

Sermon for Mount Macedon and Riddells Creek

12th of April, 2009

Mark 16:1-8

Did you feel there was something missing in today's gospel reading? Were you expecting Eric/John to read a little further on? Surely the story can't end with: "So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." It's no great shout of joy and triumph. The other gospels all end with tales of meetings between the risen Jesus and the disciples: the great commissioning on the mountain in the gospel according to Matthew; the meeting on the road to Emmaus in the gospel according to Luke; the miraculous catch of fish and breakfast on the beach in the gospel according to John. Mark doesn't tell us of any such meetings. This abrupt conclusion has been such a problem for the church that scribes later added two further endings to the gospel: and they're in most versions of the Bible: called the shorter ending and the longer ending of Mark. But they aren't the way Mark originally ended his gospel, and we need to ask why. Why does the gospel according to Mark end with a whimper rather than a bang?

The story Mark tells does have its astounding and exciting moments. Jesus died on the cross, crying out: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" as darkness fell over the whole land. Now, the sun rises, and three women go to the tomb. Between them, these women had followed and served Jesus, had watched from a distance as he was crucified, and had seen where he was buried. Unable to care for his body on the Sabbath, they now bring spices to anoint him. After the body has been so long in the tomb the spices probably aren't going to do much to ameliorate the smell of decay, but the women who have served Jesus throughout his ministry want to continue to serve him after his death. They're more loyal than the male disciples, who fled and betrayed Jesus, but like the men these women don't seem to have believed Jesus' predictions of his death *and* resurrection. They're prepared to care for a dead body, not be confronted by new life.

As they walk, they wonder about the stone that had been rolled over the entrance of the tomb, a stone too large for three women to move by themselves. But as they arrive at the tomb they find that the stone had already been rolled back. By whom? Entering the tomb, they find a young man, a heavenly messenger, who tells them that Jesus has been raised. Again, by whom? Another actor has entered the drama, someone who rolls away stones and raises the dead. On the cross Jesus cried out his abandonment by God. Now we learn that God did not abandon him. The stone has been rolled away and Jesus has been raised; he is not here. God has taken over this story of betrayal and abandonment and death, intervening to change the ending.

The story is astounding. But it's not joyful and triumphant. The women are given a message to pass on to the other disciples. We're told that because of their fear, they didn't say anything to anyone. All the way through, when the twelve, the male disciples, were getting it wrong, the women had been getting it right. They had served Jesus; followed him; witnessed his death when the other disciples deserted him; come to anoint his dead body when Peter and the others were nowhere to be seen. But, now, finally, they too fail. No one, neither the twelve nor the women, succeeds in their discipleship. But that doesn't seem to matter. Human beings may fail, all of us *do* fail, but God doesn't. Discipleship isn't earned by success. The message of the young man to the women is that the disciples are to meet Jesus in Galilee. Despite their failure, they are still disciples. And despite the women's fear and flight and silence, the story was told. Mark was writing for a believing community, and his gospel has been read by believers for thousands of years. The gospel itself doesn't tell us that the women overcame their fear and passed on the young man's message. It doesn't tell us that the disciples went to Galilee and met the risen Christ. But it doesn't need to. These things must have happened, or the gospel would never have been written. The story doesn't end with the end of the written gospel. The story continues in the lives of everyone who reads it.

Who are the disciples that the young man refers to when he says: “tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” James and John and the rest of the twelve, obviously. Peter, mentioned by name, with the suggestion that this means he has been forgiven for his betrayal in the courtyard of the high priest. The rest of the women who had provided for Jesus in Galilee and followed him to Jerusalem. Joseph of Arimathea, who provided the tomb in which Jesus’ body was laid. All of these, and more, were the disciples that the young man told the women to tell. But it doesn’t end there. We are Jesus’ disciples too. We, too, are given the message that Jesus is going ahead of us, that we will see him in the future, just as he told us.

In John’s gospel Thomas is told: blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. At the end of Mark’s gospel, no one has seen the resurrected Jesus. The women are in the same place that we are. We have been told that Jesus has been raised, but we have not seen the resurrected Jesus ourselves. We are asked to have faith, we are not offered proof. And the same was true for the women, who saw an empty tomb, and presumably for Peter and the disciples, when the women passed on the young man’s message. That’s where the gospel ends, reminding us that our confession of faith is that Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ *will come again*. Christ’s coming again; the meeting with the risen Christ, is a promise for the future, for these disciples and for us.

Mark’s story of Jesus has a beginning, but it doesn’t have an end. It just keeps going, from one life to another, touching and transforming us. The risen Christ was not at the tomb but going ahead of his friends. He was going to meet them in Galilee, in their home town, the place where their story of discipleship started, in the midst of their ordinary life. That’s where we see him today: both going ahead of us and present in our daily life. Where charity and love prevail over injustice and violence; where compassion and hope replace cynicism and despair; where peace and love take root in lives that are empty and lost; where human beings know joy and justice, dignity and delight: there is the risen Christ, beckoning to us. Thanks be to God. Amen.