

Sermon for Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Mark 16:1-8

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Elementary and middle school science fairs are filled with projects where students use a procedure called the scientific method to answer a question about something they have observed in the world. Many of us were taught this method in school and because of this educational grounding we approach pretty much everything with a scientific eye even now as adults.

We are faced with a mighty big challenge however when it comes to stories of faith; especially the story of Jesus' resurrection. Using the scientific method isn't going to hold up when we talk about Jesus' resurrection. The best we can do is consider this amazing and challenging story from the perspective of the eyewitnesses: and in particular, the women.

Here's what the gospel of Mark reports:

- A centurion was witness to Jesus' death.
- Women followers of Jesus were looking on "from a distance" and they saw Jesus die.
- Joseph of Arimathea, recognizing that Jesus was dead, asked for Jesus' body. Pilate confirmed from the centurion that he was dead and granted Joseph permission to take the body.
- Joseph put the body in a tomb and rolled a stone against the door.
- Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus were witnesses to Jesus' burial.

The gospel of Mark provides us with several different human witnesses testifying that Jesus is absolutely, and without question dead. The women know this. The centurion knows this. Joseph of Arimathea knows this. Pilate knows this. We assume that someone from this list reported Jesus' death to the 12 disciples. Since those disciples were not present at his death, they had to believe the reports that they received. Like those first disciples we have a choice to make about Jesus' death: either believe these eye witness accounts *or not*.

Let's turn our attention specifically to the women as witnesses. This is what they know. 1. That Jesus is dead and buried. 2. Where

the tomb is located. 3. That the opening has been closed with a stone.

But there is one more thing that the women know: that there was no time to prepare the body for burial. So to honor this man that they cared about they make plans to go to the tomb early on the first day of the week and anoint his body.

Because they know that tomb was sealed with a big stone the women wonder how they are going to move that rock. Mark the gospel writer is a masterful storyteller. He implies by the repetition of the detail about the stone that this is the end of Jesus' story. That stone has sealed the tomb. There will be nothing more to tell. Sure, maybe the women will anoint his body; but that is still the end of the story. Jesus' life is over. It is finished.

Have you ever watched a movie with a surprise ending? Clever story tellers will lead us in one direction and then turn the plot upside down with a totally unexpected ending. I find that unexpected ending delightful. That's what Mark is doing here. He has convinced us through multiple means that Jesus is dead and buried. That the story is over except for the wrapping up of a few details. It is those details that lead us to the surprise, the unexpected plot twist, that Mark has been waiting to spring on us.

The detail to be wrapped up in this story is anointing Jesus' body for burial. The women are determined that they are going to perform this duty. They are so focused on the task that they don't even look up until they get close to the tomb. That's when they discover that the stone had already been rolled away. Our first hint that something remarkable has occurred.

The second hint occurs when the women enter the tomb and see a young man who is dressed in white. While the true identity of the young man is never clearly told to us (he might be an angel or maybe not) he does "know things." He says, "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." 56 words. 56 words that change the world for the women (*Pause*) and for us. 56 words that provide us with the totally unexpected ending.

"You're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here." Jesus' story is not over. Jesus is alive! AND Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee where you will see him.

There is no resurrected Jesus present in this scene or in this gospel. There are no eyewitness accounts of meeting him alive and in his resurrected body. Unlike the multiple eyewitnesses testifying that he is dead, there are no eyewitnesses testifying that he is alive. From Mark's point of view the followers of Jesus whether male or female have to go look for him. They have to go to Galilee. All that they have is the statement, "you will see Jesus there."

They have to trust this messenger. They have to have faith that his message is accurate. And that's true for us as well. What we have today is not scientific method. What we have are eye witness accounts that have been passed down to us; generation by generation, year by year to the present. And like those first disciples we have a choice to make: either believe the messenger *or not*.

You are here because you have made a choice to believe the messenger. You have made the choice to believe that Jesus is alive. You have chosen to believe that he was raised from the dead. You have chosen to trust; to believe. Choosing to trust or believe is called faith.

The thing about faith is that it asks something of you. On second thought, it's more than just asking, it demands something of you. It insists, frequently, that you believe in something that you didn't observe in person. It demands that you trust in Jesus as God's Son even though you cannot see or hear or touch him with your physical body. Faith asks something of you and strains the boundaries of belief. But that's okay. We all find ourselves stretching our faith. You know the old adage about muscles: if you don't use them you lose them. The same is true for faith: you build your faith muscle by using it; by stretching it; by taking faith risks even when you have little or nothing to go on. By going to Galilee....

In the gospel of Mark one young man tells some women that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. The challenge becomes whether or not they are willing to go. It's a long journey from Jerusalem to Galilee. There are no guarantees that they will even arrive there safely. Galilee's a big enough place that you might have trouble locating him. What if they go there and they cannot find him?

The gospel of Mark doesn't give the women or any of the disciples or us any confirmations that Jesus is alive through personal encounters with the risen Lord. The disciples will have to go to Galilee. And so will we. We will have to go in order to get the

confirmation we seek. We will have to believe, to trust, to have faith that when we step out and arrive in Galilee we will see Jesus.

This Easter story calls for a response that anticipates evidence but doesn't actually provide it. It challenges us to respond to something that we believe to be true, but for which there is no physical evidence. No my friends, the scientific method isn't going to solve this challenge. Faith is. Faith in God. Faith in Jesus. Faith in the promise of the resurrection. Jesus is alive! He is risen! Amen.