

Resurrection Fear

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Mark 16:1-8 RSV

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen.

And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; — it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed.

And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you."

And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

Biblical scholars have long puzzled over the end of the Gospel According to Mark, in chapter 16. Actually, two different endings have come down in ancient manuscripts. The longer one is usually printed in our Bibles as verses 9-20. It relates how the risen Christ appeared to His followers and told them of the signs that would accompany their preaching: casting out demons, speaking in new tongues, handling serpents, being kept safe from poisons, laying hands on the sick for their recovery. Some ancient manuscripts have a briefer ending that simply tells how the risen Jesus sent His disciples out with the message of salvation.

But the oldest and most trustworthy manuscripts have neither of these endings. They simply end with the words we have read: "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid."

Most scholars believe these words weren't the original ending, either. Something has been lost, because in the Greek the last word of this verse is a word that's never used at the end of a sentence. What happened? The first Christians lived under persecution from both Jewish and Roman authorities. Sometimes they were on the run, enduring the most difficult of conditions. It wasn't easy to preserve their manuscripts, such as the Gospel the apostle Mark had written for them. The earliest New Testament writings were rolls of parchment, and as the manuscript was rolled up the last page would have been on the outside. It could very easily be damaged or lost during difficult conditions of travel, or flight from persecutors. Whatever Mark originally wrote, that ending appears to have been lost in transit. Instead, the story he tells ends strangely: "And they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid." Later on, scribes tried to repair the damage by adding the two endings we now have for chapter 16, basing their work on what they already knew from other sources.

That's one theory, and I mention it for this reason: that last verse of Mark's original Gospel, verse 8 — even if it's incomplete — still proclaims a compelling truth. "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid." Our observance of Easter is a time of celebration; we have great joy in knowing that our Redeemer lives! And because He lives, we see God at work *in us* to create new life today and hope for tomorrow. But Mark 16:8 reminds us that there's *another side to resurrection* — the *astounding* side, the *trembling* side, the *fearful* side!

The resurrection of Christ is the foundational event of our faith. As Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:17). The resurrection reveals who Jesus is: not just another teacher, or a good man, but the Messiah through whom God the Father is reconciling the world to Himself. As Peter announced to the people of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost:

This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised Him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for Him to be held by it. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know

assuredly that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified (Acts 2:23,24,36).

The resurrection *vindicates* Jesus; it shows without a doubt that He *is* the Son of God, the Lord, the Christ. So the resurrection is basic to our faith. But perhaps, for that very reason, it has lost its grip on us. The impact of astounding events can fade over time. After September 11, 2001 our nation was aroused to patriotic fervor; flags were everywhere, the nation was united in dealing with the horror of the attack and trying to strike back at those who were responsible for it. But now, nine years later, we seem to have largely settled back into a September 10 mentality. It's much the same with the resurrection of Christ. We're so used to preaching it, and singing it, and teaching it, and discussing it, that maybe we've *lost our sense of astonishment* about the resurrection. We find comfort in it, but we don't *tremble* over it as did those women who were the first to learn of it — going to the tomb early that morning to anoint the body of Jesus, slipping out before dawn lest hostile eyes should see these dispirited followers of the would-be Messiah and report their strange doings to the authorities.

“Who will roll away the stone for us?” they ask one another, knowing that the massive monolith covering the entrance to the sepulcher is too heavy for them to shove it back in its track. And then — the open doorway, the young messenger in dazzling white, and the words: “You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, He is not here!” In amazement and trepidation they flee from the tomb, hardly remembering the message they've been told to carry to the disciples — to go to meet the risen Jesus in Galilee! “And they said nothing to any one, *for they were afraid.*”

“They said nothing . . .” So often our response to the news of God's tremendous action on our behalf is to *talk* — to fill the air with sound, whether speaking or music or even applause. Is there not a place for reverent *silence* when the Word of God confronts us? Scripture says, “The LORD is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him” (Habakkuk 2:20). In the drama of the Revelation, when the Lamb opens the awesome seventh seal “there was silence in heaven for about half an hour” (Revelation 8:1). Why do we make so much *noise* in God's presence? Is it to shield ourselves from His touch, or to cover up our lack of understanding? As Ecclesiastes says, “there is . . . a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (Ecclesiastes 3:7). But often we fail to heed the admonition of the Lord's brother James, who said, “Let every man be quick to hear, [and] slow to speak” (James 1:19).

“And they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.” Dare we be *casual* about the resurrection — unimpressed and unmoved, or even flippant or verbose — when by the glory of the Creator a Man who had endured the shame of death on the cross has been raised from the dead, and so declared to be the Son of God? Can we say, “Ho hum, another Easter's come and gone, and life goes on as before”? In the presence of this mystery that defies our understanding — because it runs counter to what we think we know about how the space-time universe works — shall we not *fear* to hear the story told once again? Shall we not be astonished that God should so reveal Himself, breaking in upon the human scene to upset our preconceptions about success and failure, about life and death?

Our cultural values pressure us to overcome obstacles, to strive for power, to dominate other people in order to gain our own ends. Yet here is a Man who laid down His life for others, who gave Himself over to humiliation, who died in the agony of *rejection and failure*: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” Yet it was *that* Man, who *suffered and died*, whom God vindicated by raising Him to His right hand. It was *that* Man on the cross — not the brutal Roman executioner, nor the crafty high-priestly conspirator — for whom it was impossible that death should hold Him. If Jesus were the kind of Messiah who commanded the allegiance of huge crowds and resisted His enemies by an exercise of overwhelming power, we should not be surprised that He rose from the dead; in fact, we might suppose He only faked his death in order to trick His opponents. But that a Messiah who was executed in abject disgrace should be raised from the dead — that strikes fear in our hearts, because that's not the way things are supposed to happen.

Confronted, then, with such a reversal of our ideas of how to “succeed” in life, shall we not *fear* what the resurrection of Christ reveals to us? Shall we not reexamine all our efforts to gain power and status? Can we afford to be careless about following His way of suffering — of *bearing up under* the difficulties of our existence? For that's what *suffering* means; it's not pain, nor sorrow, but *identifying with Jesus* in his death as He bore up under the rejection of the world. As Paul puts it, “we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings” (2 Corinthians 1:5). The law of Christ, he reminds us, is to “bear one another's burdens”

(Galatians 6:2). “In my flesh,” he says, “I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Colossians 1:24). Paul states the matter starkly in Philippians 3:8-11:

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For him I suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I might gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own based on law, but that which is through the faithfulness of Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith; that I might know him and the power of his resurrection, and might participate in his sufferings, being patterned after him in his death, that in some way I may attain the resurrection from the dead [RSV translation modified].

This isn’t the message we like to hear, because conforming our lives to the pattern of Christ’s death doesn’t fit the priorities we’ve absorbed from our culture. So the resurrection of Christ is a *rebellion* against my taking up any agenda other than God’s. In the Greek of the New Testament the word for “resurrection” is a word of revolution. The word *anastasis* means an *uprising*, standing up against repressive powers. The resurrection is Jesus’ *revolt* against my rejection of the ways of God, my self-seeking lifestyle that looks for success on the world’s terms. It’s His *revolt* against a complacent religion that pats me on the back for having just a smattering of spiritual interest, while leaving the rest of life untouched. I’m comfortable, I don’t want to change — but now I learn that God has put his seal of approval upon a Man who chose a different way, who gave Himself in suffering for the sake of all. “And they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.” I, too, must fear what I have seen and, with Job, “lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:4).

Confronting the resurrection, then, are we left with nothing other than silence and fear as we ponder the mystery of what God has done? By no means! For *resurrection fear is the doorway into resurrection faith*. When the fear of what God has done to reverse our priorities gets hold of us, then we’re led to question our grasping for power and privilege and “success.” We’re brought to decision: will I seek my life, and lose it — or let it go, in order to find it? In other words, will I come to faith, which is *identification with Jesus* in both His death and resurrection? Pain and sorrow *happen* to us, but *suffering is a path we choose* for the sake of attaining the resurrection from the dead. The Letter to the Hebrews declares that Jesus chose that path, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” In so doing He became “the pioneer and perfecter of *our* faith” (Hebrews 12:2), a faith in which we follow His *faithfulness*, His obedience to God. Given the world view our culture thrusts upon us, we would never dare choose that path. The shame would overwhelm us; we could never *despise it*, as Jesus did, considering it to be of no consequence. But the resurrection reveals to us that God’s pathway to life is through “the fellowship of his sufferings” (Philippians 3:10 KJV).

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead,” wrote the apostle Paul, “the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Corinthians 15:20). The message of Easter is that Christ is “the first-born among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). The God who raised Jesus from the dead will raise up all who dare to come to Him through the cross. That God will dispel the darkness of my life, and set me free from that which weighs me down. That God will forgive my imperfections and cleanse me for a new and wholesome life. That God will take the little I have to offer Him and fashion it into a worthy vessel for His glory. The God who raised Jesus from the dead, once I identify myself with His Son, will remake me after His likeness to share in both His sufferings and His resurrection. “They said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.” Yet through this fear comes faith.

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow.
Because He lives, all fear is gone.*

As Paul puts it, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by the *faith* of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Galatians 2:20). Or, in the words of Charles Wesley:

*Made like Him, like Him we rise;
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.*