

**Easter 2009**

**Mark 16:1-8**

**“So they went out from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”**

**What a strange way to end today’s Easter gospel lesson. What a strange way for the author of this gospel according to Mark to end his story of Jesus. Yes, there is an empty tomb. Yes, there is a missing body, Yes, there is an angelic figure with an announcement: “He has been raised. He is not here.” There is even a command, “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.”**

**But the great response of these three women to this tremendous event is not, “Hallelujah!” It is not, “Come and see.” It is not even a whispered report murmured in haste to Peter and the others. It is silence. And it is fear.**

**“For they were afraid.”**

**That is the last word of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God, according to Mark.**

**I don’t think of Easter as a particularly scary holiday. Halloween is scary with all its skeletons and witches and ghosts. Fourth of July can be scary for little children who don’t like all the loud explosions of fireworks. Even Christmas has its scary moments ... I mean, think about Santa Claus. He’s a strange, bearded man who breaks into your house in the middle of the night, after spying on you for months to see if you’re a naughty person or a nice person. And either he’s bringing you all the things you asked for, or else he’s leaving you lumps of coal. *That’s pretty scary.***

**But Easter? Easter is all about sunshine and flowers and butterflies. It's about big white bunnies and fluffy yellow chicks. It's about new clothes and colored eggs, an obligatory visit to a gorgeous church, and then a big family dinner. Easter is almost completely benign in its pastel prettiness. Of all the holidays in the whole year, how could you ever say that Easter was scary?**

**Still, Mark tells us that those women thought Easter was terrifying. They fled from the empty tomb scared out of their wits, struck dumb with shock and horror.**

**As one of my old seminary professors used to shout ... "Is this good news?????"**

**The early church didn't think so. Clearly, they thought, this Mark guy had no idea how to run a resurrection, so some scribes tacked other endings onto the end of this startling gospel. They are included in most bibles, and a good study bible will label them "The Short Ending of Mark" or "The Longer Ending of Mark." They feature encounters with the risen Jesus that sound a lot like the ones in Luke and Matthew, encounters that the early church found much more satisfying than Mark's short, blunt, "they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."**

**But biblical scholars today are pretty well agreed ... this is how Mark's gospel ends, with a terrifying Easter experience. And silence.**

**There are a lot of reasons in Mark's Easter story to make anyone frightened. First of all, there are strange, supernatural things going on. The enormous stone is already rolled away when the women get there. Who rolled it? We don't know. There is this strange young man in the white robe sitting inside the tomb with a report on Jesus' whereabouts. Who is he? We don't know. And then the dead body of Jesus is gone. Where is it? We don't know. We have only the word of the strange young man to give us a hint ... he is raised, free, busted out of the tomb and gone off ahead to Galilee. Is this a believable statement? We don't know. It's all very disconcerting.**

**And then there is the complete disruption of the normal process of grief. These women were distraught over the death of their friend Jesus. They were the only ones who had stood by him when all the men had fled. They were the only ones there at the cross, watching from a distance as he died. And they were the only ones brave enough to head out early in the morning to finish the work of tending to Jesus' corpse. They were supposed to be finding closure in that last act of love. Instead, they found him gone.**

**But there are far more terrifying things going on in Mark's gospel than just a few creepy supernatural events or the interruption of the agenda of grief. Here is the most terrifying part of all, the reason the women flee in fear ... if Christ is raised, then he is who he said he was. If Christ is raised, then his whole way of living -- his passionate commitment to the outsiders, the little ones, the least of these, and his willingness to die on their behalf -- is vindicated. If Christ is raised, then it's all true: the first WILL be last, and the last WILL be first, a prospect that's as upsetting to the last -- who get bumped up -- as it is to the first -- who get knocked down.**

**If Christ is raised, then everything we bow down to, everything we put in control of our lives ... power, money, fear, violence, ambition, even death itself ... actually has no control over us. If Christ is raised, then there is nothing stopping us from being the people God created us to be. If Christ is raised, then the Kingdom of God IS close at hand, in all its forgiveness, all its wholeness, all its justice and all its love.**

**If Christ is raised, there is nothing or no one beyond the reach of his loving embrace, not even Peter, who denied him three times. Even Peter will see him again, not to receive a punishment, but to receive a commission -- to go out and proclaim God's love for the world. If Christ is raised, then anybody, ANYBODY, can be forgiven.**

**This is a reality beyond imagining, a new order that the frightened women could not accept. So they fled in terror and amazement and said nothing to anyone. As far as they were concerned, Jesus was right where he was supposed to be, dead and locked up, safe in the dark, sealed behind an enormous boulder. End of story.**

**And so we can complain, right along with the rewrite team from the earliest days of the church. *They said nothing to anyone? What kind of Easter story is that? Where's our happy ending?***

**Well, of course the women must have talked in the end. If they hadn't, Mark wouldn't have written his gospel. If they hadn't, there wouldn't be Christianity. If they hadn't, none of us would be here this morning. But Mark ends it all with their silence and their fear, because he wants us to take the next step. The story isn't over at all; it's just begun, and Mark invites us to jump in and start writing it ourselves.**

**Because if those women don't talk, then who will? If the women are too afraid to tell the story, then how will it get told? If the resurrection of Christ is too terrifying to accept, then how can anyone ever live like it is true?**

**Mark leaves us with their silence and with their fear, and with a huge unspoken question hanging there ... "And what about you? What are you going to do with this scary Easter story?" Will you too leave here today in silence and fear, mute with the terror or difficulty of resurrection?**

**Or will you do as the young man suggested ... follow Jesus into the Galilee of your own lives, the places you call home, the places where you work and study and laugh and weep, the places where he has promised to meet you? Will you be brave enough to see the signs of resurrection all around you? Will you be bold enough to speak out for the outsider, the little one, the least of these? Will you let the resurrection free you to live the life that Jesus did, a life poured out for others?**

**It's a scary thing, Mark's Easter story. It leaves it all up to us ... we can let Jesus rot in that tomb or we can live like resurrection is true. If we do, then nothing will ever be the same. If we do, then we will discover that everything old can be made new, even you, even me ... even this worn-out, beaten-up, broken world.**

**The women didn't say it that day ... they were too frightened to speak. But Mark, I think, would want us to give it a try: *Alleluia! Christ is risen!***