

Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV)

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.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

A few days ago, on Maundy Thursday, some of the men of the congregation put on a play, a re-enactment of the first Lord's Supper. The guys did a wonderful job and I hope we do it again next year, or maybe sooner. The play invites us into the minds of the apostles – Jesus has just told them that one of them would betray him and each of them is asking himself, "Is it I? Will I betray the Lord?" And as I watched, the play began to feel like a murder mystery, something out of Agatha Christie, like "Murder on the Orient Express." "Did I do it? Am I the killer?" Now, we know who did it, don't we? When we say during communion, "On the night in which he was betrayed ..." we know who did the betraying, right? But as I listened to the play, I wasn't so certain anymore. I'll come back to this in a minute.

Today's Gospel reading also presents us with a mystery, if we listen carefully. Since this is the year of Mark, we take the Easter

Gospel reading from St. Mark's Gospel. But in Saint Mark's Gospel, this story that is so familiar seems a little strange. The women, the two Marys and Salome, come to the tomb, wondering how they are going to move the stone away. It's a big stone and they are three women, three practical women who are here to do a practical thing, anoint the body of their murdered Lord, and they have a practical question – how are we going to move the stone?

But all of a sudden, their practical question is replaced by a mystery – the stone has already been moved and while there is a young man in the tomb, he is alive and he isn't Jesus. But while that is a mystery in itself, there is more. The young man tells them that "Jesus has been raised, he is not here." The young man tells them that "Jesus is going ahead of you, to Galilee" and they would see him there, just as he had promised. And as if that isn't mysterious enough, the women run out of the tomb, and Mark tells us that "terror and amazement had seized them." And so, the reading concludes, "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Most scholars think that this is the original ending of Mark's Gospel, and if that is so, it is a strange and abrupt one. "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The Greek is even more abrupt. The Gospel appears to end in mid-sentence – the literal translation is "They said nothing to anyone – they were afraid for ..." They were afraid, because ... And this raised a question in my mind for the first time – why were they afraid? Mark tells us that "Terror and amazement had seized them." But why?

They had come to the tomb expecting to find a dead man – now that, to me, would have been scary, don't you think? But no, they have found a nice, articulate young man who is telling them good news – that their Lord, whose lifeless body they expected to find, their Lord is not dead. He is alive and has gone ahead of them, back home to Galilee.

Why might they be afraid, *terrified* as the text tells us? Maybe they were afraid because death was something they could handle, death was what they expected, death was what, in their hearts, they knew would happen to this man who so clearly did not fit in, did not go along, did not get along with the Romans and the high priests. What else could anyone have expected? Women, more than anyone else, knew disappointment, knew the death of children and loved ones, the death of hope, death in the midst of life. The big deaths and the little deaths of failed dreams, frustrated plans, disappointment and resentment and despair. As they had walked to the tomb, they had steeled themselves to this, to the mourning, to the weeping, to the final catastrophic death of hope. They were ready for that.

What they weren't ready for was *life*. What they weren't ready for was the mystery of life in the midst of death. What they weren't ready for is that God would raise up this good man, beyond the grave, beyond the priests, beyond the Romans, that hope was not gone but just beginning, that their lives were not over, but just getting started. That their plans just to go home and sink back into the life they'd left, those plans were tossed into a cocked hat. They would be going home, all right, back to Galilee, but their Lord would get there ahead of them, and they were terrified.

And it occurs to me that this mystery is very like the mystery that the men re-enacted on Maundy Thursday. We listened to them asking, "Is it I? Will I betray my Lord?" The mystery was a "who-done-it," who betrayed Jesus? We were confident we knew the answer, that it was Judas, but we were wrong. *Each* of the apostles betrayed his Lord. At the crucial moment, each of them fled, each of them was afraid, was terrified, too, just like the women. Each of them denied their Lord. "Is it I?" The answer is uniformly, "Yes, it was you."

The disciples would probably be terrified when they heard that their Lord was not dead, was instead alive, that God had raised him to new life and he would meet them in Galilee. What would he say to

them? What would he *do* to them? Would he be angry, would he be disappointed? How could they face him?

And perhaps that is why the young man in the tomb tells the women, “tell his disciples, tell Peter especially” that it is all right. Come back, Peter, all is forgiven. You will still be the rock of the church, you apostles will still be my witnesses, even to the ends of the earth.

After all, even though Mark’s Gospel may seem to end with the ominous note that the women told nothing to anyone, we know that they did. They told Peter, they told the apostles, eventually they told everyone who would listen and some who did not want to listen, some who still don’t want to listen, that this Jesus who was dead is alive, that this Messiah who seemed defeated was victorious, that this God who seemed powerless is instead the source of all true power. This risen Christ goes ahead of us to our Galilee, where we need him, wherever we need him, he is there. This Gospel that seems to end so strangely, in fact doesn’t end at all, has not ended yet. The first words of Mark’s Gospel tell us that this is the “Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the son of God.” The Beginning.

So the mystery of Easter, the mystery of these Easter stories, is never really solved. The men are afraid that they are betrayers of Jesus and they are right, they did betray him. The women are terrified that he lives, and they are right, he does live. But they need not be afraid. He lives, and he forgives them their betrayals and he forgives us our betrayals. He knows us, clear through and he loves us in spite of all that. He goes ahead of us, always ahead of us, always with us, the Good News, the *best news* of Mark’s never-ending Gospel, and so we can say today and every day with wonder and terror and hope, “He is Risen.” He is Risen, indeed. Alleluia. Amen.