christ. Easter does not conclude with a resounding 'Alleluia! Amen!' but with a question. How will we be Easter for the world?

Let us pray. God of Easter, show us how to be Easter for our world that is so very frightening and so very fragile. Give us the courage to continue to sing your songs of hope, to be people of your grace, to quietly and defiantly proclaim that your love is stronger than even death. May your story continue in us and through us enfolding the world in your love. Because of your Son we pray. Amen.

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³ Mark 16: 7 NRSV