

B Easter 1 3.31.24

Mark 16:1-8

Focus Statement: Jesus is already where we are going.

I was in college when Mel Gibson's *Passion of the Christ* movie came out. I bring this up because there's one thing about it I remember distinctly. I watched it with a group of friends, all devout Catholics, one night a few weeks after Easter. If you haven't seen it, or if you have and it's been years, it's a long movie, with the bulk of the action being this graphic, agonizing, depiction of Christ's passion. One of the criticisms of it is how it attempts to mash the four Gospel accounts together into one, with a heavy emphasis on the brutality. Anyway, the film ends with Jesus' mother and closest disciples gathered at the foot of the cross holding his bloody, broken body across their laps. Mary leans in to kiss her son's face, her tears mingling with his blood staining her cheeks, and then stares into the camera with blank eyes as the scene goes dark. Then there is the sound of a stone rolling away, and a hint of light breaks in, the scene now in a roughhewn cave. Light sneaks around the cave revealing a linen shroud collapsing in on itself as if the body below it is vanishing as the light hits it. The camera continues to move to reveal a side profile of Jesus, no longer bloody, seated before the now empty shroud. As he stands to walk out of the scene, the camera catches the nail hole still visible through his hand. The scene fades to black again, the music fades, and my friends and I sat, wordless and motionless, in the darkened theater, not sure what to make of the weight of all we had just witnessed. Until my friend Ben, in his sarcastic way, piped up, "well that film leaves you waiting for the sequel." And we laughed because Ben was right. The ending left us wanting more, left us knowing there had to be more. We all knew the passion narrative, it was one Lutheran and a bunch of Catholics, we'd all spent our lives at Good Friday worships. But we also knew the story didn't end

there. Mel Gibson's depiction left us without the women standing in fear of the angel, without Jesus calling Mary's name, without his appearance to the disciples in the upper room, the road to Emmaus, the breakfast on the beach, all the rich, full post-resurrection appearances that we will be reading throughout these next weeks of the Easter season.

I mentioned earlier, but one criticism of Mel Gibson's portrayal of the Passion is how instead of telling one Gospel's version, it tries to weave them all together, which is clunky at best. But the ending he chose, it's Mark's. "And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Like my friends and I in the theater, when I read the end of our Gospel reading this morning, you might have found yourself being like, wait, what comes next? There has to be more. It can't end like that.

It can't end like that, and we know it doesn't. Not just because the other Gospels have stories of post-resurrection, but because we know. The women told someone, because whoever they told told someone else, and those people told people, and on down the line, until here we gather some two-thousand years later, recounting the story of the young man and the empty tomb. We know the story didn't end with fear and silence, because we know the story.

So if the ending is not the ending, why does Mark leave us hanging? What is the point of this abrupt ending? Remember what the Gospels do. They tell us a story too big for words by highlighting different parts of Christ's life. Their goal, Luke's claims of an "orderly account" notwithstanding, is to help us start to know the unknowable. To give us pieces of

the love of a God who is beyond our understanding, a love that this week we have seen declared so openly through the cross. So then, what is it about Mark's ending that tells us something particular about Jesus and his love for us?

Our reading opened this morning, "when the sabbath was over...very early on the first day of the week." This introduction connects us to Friday, which ended "when evening had come... [on] the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the sabbath." So we know this is not a new story Mark is opening, it is the continuation of the previous one. We also have the women. Chapter fifteen ended with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph watching where Christ's body was laid. Now in the early light of the morning, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, return to the tomb to finish the heavy work of preparing Christ's body for burial. They know where he was laid, and they know his body was not properly prepared, because they stood there two nights prior and watched it happen. What they did not know was any of the predictions Jesus had made to the disciples about his death and resurrection. Three times in the Gospel, Jesus told his disciples about how he would undergo suffering, die, and after three days rise again. Then he would tell them not to tell anyone until after he had risen from the dead. And his disciples clearly kept that request, because these three women, Jesus' closest family, the three who came after everyone else had fallen away to prepare his body for burial, have no idea that he could rise from the dead. The disciples were told, and they still didn't understand, these women were walking in unknowing. All they knew was what we all know, that when people die and are buried in a tomb for three days, their bodies are still there when you return.

So we can imagine their surprise, and terror, when instead of Jesus' body, they find a young man dressed in white sitting in his place. Between the white garments, the unlikely appearance, and the call to not be afraid, Mark gives us all the cues that this guy is an angel. First he gave them confirmation, you are not in the wrong place. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, here is the place they laid him." Then he went on, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." Guys, this is one of my favorite parts of Mark's resurrection account, so I want to linger here for a moment. Because see what Mark is doing here for the women, see what's being highlighted here. "He is going ahead of you." What Mark is making abundantly clear for the women, the disciples, and for us, is that so present with us is Jesus that he's not where we are, he's where we're going. For Mark, Jesus isn't so much walking alongside of us as he is already in the middle of whatever we are facing. Galilee was the site of Jesus' mission, the mission the disciples are already being called back to. And here this angel proclaims, Jesus is already there. What Mark's resurrection account declares to us is that whatever we go through, Jesus goes there first. He died so that when we too die, we know that we die with Christ. He rose from the dead so that we too can rise to new life in him. He went ahead of the disciples into the mission field so that when they got into the work, they would find him already there. Dear people of God, the thing that Mark's account of the resurrection makes clear to us is that there is no where we go, no where we can go, where we will not find Jesus already there waiting for us. He is not just alongside us in our journey, he is in front, already making a way for us to

move forward in him. There is nothing in life you face where Christ will not be, because Christ is already there.

This is incredibly strong and powerful and good and hopeful news. And the women, my translation, freak out. From the text itself, "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." Which, let's be real, is the exact logical response when an angel dressed in white shows up and tells you that someone you love, someone you personally watched die and be buried, is alive and has traveled somewhere without you. This is a crazy, frightening statement. The dead are supposed to stay dead. That is both how it actually works and, when that's not how it works, the premise to like every classic horror story. Jesus should not be alive again; the women knew that. So either something terrifying had happened or some super creepy guy in a tomb is pulling one over on them. They can be forgiven for not believing this sketchy account.

They can be forgiven, and because they can be forgiven, we too can be forgiven when we forget the power of Christ's resurrection in our lives. That's the other thing this ending does for us. It reminds us that there are no perfect disciples, there are no heroes among Jesus' followers. The horror and hostility that Jesus faced reduced even his closest supporters, even these women, to flight and fearful silence. And yet, and yet because we know, because we stand here some two thousand years later recounting this story and remembering what it means, because we know, we know that ours is a God who brings faith out of just such weakness, fear, and failure. Jesus didn't come back after the resurrection to

call some new group of superdisciples who would get it. Jesus accomplished God's will for salvation through his suffering, death, and resurrection, and these fleeing, frightened, disciples are the ones who will share that earth-changing good news.

Dear people of God, Mark's account proclaims for us that there is room for us in this resurrection story. However imperfect our faith, however many times we remain silent when we should speak out, when we let fear hold us captive, when we act in ways that are counter to who God has made us to be, this resurrection narrative reminds us, proclaims to us, that Christ died for us, rose again for us, because dying and rising is who Christ is, and we are drawn into the promise. This good news is for you. This message is for you. You can leave here today afraid, doubting, joyful, unsure, happy and sad and any emotion under the sun, and none of them will have any affect on this one promise. That Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.