

Mark's Gospel is the most enigmatic of the four gospels and nowhere more famously so than in its ending which we have read today. Indeed, some have suggested that so unsatisfying is the conclusion we just heard that something must have been lost, as if the last page had been inadvertently torn from the manuscript and lost forever.

We've come to expect, after all, a big finish from our Easter endings, with earthquakes to roll away the stone, angelic visions and swooning Roman soldiers, and a cameo appearance from the Risen Lord Himself. For centuries Mark's Gospel was regarded as inferior to the others because it is so spare and seems to leave out so many important things like birth narratives and any appearance of the resurrected Jesus.

More recently Mark has been discovered, as it were. The earliest of the gospels, it is the basis for the narrative outline of the familiar story, and even here at the tomb it has supplied the sort of 'stem cells' that have given rise to further elaboration and detail to the resurrection accounts in the later Gospels. Mark is widely admired for its sheer genius and story-telling brilliance. And as it has attracted more and more attention, it has come to be read in less conventional and therefore perhaps more contemporary ways. Its very "oddness" suggests something about the oddness of the new life of the resurrection it calls us to.

The conclusion, this story of the women at the empty tomb, is the capstone of the entire Gospel which we, during this season of Lent, have had an opportunity to hear and reflect on in several ways. It raises for us a number of questions.

First, why no appearance of Jesus? Though the later gospel writers were concerned that an absent resurrected body would not be convincing enough to curious unbelievers, Mark has something more in mind than allaying doubts about whether Jesus was raised. His intent is to urge us to look for and to identify the risen Jesus for ourselves in our own lives. It has been suggested that the entire gospel, which as we learned can be proclaimed in about two hours time, was intended to be heard by *candidates* for baptism or *neophytes* during the vigil at the time of their baptism.

They were to identify with Christ as He had identified with them at their baptism and to follow him to Galilee, that is to say, wherever they were called to seek him in ministry, their own hometowns, their families, their work places, wherever He had gone ahead of them. Indeed, this has been our experience this Lent. Welcoming forty homeless men on retreat from the free dining room in San Rafael to St. Stephen's each Saturday night for six weeks, we tuned our eyesight to see Christ in their beleaguered faces. We sat and ate with them, learned their names and heard their stories. We did not strike any great blow against homelessness, as one of our neighbors lamented we missed an opportunity to do, if we had only consulted with them ahead of

time to help us organize the County. True enough, I suppose, but we had no such lofty aspirations. We only wanted to meet the risen Jesus and have him meet us.

Second, who is this young man dressed in a white robe sitting inside the empty tomb on the right side? Compared to the women identified by name whom we met at the crucifixion, this unnamed man could easily have been taken for an angel. And technically that is what he is, since the word angel means literally “messenger” and he delivers an important message. But there is much more here in what Mark leaves out. If you participated in the Passion narrative on Palm Sunday, you will remember that when Jesus was arrested in the garden, the soldiers also laid hands on a young man in a linen garment who, slipping out of the linen cloth, escaped their grasp. It is a kind of escaping the grip of death ahead of time and of leaving behind, cocoon-like, only the linen wrappings in the tomb. And the Greek word used for young man is so close to the word for one newly baptized that the connection becomes unavoidable. In the early church the newly baptized were clothed in a white robe.

We have had this year the great privilege of welcoming two adults into baptism at the Easter Vigil. Last night they and three of their children were baptized. They are here this morning. In baptism we actually enter into the Pascal Mystery, we experience Jesus’ death and resurrection. As I have watched the lives of a number of people who make the journey into baptism as adults, I have noticed how much the experience for them can be like that of Jesus. They can find themselves losing control as their life is turned upside down. It can be like being captured and interrogated or like escaping and being set free. Clearly the young men in the Gospel, both here in the empty tomb and back in the garden, are stand-ins, representations of Jesus, as he is handed over to death and resurrection. Just so, the newly baptized are for us representations of the risen Christ. Not so much heavenly messengers, they are earthly messengers who call us to go and seek Jesus wherever we may be called.

Third, so if the women “fled out of the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid,” then how is it that I’m telling you this story now? I mean, we’re not used to this kind of paradox in the stories we hear in church. We tend to listen to them as if they were simple narratives recounted by an objective observer. But something like this throws us. It takes us back to the beginning of the story with a different consciousness. It appears to undercut its own veracity; if they said nothing to anyone, then how did we get this account? It is an ending that is actually not so much an ending as a new beginning. It overturns our carefully negotiated expectations about life and death and astonishes us with new possibilities. The gaping wound of the empty tomb becomes our own entry into the paschal mystery.

It’s a challenge to us, the hearers of the story. Whether we are neophytes or old priests, all of us are invited by the young man in the empty tomb to begin our own story of following Jesus to our own Galilee and of seeing him there. Will we be terrified by the hostility and the resistance that Jesus met? Will we be silenced in amazement, go back to our ancient arrangement with death, or will we accept the adventure resurrection life and go spread the message of the young man to others?

The Risen Christ is you and me, living in the light of the hope of the resurrection without fear of death and serving a deathless God who appears to us in the least, in the homeless, in the outcast victims, in the accused whose ultimate innocence is yet to be determined.