

Ahead of Us

Mark 16:1-8

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You cannot see them until a slender ribbon of gold appears over the hills. Then, there they are, silhouettes against the sky. Three moving figures, three women walking swiftly, three pairs of hands, each carrying something. You see determination in every step they take.

Mark tells us who they are: Mary Magdalen, a long-time follower of Jesus, Mary the mother of James, and Salomé, another female disciple. He tells us they travel in the early morning light of the first day of the week, the day after the Jewish Sabbath, which required abstinence from work or travel. Now that a new day has come, they are on their way to perform a necessary, yet heart-rending task. Their destination? A tomb in the garden of Joseph of Arimathea, a righteous Jew who had asked Pilate for the body of Jesus of Nazareth after Jesus had endured the ignominy of a tortured, gruesome death on a hill outside Jerusalem called Golgotha. His crimes? Alleged blasphemy against the religious establishment and charges of sedition by the Roman Empire.

The women's mission is to anoint the body of Jesus. Now that the sun is rising, you can see what they are carrying: a bowl, a basket, a jar. Mark reveals that the containers hold the spices needed to deal with the body, now three days in the grave. Odor would be a problem by now, as well as decay. No time to tarry.

Our narrator does not burden us with details in his spare account, but a bit of background information might be illuminating. First, Salomé and the two Marys are not Jerusalem residents. They live in the region called Galilee and had come to the capital city for the Festival of Passover along with many thousands of others who made that annual pilgrimage. To their horror, however, the festive week had ended with unimaginable loss and sorrow. They had followed Jesus throughout his ministry and believed him to be the long-awaited Messiah of the Hebrew people. His teachings had altered their lives. His love for them and for all people was like nothing they had ever experienced. It was a love and power that was not of this world, as if that love had come from another realm, indeed, from heaven itself.

On Friday, the women witnessed Jesus' death on the cross. Today, they are about the grim business of the post death ritual. They are close enough now for you to hear most of what they are saying to one another. Though Mark does not include all they must have said, I imagine they would have spoken of practical things. Women tend to do that at times of death and loss.

Who will make sure the flowers have been placed properly in the chancel at the church? Who will be at the house when guests come to pay their respects? Did you remember to put the sign-in book in the narthex? And above all else, what about the food?

I remember when the matriarch of a church I served died. After the interment, a great crowd of friends and family gathered at the home for what turned out to be a genuine post-funeral feast—congealed salad, tossed salad, potato salad, baked

beans, broccoli casseroles, cherry pie and brownies, coconut cake and lemon squares. Then, there was the chicken—stewed chicken, fried chicken, chicken made into a pie. Chicken salad, chicken nuggets, chicken baked, and chicken grilled. There must be something about chicken that soothes the grieving heart. Who presided over the buffet table and the kitchen? Who filled glasses with iced tea and put out the lemon and sugar and Splenda? The women did. It was and is the way of things. A way of loving for us. For us, a way of loving.

The women on the way to the grave had taken care of all the needed details except one. What on earth were they going to do about the stone that sealed the mouth of the tomb? They had seen Joseph use all the strength he had in his body and then come to put it in place, to keep the grave robbers out.

May we pause for a second? I want to ask a question. Where are the men? Is Peter, the upon-this-rock-I-will-build-my-church Peter anywhere around? How about James and Andrew? Surely a couple of brawny former fishermen could solve the stone problem in a heartbeat. The likelihood is that deep grief has overtaken them. Fear of harm of arrest would also have kept them away. So, it came to pass that only the three women are ascribed the role of “custodians of the crucifixion.”¹

Lest I pat the two Marys and Salomé on the back too enthusiastically, let’s remember that they, like the men who had followed Jesus, were themselves grieving deeply. Like the men, they were sure that he was dead and gone. They had been there when he had breathed his last. They had been there when he was buried in the tomb. Their plan was practical. Wipe and wrap. Rub and pour, pay respect. They brought funeral spices, not expectations.

Now, back to the problem of the stone. What are they going to do? Have you ever tried to open a combination lock without the combination? Have you ever tried to lift a king size water bed? Some things are just too much for mere mortals to do. God knows that, which is why, when the women arrive at the tomb, they see that “the stone, which was very large has already been rolled away.” Is there a message for us here? I think so. When something is impossible for human beings to accomplish, remember that nothing is impossible with God.²

That rolled away stone is surprise number one. Surprise number two is the sight of a young man dressed in white (which indicates that he is an angelic heavenly messenger) sitting inside the tomb. In other circumstances, an angel sighting might really perk a person up, but here the fellow is an unsettling sight, and the women are alarmed. “Be not alarmed,” the man says to them. “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place they had laid him.”

Those words give voice to the central claim of the Christian faith: “He has been raised.” Imagine yourself standing where the women stood when this glad news was announced. Would you have been glad, sad, incredulous, dismayed? “He has been raised.” Would you have taken the fellow’s word for it? Would the absence of Jesus’ body make a believer out of you?

In I Corinthians, a letter composed before any of the gospels were put together, the Apostle Paul maintained that “if there is no resurrection from the dead, then Christ has not been raised...and if Christ has not been raised, then my preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain....If for this life only we have hoped, we are of all people most to be pitied.”³ So far in this Easter story, though, there is not much resurrection

evidence to go on.

Remember the words of the poignant and beautiful African American spiritual “Were you there when they crucified my Lord?” I personally was not there, but there were many witnesses to the crucifixion.

“Were you there when they nailed him to the tree?” Yes, witnesses.

“Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?” Eye witnesses to the burial as well.

“Were you there when God raised him from the grave?”

No. You and I were most definitely not there, and neither was anyone else. The most important of all occurrences in heaven and on earth takes place out of human sight and without a sound heard by any human ear. One New Testament scholar puts it in this striking way: “God and God alone raised Jesus from the dead, and in doing so, God altered the rules of the “[women’s] known world.” Ours too.⁴

As does Mark, none of the other three gospel accounts tells *how* God did it. In one gospel, there are two angelic beings; in another, a pile of used grave clothes lies in the corner, but there are no descriptions of what specifically occurred.

To be human, that is to be mortal, is to lack the capacity to know what God and God only knows. I have come to believe that the *how* question is not nearly as important as the *who* question. “Resurrection was an event transacted between God the Father and God the Son, by the [life-giving] power of the Holy Spirit.”⁵ God’s doing, every bit of it.

The story is told of a seminary professor who was fond of asking his students this question: “If the town reprobate was buried in a plot in the cemetery, and the town’s most upright citizen were buried right next to him, and God came along and said, ‘Get up,’ which one would get up first?” The professor would pause and then say, “Neither, of course, for only God raises the dead.”⁶

“We know nothing about what happened,” Richard Lischer writes. “Whether the earth was shuddered or was still. Whether the night was warm or cool. We do not know what he looked like when he was no longer dead. Maybe he burst from the tomb in glory, or maybe he came out like Lazarus, blinking his eyes and unwrapping his shroud....All of which is to say that proof of Jesus’ victory over death is much less likely to be found back there in the cemetery than it is out there in the world, which according to the Easter story, is now alive with the risen Christ.”⁷

“Go tell the disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you,” said the man in white. “No need to spend any more time here. You, Peter, and the rest of the disciples will find him out there, alive in the world.” The women left the tomb, but the whole experience had rendered them speechless and terrified.

This is a story looking for a happier, more complete ending, isn’t it? Sometime in the 3rd century, CE, editors of the Scriptures did attach a wrap-it-all-up ending that was cheerier, which leaves open the question of what to do with the original ending. Consider this, that the incompleteness is an invitation to you and to me and everyone who has encountered the story across the centuries. We are called to do what the women failed to do, which was to bear witness in word and deed to the living presence of Christ the Lord. It is not just that he has risen but that he *is* risen.⁸ The Risen Lord empowers us in the present and goes ahead of us into the future.

These days, anxiety and cynicism have a way of pulling at us to give up, shut

up, and sign off, but the Risen Lord will have none of it. “Have you forgotten that I have overcome the world? Don’t let the forces of darkness get the best of you. Give the best of yourselves to my purposes of love and justice and peace.”

Remember that thin ribbon of gold that began to be visible over the dark hills outside of Jerusalem? That was the dawn of a new day, when a new set of unknown and unimaginable possibilities were released into this world.

Yes, things still appear to be in a mess, but appearances can be deceiving. In a memorable Easter sermon, William Sloan Coffin maintained that Easter is about the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power. In the end, even the power of the Roman Empire could not withstand the force of the powerless love of God, embodied in the person of Christ. God took on the identity of a vulnerable human being who emptied himself, taking on the form of a servant, and ended up enduring death, even death on a cross.⁹

The power of powerless love rolled the stone away. The power of powerless love raised Jesus from the dead, and now the Risen Lord is out there. Will we be able to see him? Of course, we will.

He will come to us, as he did to those who followed him long ago, during times of doubt and fear. When we gather with the community of faith, he will be made known in the breaking of the bread. When shadows fall, and death is close at hand, he is there, giving comfort through acts of human kindness and the reassurance of life everlasting. He will be with us in the person of a stranger, as someone who is hungry and thirsty, as the undocumented and forgotten, as one who has no home and lives on the streets, as one who lives close at hand in our homes every day.

I think of a young advertising executive who came every Tuesday night to help at the foot clinic of the night shelter our church provided. This was not a task for the faint of heart. The volunteer would fill a basin with warm, soapy water and wash the feet of the guest, who likely had walked all day in secondhand shoes. There were always bunions, corns, and sores to treat. Last came a foot massage with Vick’s Vapor Rub as the ointment, followed by the gift of a pair of clean white socks. (The whole process makes me think of the women who came to wipe and wrap, rub and pour, and pay their respects.)

One evening, I asked the well-turned-out young volunteer, “Why do you come every week?”

“I figure I have a really good chance of running into Jesus here,” he said.

Then, there was the father, who, one evening, got to horsing around with his daughter before supper. They chased one another around the dining room table, playing tag. He laughed, she giggled. When they sat down for dinner, he looked across the table at the smiling face of his daughter and said right out loud, “Surely, the Lord is in this place.”

Jesus lives today. May we go from this place with Easter eyes to see him, Easter hearts to love him, Easter ethics to serve him.

Notes

1 Serene Jones, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, (WJK Press, Louisville, KY, 2008), p.354.

2 Luke 1:37.

3 I Corinthians 15:13-14.

- 4 Gail R. O'Day, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 2, (WJK Press, Louisville, KY, 2008) p.357.
- 5 Richard Lischer, "We Have Seen the Lord," *Christian Century*, 3/17/1999, p.307.
- 6 William J. Carl III, "Something Happened," *Journal for Preachers*, 1986, p.13.
- 7 Ibid., Lischer.
- 8 David L. Bartlett, "Jesus Ahead of Us, Not Behind," *Christian Century*, 3/13/91, p. 291.
- 9 Philippians 2:5-11.