

**“Not the final word. . .”**

Mark 16:1-8

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**When the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that going, they might anoint him. And very early in the morning of the first day of the week, they come to the tomb, before the sun had risen. And they were saying to themselves, "Who will for us roll away the stone from the door of the tomb?" And looking up they see that the stone was rolled away, for it was very large. And going into the tomb, they saw a young man seated on the right, dressed in a white robe; and they were distressed. But he says to them, "Do not be distressed; you seek Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter "He is going before you in Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." And going outside, they fled from the tomb, for trembling and amazement had taken hold of them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.**

It is early morning, the pre-dawn glow of pink in the sky. Two trees, still leafless, are starkly silhouetted against the glowing pastel sky. The two trees create a frame around three figures seen at a distance on the crest of a hill. Who are they, these three? And what are they doing at such an early hour?

Perhaps they are three household employees, on their way to work, hurrying in the chill of the early morning lest they be late. What are they thinking? Is there conversation between them? Or are they silent, tired of the same old routine, wondering what surprises will come this day. . .

Upon closer look we see these are three women, their features indistinguishable, their expressions shadowed. Clearly three female figures, though, their skirts draped around their hips. Some type of head covering over their hair.

Three sisters, perhaps. Hurrying to see to their mother, suddenly taken ill in the night. Their faces lined with worry. Their steps quick, urgent, wondering what they can do to help, wanting to be near, useful in some way. . .

This image of three women in the early predawn is not just a flight of fancy. It is an actual painting. The title of the painting comes into view outside the periphery of the frame.

“Easter Morning,” it’s called.

And so it is the women, of course. Always the women. It is women who first knew of the Resurrection. All four gospels tell us so. In the gospel of Mark, it is three women. It would have been three on the crest of that barren hill on that desolate morning. On that morning in which only Death seemed to reign. On that morning where nothing stirred---not a leaf, not a bird, not a sound, except the sound of tears sliding down weary faces. The sound of hearts beating a slow rhythm, a drumbeat in step with feet. . .

*All is lost, how can this be, we hoped for so much, what will we see?*

The three women. On their way to the body, to anoint it, to pay their respects, to put it to rest in proper fashion. They whisper to one another, “how will we possibly move that huge stone?” They may be going all that way for nothing, if they cannot open the grave.

What they find is not what they expected. They find, not a blocked entrance, but a stone rolled away. They find not a body, but an empty tomb. They find, not the crucified Christ, but a very alive young man. A young man who seems to be able to read their minds. “You are looking for Jesus. He is not here. He has been raised.” They take off like a shot, filled with fear and awe.

“And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” With these words, we come to the abrupt ending of the gospel of Mark. It is thought that the ‘rest of Mark’---the part after verse 8---was added by later editors of the Gospel sometime in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It was added because the editors couldn’t believe verse 8 was Mark’s final word. Yet today most scholars say Mark’s original gospel leaves you hanging at verse 8. We don’t know if Mark intended to write more. We don’t know if part of the manuscript was torn off or lost. We don’t know. We will never know. But we do know this is not the end of the gospel. Not the end of the good news. Not the final word.

The gospel of Mark doesn’t have a proper ending. But then again, neither does Easter. As my mentor Fred Craddock says, “Is this any way to run a resurrection?” Is it enough to know there was astonishment, fear, trembling, and silence? And this account of fear and trembling isn’t only in Mark. As different as they are in recounting the Easter story, there is one thing all four gospels agree on. One element in common,

without a doubt. When humans encounter the Risen Christ there is fear, confusion, and yes, even doubt.

Easter morning. It is three women cresting a hill. It is a stone rolled away. "He is not here." It is three women, scared out of their wits by what's been set loose in those words. What it could mean. What it will mean. Who ever could have imagined how many political movements, how many nations, how many actions, how many peoples would be stirred by those words? Who ever could have imagined how many lives upset, how many plans derailed, how many minds disturbed? By what's been set loose.

Easter morning. It is not the final word. Oh no, no, no. Not by a long shot. It is not the end of the story, but only the beginning. You see, the gospel of Mark ends by saying those women were silent. But they couldn't have been silent for very long. . .

Easter is a chorus of witness beyond silence. Easter is a collective vision freed from the past. Easter is the unnerving reality of a Savior set loose in the world. Easter is not an explanation, it is an encounter. It is not definitive, it is disorienting. It is not comfortable, it is confounding. Easter is not certainty, it is surrender.

Back to that painting I described earlier. "Easter Morning." It was painted by Caspar David Friedrich. Painted in 1833 toward the end of his career, it is said to be an innovative example of German Romanticism. Friedrich was not a well-known painter. Probably no one outside his immediate circle of friends and students knew him. Yet his style is thought to have influenced a whole wave of modern artistic tradition centered on the notion of the Sublime. His style of painting created ripples that reached well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Leaving this world in silence and obscurity, Friedrich's work continues to affect painters and his art lives on to affect the public.

Looking again the painting, I see it now. It must be bonnets--- Easter hats---on their heads. They are three women on their way to the town square, to the first service at the local church, the Easter sunrise service. They greet the rising of the Son of God with the rising of the sun. They must not be late, not today, as the air around them slowly and imperceptibly warms. They pick up their pace, thoughts of this most sacred of mornings, the mystery and awe of it ever new, still a little frightening to them even after so many Easter mornings.

What will they find when they get there? What will be set loose in them when they once again encounter the risen Christ? They push aside

the feelings of fear, the traces of doubt. After all, they are no longer girls. They should know something by now.

By now they know there are no quick and easy Easter explanations. They know there are no definitive answers. They know what Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome knew. They had lived long enough. They had been to the cemetery. And somehow, in their silence, in their trembling, they know.

He is not here. He is on the loose.