

## “RUNNING AWAY FROM EASTER”

### Mark 16:1-8

On the outskirts of a small town stands a large pecan tree just inside the cemetery fence. One day two boys collect the pecans from under the tree, then sit down in the shade of the tree, out of sight, and begin dividing the nuts into two buckets. *“One for you, one for me; one for you, one for me,”* the boys repeat. While dividing the nuts, several of them drop and roll down the hill toward the fence. Another boy rides along the road on his bicycle. As he passes the cemetery he thinks he hears voices, but he cannot see anyone. Afraid he knows what is going on, he hurries off until he meets an old man with a cane, hobbling along. *“Come quickly,”* the boy says. *“You won’t believe what I just heard! Satan and the Lord are down at the cemetery dividing up the souls, deciding who is going to heaven and who to hell.”* Curious, the old man joins the boy at the edge of the cemetery. They quietly listen and sure enough hear, *“One for you, one for me.”* The two, hoping to catch a glimpse of the Lord, grip the wrought iron bars of the fence while looking in, but they can see no one. They continue to listen intently, hearing, *“One for you, one for me. O. K., that’s all. Now let’s go get those nuts by the fence and we’ll be done.”* Afraid, the two retreat as quickly as possible. It is said the old man with the cane was in the lead for the first quarter mile until the boy on the bike passed him.

I remember as a child I found cemeteries scary places, especially after dark. They are places many persons prefer not to visit. Especially at Halloween, cemeteries are considered *“spooky”* and associated with skeletons and skulls, goblins and ghosts—and, of course, death. The scripture story we just heard is Mark’s version of the first Easter, which contains several differences from the resurrection accounts in the other three gospels. Mark names three women—Mary Magdalene, another Mary identified as the mother of James, and Salome—who before dawn make their way to the cemetery for the purpose of anointing Jesus’ body in order to give it a proper burial. The women are feeling a great deal of apprehension as they approach the tomb. Jesus’ cruel crucifixion is still very much on their minds. At least two of the women had watched as Joseph of Arimathea took the body down from the cross and they had followed him

to the grave, a cave carved out of rock. The men in their group have all gone into hiding for fear the authorities might do to them the same thing they have done to Jesus. Things are looking pretty bleak. It is a scary time!

Having observed a large stone being placed in front of the entrance to the tomb, the women are surprised to notice the stone has been moved away from the entrance. Not understanding, they cautiously enter the tomb where they unexpectedly find the body of Jesus is missing. Instead, there is a young man, presumably an angel, wearing a white robe sitting there. The Greek word used here to describe the reaction of the women is most frequently translated “alarmed” or “amazed.” Other words used to describe the women include “startled,” “astonished,” “dumbfounded,” “bewildered,” “dismayed” and “afraid.”

I find it curious how much fear was a part of the first Easter story. Sensing the distress of the three women, the young man robed in white offers some surprising news as a comfort to them. “Do not be alarmed,” he says, “you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is not here, he has been raised.” The young man goes on to suggest that while Jesus is not there, he has left a message for them. The message is that they are to tell Peter and the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee where he will meet them. Interestingly, after hearing the good news of the young man’s pronouncement, the women flee from the tomb. Mark says, “For terror and amazement has seized them, and they say nothing to anyone, for they are afraid.” Instead of doing what they had been instructed, the women run afraid from the tomb and say nothing to anyone. Why are they afraid? How can the news that Jesus is raised stir up such fear?

To answer that question, we might consider our own fears this Easter Day. Are we afraid after all the pageantry that we will return to life unchanged? Are we afraid of the possibility that God is out there and he will fail to meet us this day? After all, you can bet that if Jesus is waiting for us down-the-road in Galilee, he will ask things of us the same way he challenged this disciples. No wonder the women flee the tomb, “for terror and amazement have seized them.” We have a right to feel anxious about how meeting Jesus in Galilee will change, even alter us.

This morning I am wanting to consider Mark's account of the first Easter, the oldest record we have, which scholar's suggest ends with the eighth verse of the sixteenth chapter. Now I know, you will say to me, but in my Bible Mark goes on for another twelve verses. It is believed that the early scribes were not comfortable with this original ending, so about a hundred years later they added the extra verses—a so called short ending and a longer one. Scholars who read the original Greek language indicate there is a striking difference in writing style and use of language between the writer Mark and the alternate endings. This is evidence scribes added a post-script to make the ending more acceptable or traditional. What is the explanation of Mark ending so abruptly with an incomplete story, even mid-sentence? Did the rest of Mark's manuscript get lost, or did something traumatic happen to the author, or did Mark purposefully, for some reason, end the story on this note of fear?

What is unique to Mark's first Easter account is that because it ends so abruptly, there are no accounts of the risen Christ appearing to persons as is true in the other gospels. All we have in Mark is the account of the tomb being found empty, although the angel does explain to the terrified women that the reason the tomb is empty is because Jesus has been raised. In addition to reporting the tomb was found empty, gospel writers Matthew, Luke and John give us accounts of the appearance of the risen Christ to persons. For instance, Matthew tells of the risen Christ meeting the women on the road as they run to tell the disciples what they have found. Luke reports the risen Christ joining the two travelers who are returning to Emmaus and is revealed in the breaking of bread. John recounts Jesus gently speaking to Mary Magdalene who mistakenly thinks he is the gardener. This gospel also reports the risen Christ appearing to the disciples assembled behind locked doors on Easter evening—and again a week later when Thomas, known as the doubter, is present. John also reports the risen Christ appearing to the group of disciples along the shore of the lake where he gives them helpful instructions on where to drop their nets for a successful catch, and then fixes breakfast for them. Again, Mark's gospel alone ends without any report of the risen Christ appearing to anyone.

Yet, the Mark story does record the young man in the tomb explaining to the women that the body is not there because he has been raised, and instructing them *“to go and give this*

*message to his disciples, including Peter. 'He is going to Galilee ahead of you; there you will see him, just as he told you.'*" While in Mark we do not have accounts of Jesus appearing to persons, we do have the promise that God has gone ahead of us and is with us. Here we have an invitation to follow Jesus into the future and an assurance of his presence.

Whether the Easter story for us ends in silence or alleluias, in fear or celebration, the reality is that the resurrection changes our perspective on life, yes, gives our lives meaning. Martin Copenhaver, a United Church of Christ pastor in Massachusetts who became president of Andover Newton Seminary, wrote a play entitled, The Evening Edition of the Morning Star. In the play people look into the sky one night and see a message spelled out in the stars. The message reads, *"I really do exist."* The play traces the reactions to this message of the people who live in one small town. One person is Alexander Ferret, a novelist who indicates that the assurance that Christ is alive has made everything else in life seem trivial. For instance, he acknowledges that he used to stand in the vegetable aisle at the supermarket deciding whether to purchase cauliflower or Brussel sprouts—as if it were a life and death decision. He used to enjoy tennis, but that now seems like a meaningless activity. He has been a life-long loyal Red Sox fan who lived and died with the fortunes of the team, but now even when the team trades away the only descent second baseman they have had in years, he takes a *"who cares"* attitude. Finding his latest novel for sale at a garage sale, and it is not even a year old yet, does not even bother him. All these annoyances, foul-ups and disappointments which in the past would have bothered him now seem trivial. Alexander Ferret concludes, *"If the message in the stars is true—that Christ is with us—then life is too wonderful to worry about cauliflower or Brussel sprouts, And if the message that God exists is not true, then life is too cruel to worry about cauliflower or Brussels sprouts."* Indeed, much of what causes us anxiety, fear and concern are put into their proper perspective by the resurrection.

While Mark's original account does not specifically make any reference to the risen Christ appearing to anyone, possibly this author just said it in a different way when he promised that Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee where he will meet them. Those must have been reassuring words for persons who were feeling fearful and anxious. **Although the women**

**fearfully flee from the empty tomb, they journey into the future in the assurance the risen Christ goes before them and is with them.** Such an Easter faith enables us to overcome our fears.

J. D. Glick

April 4, 2021