

Sermon: “When Easter Morning is a Hard Stop”

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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.

— *Mark 16:1-8*

It’s a hard place to stop. “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid,” Mark’s account of the empty tomb at the end of his gospel. “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” No greeting from the Risen Jesus. No Risen Jesus for that matter. Yes, the stone is rolled back. A young man dressed in white tells the women that Jesus “has been raised. He is not here.” The women, according to Mark, fled from the tomb in terror and amazement. No fear and great joy. Just fear. “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” It’s a hard place to stop.

When you read the 16th chapter of the Gospel of Mark in a Bible rather than the verses printed in the bulletin or scrolling along the screen, when you read it in a Bible, pretty much any Bible, you won’t be able to miss all kinds of brackets and footnotes and margin notes and editorial paragraph headings. Editors and translators want to make sure the reader is aware of all the scholarly work that has been done on the last chapter of Mark. Ancient manuscripts lack consensus on where the gospel actually ends. All those notes point not to one ending here in chapter 16 but three possible endings. Though the ancient manuscripts may differ, the consensus among most New Testament scholars is that the ending is here at v. 8. “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The inserted addendum to v. 9 describes the women telling Peter and the others all that had been commanded them and Jesus sending them out “from east and west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.” That doesn’t sound like Mark or even the Bible really. It sounds more like a sentence from an academic paper. Other paragraphs in the longer ending of Mark tell of snake handling and the Risen Jesus rebuking the disciples for their lack

of faith and stubbornness. Far from “I will be with you” as the Risen Jesus tells the disciples at the very end of Matthew’s gospel.

Yes, it’s a hard place to stop but it is a hard stop. Mark ends here. But what preacher wants to preach that on Easter morning? I know I never have until now. Almost forty Easter sermons in my time preaching Easter from Mark. Everyone is waiting to sing “Thine is the Glory” or “The Stife is O’er the Battle Done” or “Hallelujah Chorus,” the brass are all cued up, the timpani ready, and the preacher ends not with “Christ is Risen” but with “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Don Juel taught New Testament at Princeton Seminary, and together with his wife, Linda, was a worshipping part of Nassau Church. Much of Dr. Juel’s scholarly legacy and his gift to the church was his work on the Gospel of Mark and the ending of Mark’s gospel. He once preached a sermon on the ending of Mark and in reference to the verse that comes after the hard stop at v. 8, he said “I will confess that I have never heard those words ... read in church. And I hope I never will.” He went on to preach “people can’t leave the ending alone. It’s too unsettling. What terrified the women who went to the tomb, loaded down with spices to do their duty to the corpses, was that Jesus wasn’t there ... As the gospel ends, Jesus isn’t there. He is nowhere to be seen.”

Professor Juel argued in that sermon that Jesus’s absence at the end of the gospel is a good thing. “If we could get our hands on Jesus,” he proclaimed, “we would surely throttle the life out of him as did his contemporaries. But we can’t. Jesus is free, out of the tomb, beyond our control, and beyond death. That’s why the story is good news. He’s free so that he can make his way into our lives and actually liberate as God has planned since before the foundation of the world.” Here is the provocative trajectory of Juel’s thought: If you are going to try to keep the Risen Jesus under your thumb, if you’re going to forever link resurrection hope to a pious yearning to cling to his effort or to hear him call your name, holding on to a conception of Jesus that simply confirms expectations, assumptions defined by Easter finery, if God’s entire resurrection promise is little more than (in Dr. Juel’s words) “believing in a Jesus who has saved everyone in principle but never gets close enough to unsettle anyone in particular,” well, you may as well leave him in the tomb.¹

When you do the hard stop here in Mark, when you stop in the harder place, “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid,” maybe it is actually the closest thing to Easter morning for you and me. For when you stop right there, all you have to hold on to is the promise of God. The promise of God voiced by the young man in a white robe, “He has been raised; he is not here ... he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him, just as he told you.” The resurrection promise of God. When the resurrection promise of God in and through Jesus Christ is all you have to hold on to.

Marvin McMickle is one of the best preachers—maybe the best—I have ever listened to on a regular basis in my life. When I was doing my seminary internship

at Central Presbyterian Church up in Montclair, he was the pastor of St. Paul Baptist Church there. Many Sundays after the hour-long worship in the Presbyterian church, I would go down to St Paul's. Worship began at the same time in both churches but in the African American tradition of St. Paul's, the service wasn't even half over when I arrived. I would slip in just as the sermon was starting and listen to Dr. McMickle preach for an hour. He published an article on preaching resurrection hope and clinging to resurrection promise in *The Journal for Preachers*.² He begins by telling of the two words, "but early," spoken by "almost every African American preacher inside almost any African American church. He describes it as the beginning of a call and response between preacher and congregation that builds in volume and passion concluding with: "but early Sunday morning He got up with all power in His hands." I googled the phrase and my computer lit up. It wasn't that I didn't believe Marvin McMickle. It was that I wanted to see if it was a line from a spiritual or a gospel song. If it was, I couldn't find it. I know it is not a quote from the gospels. But I sat in front of my computer for the next hour listening to preacher after preacher young and old, weeks ago, years ago, proclaiming to the people of God: "but early . . . Sunday morning, He got up with all power in His hands." It was Easter morning right there in my office a few days ago!

The article is profound testimony to the importance and the vitality of resurrection hope in the African American church, African American preaching, African American spirituals, and African American life in every century in this land, including this one. When the preacher shouts "Somebody say early," McMickle writes, what is coming next is a witness to the promise, power, and presence of God that has sustained African Americans through 246 years of the hell and horror of slavery and the subsequent 156 years of segregation, Jim Crow, second-class citizenship, and the sin of racism and hatred that never goes away. The preacher is writing about living resurrection now. The writer is preaching about a resurrection hope now that is about so much more than claiming your bus ticket to eternity. To quote Dr. McMickle: "you need to know beyond the shadow of a doubt that the God who had the power to raise Jesus from the dead also has the power not to let death have the last word in your life. That is why for most African Americans, the resurrection of Jesus is not something to be analyzed, debated, and disputed. It is the promise, the power, and the presence of God on full display."³

Or in other words, sometimes all you have to cling to is the resurrection promise of God in and through Jesus Christ. "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." That is what the radiantly dressed young man said to the women at the tomb. In Galilee is where Jesus called the disciples. It is where he taught. It's where he ate with sinners and tax collectors. In Galilee is where he healed the sick. It's where he fed the thousands with a couple loaves and fish. It's where he told parables. It's where he drove out demons. In Galilee is where he preached the Sermon on the Mount. It's where the Pharisees

and Sadducees first came to test him. It's where he welcomed little children and challenged the rich young man by telling him to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow.

He has been raised from the dead and he is going ahead of you to Galilee. Resurrection life that comes not with trumpets blasting, or the earth shaking, or angels appearing, but with the poor being fed, and with the outcasts being served, and with boundary lines being crossed, with the first being last and the last being first, with turning the other cheek and loving one another, with the kingdom of God being taught, announced, proclaimed, served. Behold the kingdom of God is at hand. In Galilee. In Galilee, there they will see me.

The gospel that ends with a hard stop on Easter morning is closer to Easter morning for us because it is far more real. When the women got to the empty tomb, Jesus's body was not there. At the moment, all they had to go on was the promise of God. They were frightened and said nothing to anyone. Of course they were! But the hard stop Easter morning dares to hold more promise. Because the only one to finish the story is not a scribe, or a Bible editor, or the women, or the disciples, or the first-century church, or even you and me. The one to finish the story is God in and through the Risen Christ in the Galilee of our lives. God's resurrection promise in your life and mine, even in the everydayness of our lives.

Go on to Galilee where resurrection life comes not with trumpets blasting, or the earth shaking, or angels appearing, but with the poor being fed, and with the outcasts being served, and with boundary lines being crossed, with the first being last and the last being first, with turning the other cheek and loving one another, and forgiveness assured, and with the kingdom of God being taught, announced, proclaimed, served, and daring to never letting death have the last word. Go on to Galilee and you will see him there.

In the Galilee of our everyday lives we will shout Christ is Risen! Not just when Easter morning comes but also when we are clinging to the resurrection promise of God on Monday. And living the resurrection promise of God on Tuesday. And serving the resurrection promise of God on Wednesday. And seeing the resurrection promise of God on Thursday. And hoping for the resurrection promise on Friday. And resting in the resurrection promise of God on Saturday.

I don't know but you, but I have seen him in the Galilee of our lives, just as he said. Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

Notes

1. Donald H. Juel, *Shaping the Scriptural Imagination: Truth, Meaning, and the Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Shane Berg and Matthew Skinner (Baylor University Press, 2011), 181ff.
2. Marvin A. McMickle, "But Early Sunday Morning" *Journal for Preachers XLV,3*(February 2022):15-21.
3. Ibid.,20.