

24 March 2024

Jesus and the Women
Mark 16.1-8; John 20:1-18

Our first scripture reading today comes from the last verses of the original text of the Gospel of Mark, chapter 16, verses 1-8.

16 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. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But 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. ⁷But 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.' ⁸So 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.

The Gospel message for the day is "Christ is risen!" If you only take one message away from this morning's service, let it be "Christ is risen." That's why we're here. I don't mean just this morning; I mean at all. Christ's resurrection is why we, the church, exist. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15: "If Christ isn't risen, then everything we say is just gas." Authorized Morris Version. But having said that, you should be able to get that message from, you know, *every other part of this service*, so I don't know that I need to spend all the sermon time simply repeating it. Instead I want to do two things with this time: first, I want to let you hear the story in the gospels' own words. You've just heard it from Mark, and in a few minutes you'll hear it from John. And second, I'd like to reflect briefly on just one consistent aspect of those biblical accounts: the fact that in every gospel, the first people to encounter the resurrection news or the risen Christ were women.

Look back at the account we just read. It is the third day since Jesus was crucified. He was taken down from the cross, hurriedly wrapped in linen cloth and buried, so as to get him in the tomb before the Sabbath began at nightfall. Then a huge stone had been rolled over the mouth of the grave. Now three women are heading back to the tomb to finish their funeral rituals by anointing the body with spices. As they walk, they are wondering if there will be anyone around to help them roll the stone away from the tomb. They know it's too big for the three of them and that they'll need help, so they're hoping they find someone. Think about that. Gee, if only there were, say, *at least eleven able-bodied men who might have wanted to help them show respect to Jesus*. Where were the disciples? I don't know, and apparently neither do the women. But they go anyway, hoping that maybe a stranger could help them.

Some commentators have tried to explain the absence of the disciples that day by noting that caring for the dead was traditionally done by women. Okay, two things: first of all, I don't buy it. Anointing bodies may have been something done by women, but rolling heavy stones was not. But second, even if that explanation were true, it wouldn't help. All it would say is that the

disciples were more concerned with maintaining traditional gender roles than with honoring Jesus. (This curious priority can be found among some Christians even today.) Any way you look at it, the disciples were conspicuous by their absence. Yes, there were reasons not to appear at Jesus' tomb. It could have been watched. It might have been dangerous to be identified as one of his associates. What if the priests wanted to arrest his followers next? It's a valid fear. But the fact is, some people went anyway, and it wasn't the disciples. It was three women. And so the good news of the resurrection was first proclaimed to ... the people who showed up. But let's read on.

We read now from John's account of the resurrection, John chapter 20, verses 1-18:

20 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' ¹⁶Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." ' ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Between Mark's gospel and John's there was maybe thirty or forty years, a generation. Plenty of time for the story to have been adapted and retold and reshaped for later audiences. And indeed there are some significant differences between John and the earlier gospels. But one thing at least is scrupulously maintained: the women were still first. (And that's fascinating. Jesus always treated women exactly as he treated men, but the rest of his society did not, and by the time John was written, male church leaders were already adding exceptions to that egalitarianism. Women shouldn't teach; women shouldn't be in authority; women shouldn't dress so darn provocatively, and so on. In many ways, after Jesus, the church moved women into the background. But the memory of the women at the tomb was too strong. Even in John, they were first.)

John highlights just one of those original three women at the tomb – Mary Magdalene – and tells how she ran at once to tell the disciples that the tomb was opened. She finds two of them, Peter and the unnamed “Disciple Whom Jesus Loved,” and they run back to the tomb with her. All right, good for them. They go into the tomb, see the place where Jesus had been, then come back out. The text then adds a curious note, that even though neither of them understood what the empty tomb meant, the Beloved Disciple saw it and believed, which sort of implies that Peter, at this point, didn’t. But either way, they are still puzzled and uncertain, so they go home. Mary does not. She’s puzzled and uncertain, too, but she waits in the garden. And to the one who waited, first the angels and then Jesus himself appeared. She doesn’t recognize him from his outward appearance – that’s another consistent detail in the resurrection stories – or even by his voice at first. But then he calls her by name: “Mary.” And then she knows him. “My teacher!” she exclaims. She worships him, then goes to tell the others.

Now, I’m not going to try to make any broad generalizations about men and women here, partly because such generalizations are usually wrong, but mostly because I’m not a complete idiot. Instead, let me just point out a few things that we might reflect on. First, if the disciples had been all that we had in those days after the crucifixion, Christianity might have had a lot more trouble getting off the ground. Now, the disciples improved over time. They grew wiser, braver, and more faithful, and we are justified in honoring the people that they became, but this was not their finest moment. In their first test after Jesus, they failed. Without these women, they could have missed the miracle.

And why did the women not miss the miracle? Because they showed up. Those women with their spices were not trying to change the world. They weren’t trying to outdo anyone in anything. They were just trying to do the one small thing that they could think of to do to show their love for Jesus, rather than sit at home and do nothing. And doing the one small thing that they could think of was enough. And, in a way, they did change the world.

Finally, Jesus reveals himself to those who wait. Peter and the Beloved Disciple encountered the unexplainable and said, “Huh!” and went home. Mary waited in her confusion to see if there was more coming. For two thousand years, this crackpot story of ours – a story about a man who was also God, who died and then rose again in a different sort of body, so that we could do the same – as I say, this wild story has been a stumbling block to millions. People have heard us tell this story and have said, “Huh!” and gone home. Don’t do that, though. There’s more. Wait. Because Mary was the last to give up and leave, Mary was first. She met the Risen Lord, spoke to him, and heard him call her by name. The Risen Lord is still doing meeting people, still calling them by name. Listen. Wait. Christ is risen.