

Amazement and Terror Mark 16:1-8

This week I noticed a very colorful and highly designed sign outside a church that said “Extreme Easter” This Sunday. Undoubtedly they purchased this from one of many companies who package graphic/music and content guaranteed to draw a crowd on Sunday morning. Hopefully it worked for them, but I have to confess I couldn’t get images of Angels jumping over rolled away stones on BMX bikes out of my head. The phrase “extreme Easter” seems like non-sense to me. Because Easter – this day when we celebrate the Resurrection of the Christ, cannot be made any more, because Easter is the ultimate extreme of Love and Life overcoming cruelty and death. The women who come to the tomb in the Gospel of Mark experienced the most extreme of emotions.. The Gospel tells us the women experience terror and amazement. You can get no more extreme than these two emotions which are at opposite ends of the scale of human emotion. Terror is “a very strong feeling of fear” according to Merriam-Webster. It is the word we use for our worst nightmares, and we label those who try to cause us horrific and violent harm – terrorists. Terror – or extreme fear is one of the deepest and difficult of our emotions.

While the dictionary tells us that amazement is “a feeling of being very surprised,” the women at the tomb are not so much very surprised as they are in extreme awe, that the impossible seems to have happened. That Jesus, who was tortured, ridiculed and crucified was able to get up out of the grave. This is what causes amazement – that He Is Risen. Though every human device of terror was used against him, physical torture and execution, emotional ridicule and rejection by his own and denial and even betrayal by those closest to him... Jesus is not in the tomb.

In the earliest versions we have of the Gospel of Mark, today’s reading is the end. Later versions add Mary Magdalene and other appearances of Jesus, but the earliest manuscripts stop with the empty tomb and terror and amazement. We know that is not the end of the story, but what does it mean that Mark’s Gospel ends so abruptly?

To get at that, let’s look at the other Gospels’ accounts of that first Easter. In the

Gospel according to Matthew the women watch as a single angel in white raiment rolls away the stone which terrifies the guards so much they freeze. And the Angel tells the women that Jesus is risen and will meet the disciples in Galilee. The women who the writer says experience fear and great joy, run and tell the disciples and on the way, they meet Jesus who says “don’t be afraid, tell my brethren to Galilee and there they will see me.” The Soldiers are bribed to say the disciples took Jesus’ body and then Jesus meets the 11 on a mountain in Galilee where it says some doubt, Jesus gives them the great commandment to make disciples of all nations and promises he will be with them always.

The Gospel according to Luke tells us two men in dazzling appearance say to the women, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Remember how he told you that the Son of man must be crucified on the third day rise?” And the women remember, but the male disciples did not believe them at first, but dismiss them as being hysterical. but two disciples on the road to Emmaus, encounter someone who is revealed as Jesus when he prays over the bread with them at the evening and then suddenly vanishes from their sight. These two return to Jerusalem where they hear that Jesus has appeared to Simon and then Jesus appears in the midst of them and he shows them his wounds and eats something and he reminds them of scriptural evidence of the Messiah needing to suffer, die and rise on the third day.” Jesus tells them to stay in Jerusalem until they are clothed with power from on high.” an allusion to Pentecost and he ascends into Heaven in front of them from the Mount of Olives.

Finally The Gospel according to John – the last written, has Mary Magdalene come alone to find the stone rolled away, she returns to the disciples and Simon Peter and John have a foot race to the tomb. They go in and find the tomb empty and the grave clothes folded but then they leave. Mary stays weeping and then she sees two angels where Jesus body should be. They ask her, “Woman why do you weep?” to which she replies, “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” Then Mary hears someone behind her who says, “Woman why do you

weep.. Whom are you looking for?" Mary thinks he is a gardener who has moved Jesus' body until he calls her by name, she knows it is Jesus, and he tells her not to touch him until after he ascends to the Father. She goes back to tell the disciples and Jesus appears in the middle of their locked room and says "peace unto you" and he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." But Thomas was not with the disciples that day and he did not believe, so Jesus comes a week later when they are gathered in the same room so Thomas too can see and feel his wounds, but Jesus also says, "blessed are those who have not seen yet come to believe." The disciples see Jesus a third time when they are on the Sea of Galilee going fishing. They seem to be discouraged and out of sorts and Simon Peter says, "I am going fishing" and the other disciples join him. Their discouragement deepens as they fish all night and get nothing, but in the morning this armchair fisherperson from the shore says, "put the net on the other side of the boat.." which is pretty ridiculous, and just to humor him they do it and suddenly they have a net full and they begin to wonder if it is Jesus, so they eat with him and he begins to instruct them on their mission, telling Peter to "feed my sheep."

These four accounts of the first Easter have very different details. In John and Luke, Jesus appears many times, and in both he even appears disguised once - on the Road to Emmaus and on the Sea of Galilee., John says Jesus appears in both Jerusalem and Galilee, Luke only in greater Jerusalem. Matthew has only one appearance of Jesus, and that is in Galilee at an unnamed mountain - where it says some still doubted. And then there is Mark, with only an empty tomb and terror and amazement.

What does Mark's account give us as people of faith? Well, certainly it comforts those who struggle with how miracles are presented in the scriptures. Mark's Easter assures us that the empty tomb can be a touchstone for an Easter Faith. For some John's story of Mary Magdalene walking alone in the Garden talking to the Risen Jesus stirs their hearts, for others Matthew's account of Jesus' single appearance in Galilee that was so ethereal that some of the disciples still doubted may ring true. Some love the mysterious traveler on the Road to Emmaus which teaches us that we can see the risen

Christ in the breaking of the bread – a beautiful reminder as we approach the communion table today.

But Mark only gives us the empty tomb and the range of human emotions from terror to amazement. We know something happened that Easter. We know that because the disciples were just regular working men. They had been so confused that last week. And so quick to run away and Peter, the one appointed leader, even denies knowing Jesus. Yet somehow, they became the ones who turned the world upside down. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, The Spirit of Life grabbed them and turned them into the givers of Good News. Death is no longer the victor, We have nothing to fear for God loved us so much that Christ came into the world, and suffered everything to show us that love wins. Love wins, and death will never have the final victory.

The Gospel of Mark challenges us this day with how we will live our life. Like the women at the tomb we have a choice. Will we see life as an amazing gift from God full of miraculous wonder each and every day, or will we be tempted by the world's message that life is a terrifying experience full of traps and danger. That the power of oppression and hate are too great and maybe even God is watching for us to trip up in order to punish us..

We do not have to know in our heads what happened that first Easter. In fact, we can't. But the question is, how will we live our lives differently because of Easter, because of that empty tomb. It is mystery for sure. It might be easier to just watch the television version of Easter and accept it all as the way it was... like the Old Walter Cronkite programs, but that is not what the Gospel's give us... They give us a mysterious wonder like a four sided crystal that looks different depending how you look at it. And the real question of Easter is not what you believe, but how it changes the way you live. Are you willing to be filled with the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Love and forgiveness and wholeness and healing. It is not about our heads, but about our hearts.