

What's the Difference?

sermon digest

Easter, April 20, 2014

Mark 16:1-8; Colossians 3:1-11

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Mark's story of the Resurrection dangles. The Gospel actually ends at 16:8 with the dark, anxious statement: "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." I deliberately left that verse off in our reading this morning. I did not want our worship to die of disappointment before time for the sermon.

According to Mark, the women at the tomb were counseled to "tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee," but terror and amazement got the best of them. The literal Greek is actually a double negative: "they said nothing to nobody." Some speculate that Mark elaborated on the resurrection of Christ, but the end of Mark's scroll was damaged and lost. Others believe that the story was left dangling on purpose, an open door for the reader to draw conclusions. The instruction for the disciples to meet Christ in Galilee was a subtle message to return to the beginning of the Gospel in Galilee, to read the story again.

Regardless of Mark's intent, scribes were so uncomfortable with his ending that they seemed compelled to fill in the blank. Most scholars believe that verses 9-20 were added by editors, not by the original author of the Gospel. Of our four Gospels, Mark appears to be the earliest. The other Gospels were also compelled to tell the rest of the story, contradicting the fear and silence with earthquake; lightning; appearances of the risen Christ; dialogue and disagreement among the disciples; and, finally, worship and ascension.

In his commentary on Mark, Princeton Professor Donald Juel tells about a student who was so fascinated by Mark's Gospel that he decided to memorize and perform the entire Gospel. He spent months, carefully weighing each phrase and deciding the best gesture and inflection of voice. It was to be a different kind of commentary, an interpretation of Mark's meaning through drama, in fact, the most difficult kind of drama, a soliloquy.

His first performance was to a large congregation. He stood in front of the altar and brought the Gospel to life with moving clarity of voice and spirit. His homework on Mark led to the decision to leave off the verses attached to the end of chapter 16, but he had not fully thought through the effect of the dangling ending on the audience. His performance concluded with Mark's questionable finish, "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." The congregation was left in stunned silence, waiting in anticipation for the rest of the story. After a long awkward pause, the discomfort got to the student; and he blurted out, "Amen!" In relief, the audience broke into applause, and it appeared that the experiment was a success.

However, in reflection on Mark's ending, the student decided in a subsequent performance to follow Mark's lead, to avoid the exuberant applause. To be faithful to Mark, he decided that the Gospel must be left to dangle. After the final word of fear and silence, he paused briefly, then turned and walked off stage, leaving the congregation in stunned wonder. (Thomas Long, *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2003, p. 10ff). There was no applause, only quiet conversation as the people slowly left the room.

The Easter message is a call to wonder. Jokes about C & E Christians (Christmas and Easter) are fairly common. An unhappy tradition follows Easter and the reference to the next Sunday as "Low Sunday," because the attendance is often miserably low. Over the years I have noticed my colleagues in ministry often taking a vacation day to avoid the post-Easter depression. The same churches that had chairs in the aisles on Easter look deserted on the Sunday after Easter.

One cartoon shows the pastor in robe standing on the steps of the church greeting the congregation after the service. The sermon title on the sign in the background reads "He Is Alive!" The wife is offering her words of appreciation to the pastor, while her husband stands aside with his hands in his pockets wearing a sly grin. The husband speaks: "May I offer a word of constructive criticism, Reverend? Frankly, you are in a rut. Every time I come to church, you preach on the resurrection of Christ."

The C & E Christian has a point. On Easter, the Gospel lesson may shift from Mark to Matthew to Luke to John, but the message is usually the same, reciting the event recorded by the Gospels following the death of Jesus on the cross, Easter morning, the resurrection of Christ. John Dominic

Crossan observed that not one Gospel gives an account of the resurrection itself. Only the false Gospel of Peter, rejected by early Church Fathers, pictures the enemies of Christ as actual witnesses to the revival of life in the body of Jesus. Although including appearances of the risen Christ, our Gospels focus on the aftermath of the resurrection, the impact of Easter morning on the disciples.

Early Christians had no photographs, videos, or voice recordings to verify their message. They could not reproduce any event in the life of Jesus as a scientific experiment, much less the resurrection of a dead body. Two words of confirmation dominate the early preaching of the church: the empty tomb and eye-witness encounters with the living Christ. The empty tomb was evidence of nothing; the witnesses eventually were dead and gone. Of greater importance, Easter extended into the life of the church with ripples impacting and changing lives. The immediate effect of the resurrection of Christ is recorded in the Gospels, but the rest of the story is recorded in the life of early Christians in the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and Revelation.

While somewhat cynical about historical details in the Gospels, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg agree that Easter is at the center of the gospel of Christ, determining the survival of the Christian faith. Christians came to practice worship on Sunday in recognition of the day that Christ arose from the dead. Without Easter, the followers of Jesus would have scattered and the story of Jesus would have died with him on the cross.

Mark's disappointing final verse may have been the most profound word offered in the Gospels toward the meaning of the Christ event. To walk through that door was to experience the Christ for oneself and to finish the story in one's own time and place. The Jewish experience of God in history always left unanswered questions, awe, and wonder about the ways of their God. Even in the process of revelation, Isaiah (45:15) declared, "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior." In the encounter with God, we are always left with more questions than answers, more wonder than satisfaction of our curiosity.

So what? The Epistle to the Colossians is counted among the letters of Paul, although the vocabulary raises questions about whether Paul or one of his companions actually wrote it. The salutation indicates that it comes from Paul and Timothy. Typically Pauline epistles move from salutation to theology to ethics. In chapter 2, the epistle turns to issues of behavior, "As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him." This is the "So What?" section of the letter. It is about practical application of the gospel that comes out in behavior.

Colossae was destroyed by an earthquake in 61 CE, so we may assume that this letter was written while the city was still alive, perhaps a decade or more before the Gospel of Mark. At this point in the life of early Christians, the Easter message was not just a story to be told; it was a life to be lived in faithfulness to the God revealed in Christ.

Then as now, Easter was acted out in the drama of baptism. The epistle reminds the readers (2:12), "when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead." The question of Easter comes to rest on the way you choose to live your life (2:20): "If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?"

So, Paul's Easter message hits us where we live: "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above." The epistle gets explicit, pronouncing a death sentence on common practices in Roman culture: sexual infidelity, distorted passions, greed, idolatry. Personal relationships are sabotaged by anger, malice, slander, abusive language, and dishonesty. When Christ dwells in his people the walls of division break down between Jews, gentiles, barbarians, Scythians, slaves and free. Christ is revealed in kindness, compassion, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, and peace.

Look at the world around us today and choose the common behaviors that need to die and acts of compassion that need to be encouraged. I don't know about you, but I have experienced major changes in my own attitudes along the lines described by Colossians. As a child, I sang "red and yellow black and white, all are precious in his sight." As an adult I finally came to hear the song as a revolution in friendships. I once thought of Christ in terms of exclusion: the types of people to hate or assign to the eternal damnation of God. I am running out of categories to denounce.

On this Easter morning, as we sing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," let us seek the risen Christ in the places we once avoided. There he is: Christ lives in the compassionate love of Mother Teresa of Calcutta in her mission to the outcasts of India; Christ lives in the larger love of a larger revelation that sees God in the lives of people outside our religion and culture; Christ lives in the embrace of people whose sexual orientation is different from mine; Christ lives in people who do not speak my language and have not shared my experiences in life. Indeed, God lives in Christ wherever God chooses to dwell.