

Resurrection Sunday 2024
March 31, 2024

Mark 16:1-8

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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 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. 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.’ 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. (202)

There a few things missing from the story this morning. We’ve got plenty of fear here, according to Mark, but there’s little of joy. There’s plenty to report, lots of news to speak of, but the witnesses to it all are struck silent. And then there’s Jesus; or rather, there *isn’t* Jesus. He’s missing from the story this morning, according to Mark. He’s gone ahead, just as he said, which is to say he’s not here.

He’s not in the tomb. He’s gone ahead.

Mark’s gospel is best understood if you imagine trying to stage it. We have four gospel narratives, as you might know, and each of them is little different from the rest. As for Mark, his recalling of Jesus is one of trying to keep up. Jesus is active in Mark’s remembering and evoking. Jesus acts and moves, so Mark’s telling of it is quick and to the point, a narrative version of panting to keep up. The sentences are short. The events are quickly told. The scripture passages throughout the church year when we follow Mark’s gospel will be short, sometimes very short—and yet a lot happens. So, it’s best to let your own imagination do some wondering, some visualizing, as if you were to stage it.

One of the things you’d find yourself doing a lot is filling out where Jesus is in relation to all the others. Most often he’s remembered as going ahead, the disciples or the crowds coming up behind.

Once, by contrast, Jesus is remembered as having stayed behind, to have told his disciples to go on ahead. It’s when Jesus has learned his cousin has died. John, the baptizer, Jesus’ cousin, has been killed.

Herod the king had it done. He’d been dared to do it, on whim, on a dare. That’s how power in the world works sometimes. Worldly power can play out in deadly ways because the

people with the power are often vain and capricious, whimsical and therefore dangerous—and it had John killed, which, when word of it reached Jesus, unnerved him and aggrieved him so much that he sent his disciples ahead while he stayed behind.

It's striking for its rarity, an abdication, almost.

It didn't go well. The disciples found themselves in a boat heading across the sea and suddenly swamped by a storm. Jesus could see it all from the high solitary place where he stayed behind.

That was the first and last time he sent them ahead into an unknown.

Shortly after, Jesus began teaching his disciples about what would happen to him. He would be handed over to worldly power, the chief priests and the scribes, and he would be made to suffer, and then would be killed. But on the third day, he would rise again.

At this, Peter, who was one of the disciples, rebuked Jesus, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you!" But Jesus rebuked him right back, saying, "Get behind me, for you are setting your mind on human things, not on divine things."

"Get behind me," as in, "You're setting a path and trying to get me to follow in it. But I am the one to set the path, which *you* are to follow in."

If that sounds like a power move, okay, maybe. If it sounds like someone in a power struggle trying to assert their dominance, then it likely doesn't land in our hearing all that well. We are, after all, a self-determined lot, in a self-determined culture. We don't like to be told to follow. We aim to be leaders, all. We prize the self-made. We sing lyrics to songs: "I did it my way," and "I want it this way," and "You can go your own way. (Go your own way.)" We're really into setting our own course—which has its value, even an enduring value. Christianity gave us the self, an idea in the long genealogy of human ideas. That God calls us each by name, a Christian confession, gives ground to the much more modern notion of the individual, and even the ideology of individualism.

But there's something, too, in knowing whom to follow, knowing what way to imitate in order to thrive in a world of confused and confusing values. Babies thrive when they're born into environments full of ways of living worth imitating. They thrive when given a model as to how to live, what to seek after. And though we outgrow the most immediate aspects of this ("Don't play in traffic. Do eat your broccoli. Watch me as I choose what's good, and then you do it too.") we never come fully free of the need of role models, people to show us the way into the new thing.

I imagine Jesus in that high place, having learned of his cousin John's terrible death and coming to understand that so it would be for him as well. I imagine him having sent his disciples ahead so he could stay behind. I imagine him entertaining thoughts that he might ever stay behind, lay low, keep his head down; ever send the rest ahead to take the lead to do what needs to be done amidst a world that exploits kindness and abuses goodness and kills love.

I imagine him then seeing the storm overcome them, and realizing, no, it had to be him. It had to be him.

He had to be the one to go ahead, that we might follow, that we might decide, nonetheless, come what may, to practice kindness and to trust goodness and to live love. It wouldn't guarantee our safety, just as it didn't guarantee his. But it would secure us the very world we long to be amidst: a realm of goodness and kindness and love. Live those things and you will live amidst those things.

Well, we're off the map in a lot of ways. As a society, as a whole world, we're off the map, embarking into new realms that have only barely relevant prologues. When it comes to technology, when it comes ecology, when it comes to human physiology, when it comes to human reproduction, we're off the map. Whatever has been in history as regards almost every aspect of our lives comes to nearly nothing as we embark into what's new and what largely we've made.

For all this, I think we suffer what's come to called future shock. This is a phrase Neil Postman first used in 1963. He explained it in a prologue he wrote for the book of the same name, *Future Shock*, which came out (as it happens) the year of my birth, 1970. He explained that he meant to name "the social paralysis induced by rapid technological change." As for the book, its author Alvin Toffler would fill out the framework, arguing "that the accelerated rate of technological and social change leaves people disconnected and suffering from 'shattering stress and disorientation'—future shocked."

And, yes, lots of things from 1970 seem dated at this point: leisure suits, avocado-colored kitchens, some certain middle-aged women. But this notion of being paralyzed at the shocking nature of the future seems only to have doubled down. It has us, many of us, clawing after the past, or some imagined version of the past. Our increasingly reactionary politics: we aim for "greatness" made again. We do this rather than trust that the future might hold promises worth realizing, just as it has in the past.

Does it help to imagine that Jesus has gone ahead?

Does it help to imagine that the God of time and eternity, who came to participate in time as eternity, goes ahead of us to make a way for us that we might follow in hope, in new blessing, in joy?

It does me. It helps me.

Mark's gospel always surprises me. It's an ancient text that reads post-modern, wherein the audience becomes characters, wherein the end of the story isn't found in the writing of the story but in the living out of the story. It's a parochial text that tells a story whose scope widens every go round through it. And going round through it, again, again, is very much what we're supposed to do. "Go back to Galilee," the man in the tomb told the women. "Go back to Galilee. There you'll see him."

Funny thing. You'd think the Easter story would end with Jesus, if now missing, returned to the reign of God, returned to some eternal realm. You'd think the man who is just now sitting in the tomb would say to the women who've remained faithful to this final, sorrowing point, "You're looking for Jesus. He isn't here. He was killed but he's been raised. He's gone ahead of you, to heaven. There you'll see him, once you die too." And so it is with so much pseudo-Christian imagining, that heaven is where, like Jesus, you're headed once you've died, if you've played your hand right.

But no. Here the man says something very peculiar. "You're looking for Jesus. He isn't here. He was killed but he's been raised. He's gone ahead of you, to Galilee. There you'll see him, just as he said."

Ahead of them to Galilee. Ahead of them to an ordinary village, of the sort you'd find almost anywhere, but which has this one notable quality: that here is where it began for so many of them. The disciples, most of them Galileans, were first called when they were in Galilee, and first witnessed what God looks like in the world when they were in Galilee, what the reign of God looks like when arrived in the world—healing for the sick, restoration for the damaged, uplifting for the poor and downtrodden of the earth, a square facing off against death, its powers and terrors, and a walking right though. So, they should go back to where it began for them, and they should follow again, follow again, make grooves in the world, a well-worn path, God-marked grooves in the world by which the world might be evermore filled with the gracious ways of God.

And not just them, by the way. It's not just those earliest disciples that should trust they'd find Jesus, now raised, at loose once again in the world, God's reign on the loose once again in the world. It's us, too. We should trust that, too. We're the audience and we're the players, the ones

who bring the story to its end by living amidst the reign of God now and into time to come—a living end!

The resurrection calls us into the world. The resurrection calls us from the future. We have lots of reasons to be unnerved by what's to come. Forecasts are daunting. But this isn't only because things are unusually dire. It's also because we've become all the better at forecasting—which is itself good because it gives us the chance to change course when that's wise.

But one thing forecasting fails to take into account is the unexpected. And the unexpected is *always* happening, the most miraculous ordinary thing you can imagine.

Hannah Arendt writes of it in these terms, for what that's worth, in her book *The Human Condition*. She observes, “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that [people] are capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from [us], that [we are] able to perform what is infinitely improbable.”

Easter calls us to this improbable action, this unexpected hope. The Resurrection of Jesus awakens us once again to the irrepressible insistence that things aren't so concluded as all that. There's more. There's more, and it is good. So go back to where that suspicion first took hold in you, for there you will see him.

You came here looking for him?

Well, he isn't here. He's gone ahead. But I'll be following in that way. Join in if you like.

Thanks be to God.