

A WEEK OF HOLY TERROR: HE IS NOT HERE

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Mark 16:1-8

The Easter story is a story we all know so well. On Good Friday, Jesus was crucified. Because the Jewish sabbath starts at sunset on Friday and Jewish custom required that Jesus be buried before the sabbath, Jesus' body was removed from the cross and hastily placed in a borrowed tomb.

Very early on Sunday, three women—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and a third named Salome—travel out to the tomb with the spices needed to anoint a body, because there had not been time on Friday. Along the way, they wonder how they might move the stone door of the tomb. But when they arrive at the tomb, they discover that the stone had already been rolled back.

Standing at the door of the tomb and peering into the darkness, they can see that Jesus' body is not there. It is missing. There is, however, a young man sitting in the tomb. He is dressed in a white robe, the calling card of heavenly beings.

The three women are greatly alarmed. The man says to them, *Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified*, as if maybe, possibly, they had gone to the wrong tomb. He informs them that they have not. *You are in the right place. You're looking for your friend, Jesus. 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.* Upon hearing this, the women flee from the tomb and are *seized with terror and amazement*. According to Mark, the women say nothing to anyone because they were so very afraid.

And the gospel ends. Mark concludes his gospel with the words *for they were afraid* and nothing more. He ends with the women's angelic encounter and immediate exit. That's it.

During this season of Lent, I have been preaching a sermon series in which I have focused on the significant events that took place during Holy Week—from Palm Sunday to Easter. I titled this series *A Week of Holy Terror* because as we examine the events of that soul-shattering week, we can't help but be appalled at the many horrors inflicted upon Jesus. He is betrayed by those close to him, Peter denies knowing him, he is arrested, tried and although innocent he is declared to be guilty, he is dragged through the streets of Jerusalem and mocked and beaten, he is executed by the detestable practice of crucifixion, he descends to Hell.

I began this series with the account of the cleansing of the temple that took place on Holy Monday when Jesus entered the great temple in Jerusalem and

disrupted the commerce of the money changers and the merchants, accusing them of turning his father's house into a den of thieves.

We resumed on Thursday of Holy Week and Jesus' celebration of the Passover meal—an event we know as the Last Supper. At that meal he announced that one of those present would betray him. Peter declared, "Certainly not I! I would give my life for you." Of course, he doesn't. At the meal Jesus institutes what we now know as the Eucharist—or Communion—breaking the bread and pouring the wine and sharing it with his disciples as a reminder that even when he is gone, he will always be with them.

Following the meal, Jesus led the disciples out of the city to Gethsemane, and we watch as Jesus prays and as the disciples sleep until Judas arrives with a small mob. They arrest Jesus and drag him back into the city to the palace of the high priest.

There, we endure the fraudulent proceedings of a trial before the Sanhedrin. The prosecutors in that trial could not even get their witnesses' testimony to agree with one another. So, finally, the high priest comes down and asks Jesus directly, *Are you the Messiah?* and Jesus responds, *I am*. The Sanhedrin declares him guilty of blasphemy and should be sentenced to death. But because the Jews did not have the authority to execute someone, they needed to take him to the Roman governor Pilate.

In a second trial, Jesus is accused not of blasphemy but of being *King of the Jews*. Pilate asks the people who they would like for him to release that year. The people call for Barabbas. Pilate asked, "Don't you want your king to be released?" And they said, "No, release Barabbas." And Pilate asked them, "What should I do with him?" and the crowd roars, *Crucify him!* and he is sent to the cross.

Last Sunday, I told you that the crucifixion of Jesus was not an ad hoc or impromptu event, but part of God's great plan for the salvation of all. It was a plan begun generations earlier with the covenant that God initiated with Abraham and Sarah. At the same time, Jesus was wholly obedient in carrying out God's plan despite the fact that he must die and descend to hell.

And so today, we complete this sermon series by going to the tomb on Easter morning.

As I said, Mark is unique among the gospel writers in that he does not give us any information after the women visit the tomb. In other Gospels we find evidence as proof that Jesus has risen from the dead. In Mark, the tomb is empty, but no one gets to see Jesus or touch the nail holes in his hands. There is no Great Commission in which Jesus sends his followers out to *make disciples of all nations*, no recounting of the Hebrew scriptures or a meal shared with travelers to Emmaus, no intimate

conversation with Mary in the garden, and certainly no sudden arrival of the risen Christ among the disciples behind locked doors.

None of this is found in Mark's gospel. Scholars cannot tell us why. Some have suggested that possibly the last pages of Mark's gospel have simply been lost.

But I disagree. As I see it, Mark ends his story here because that's where the story needed to end. The women go to the tomb and learn from an angelic being that Jesus has been raised. Mark's gospel is the earliest gospel to be written. He is writing to a community of faithful believers, and they know the story of what happened because they are the story of what happened. Mark is writing to the church's first generation.

From what we have learned from studying the gospels, and especially these readings from Holy Week, is that no one really understood who Jesus was. Even his disciples; especially the disciples. When Jesus asked, *Who do you say that I am?* Peter answered correctly, *You are the Messiah.*

But it is clear that although this was the correct answer, it came from Peter's head, not his heart. Peter claimed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, but we see that he didn't have faith in that, because if he had, he would not have denied Jesus. If he had, he would not have fled away from him. If he had, he would have been died with Jesus.

And the same goes for the other disciples. They view Jesus as a rabbi, a teacher, a mentor, a religious leader, but they were unable to take the next step and see him as the son of God in their midst.

At the tomb on Easter Sunday, those women go to anoint the corpse, and they go expecting to find a corpse. For even though Jesus had told them time and again that he would die, he would also be raised, they didn't fully believe it. It was just too much to believe. And so, when they arrive at the tomb, and it's empty, and the stranger tells them that they're looking for Jesus, but he's not there, they are shaken to the core with a holy terror. They now understand who Jesus is. He was who he said he was. And if he was the Messiah, that meant that God also was real and present and so close they could touch him.

And they're terrified because they realize that all their lives, that God had been with them, and they hadn't realized it. I have no doubt that those women believed in God and believed—like Peter—that Peter that Jesus was the Messiah. But that did not translate into faith. Just as the troubled man prayed to Jesus, *I believe; help my unbelief.*

Have you ever had such a moment when you became aware of God's presence? It can be reassuring, but it can also be terrifying. If God is real then we need to change who we are and how we live.

I have no doubt that all of us here believe. It's our unbelief that needs help. Do we have the faith that Jesus is the Messiah?

Today is Sunday. It is Easter, but it is a Sunday just like every other. And we come here and give thanks, and we worship. But to be honest, are we like the women who go to the tomb fully expecting to find a body? After all, dead things stay dead. Do we come to church content to find a body, or do we expect life?

There's an amazing quote by the American poet and writer Annie Dillard. It's a quote that preachers love, and I'm sure you are familiar with it. Annie Dillard writes about people who are in church and how safe they feel. She writes, "We're like passengers on a cruise ship, enjoying life, not paying attention to the conditions or the weather outside." But then she says, "When we come to church, it is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church. We should be wearing crash helmets; ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us to our pews, for the sleeping God may wake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return."¹

We come to church wanting to feel safe when we really should anticipate the holy terror of being changed, of getting caught up in being a follower of Jesus.

Mark's gospel concludes with the empty tomb. But it does not end there. It ends with a promise told by the angel: *[Jesus] is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.* The promise is that Jesus is always ahead of us, clearing a path for us. He is waiting for us. That promise becomes an invitation of faith for us all.

Despite spending years at Jesus' side, the disciples' faith fell short. They denied and they deserted. It is only after they encountered the risen Christ were they able to go forth and make disciples of the world and do the work of the church. They are able to do this not because of their faith in Jesus, but because of Jesus' faithfulness in them. That is the gift of Easter—the promise that Jesus is not just with us but going before us. It is the gift called the church into being at Pentecost; it is the gift that allowed Peter to become the church's leader; it is the faith that holds us together today.

This is the Easter story, and it is still being written. As we leave the empty tomb, we are free to choose our own adventure. Where do we go? What do we do? Who do we desire to be? Do we go to Galilee to encounter the risen Christ? Do we become those who strive to bring God's kingdom to all? Do we commit to ending human suffering? Do we believe that Christ is with us, and we arpe with Christ? Do we choose to repent and believe the good news? Are we willing to deny ourselves and take up our cross and follow? Are we willing to serve one another?

On this glorious Easter Sunday, these are our choices. Let us go out and write our story.

¹ Annie Dillard, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, 58.