

*At the Moment*

A Sermon on Mark 16:1-8 by the Rev. Philip Major

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We are here because of the resurrecting power of God's love. We keep coming back to this place because God is offering us something we desperately need. We keep coming back because there are some parts of our lives that feel at least a little bit broken. We keep coming back because there is a God-shaped whole in our lives. And yet, we are often not remembering, or not understanding the gift God is giving us.

This was also the case for the women at the tomb, as recounted in Mark chapter 16. *As they entered the tomb, the women saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But 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. But 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."* 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.

Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Salome, were right there, on the day of the resurrection. They were perhaps the first ones to witness the resurrection. Yet, at the moment, they were not comprehending the work God was doing in the world.

I remember reading this passage early in my life. I was quite surprised. I am still surprised as I read it more than fifty years later. I always have this expectation that it will sound a little more like my idea of an Easter story. In the Easter story that runs around in my head, the young man will say, *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.* And the women were overcome with joy. They hugged and kissed one another and danced around in a circle. And great rejoicing was heard throughout the land!

But that is not the story of Easter. At the moment of the resurrection, the women did not hug and kiss one another and dance around in a circle. Great rejoicing was not heard throughout the land. The women were not overcome with joy, they were overcome with terror and amazement, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

This is why the Gospel of Mark and the story of Easter is good news for us. It is good news because, unlike the little stories in our heads, it is telling the truth. The story of Easter is not some sort of fairy tale. It describes real people, like you and me.

It seems these three women were very much like me, and perhaps like you. I wonder if their first mistake might be that they were not really paying attention to what the young man was saying. The young man said, *"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised."* I can only guess that, as is often the case for me, the three women were not really paying attention.

Or perhaps, as happens with me many times, they are paying attention, but they were not understanding. The young man did his best to explain. He said, *"He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But 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, at the moment, they do not understand. They do not understand that God is doing some completely new sort of work in the world.

As the years go by, I love Mark's version of the Easter story more and more, because it is so real. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome are not understanding what has happened, they are almost certainly distracted and not really paying attention to what they are seeing and hearing, and they are afraid.

I have no doubt that the situation would be similar for me. I would not be paying attention to what was being said. Like them, I would not be understanding that God is doing some sort of completely new work in the world. Like them, I would be afraid.

Perhaps it would be similar for you. Or perhaps you are the kind of person who doesn't have a lot of fears, but you have other strong emotions. Perhaps you have a tendency to get angry. Or perhaps you are the kind of person who might be carrying lots of grief or sadness from past experiences. Regardless of whether our strong emotions are anger, fear, or grief, you and I are liable to get overwhelmed with our emotions, just as these three women were seized by their emotions at the moment of the resurrection. Part of our brokenness is that we have these tendencies to be defensive, or to lash out in anger, or to avoid any sort of conflict.

This is why the Easter story, especially in the Gospel of Mark, is such good news. This is a story about you and me. The Easter story is the story of the way God is bringing God's resurrecting power into the world, even though we aren't paying attention, we aren't understanding, and we are often blinded by our emotions. The Easter story is the story about the way God is bringing something completely new and unexpected into the lives of real people, like you and me. And this is what we can see in our own lives. God is bringing the power of God's love into our lives at this moment, even if, at the moment, we are not paying attention, or we are not understanding, or we are overcome with emotions.

There is one more way the story of Easter is very good news. There is one more way the story of Easter is so very realistic. We find this realistic little detail in the very last sentence. *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.*

This is my question for you: does the story end with this sentence? No. The Gospel of Mark ends with this sentence, but the story does not end here. The story does not end with the women running off, shrieking in terror, refusing to say anything to anyone, for they were afraid. The story is not over. The story is just beginning. For these three women, the story is just beginning. For Peter and the other disciples, the story is just beginning.

The Good News of Jesus Christ as told by Mark is the beginning, not the end of the story. This is true for you in your life. God has given you many gifts. Among them is the greatest gift you will ever receive, which is the gift of being able to love. Like the women in the story, you have experienced some great joys and some terrible griefs. And like the women in the story of Easter, your story is not finished.

The story of the resurrection turned out to be the beginning, not the end, of the story for Jesus' disciples. The same is true for you. We often make the mistake of thinking that our story is finished, or at least mostly finished. As long as you have the power to love another person, you are far from finished. Continue the story of God's love in your life. You have been given the greatest gift. Thanks be to God!