

QUITE THE FRIGHT

--If you know something about the New Testament, then you may know that Mark, though placed in our Bibles as the second of our four gospels, is actually the earliest of them all. Composed around the year 65 C.E.--predating Matthew and Luke by perhaps 15 years, and John by some 30 years--it presents the first gospel account concerning the resurrection.

Having heard, over so many Easters, verses such as were read this morning, we may have the sense that we know what they're all about. We heard it all before, we may think to ourselves. That means that we don't really pay much attention anymore to what they're saying--or not saying--about this great moment in our faith.

We'll be changing all that this morning by sharpening our focus especially on that final verse in Mark.

First, a brief recap of what brings us to it: Mark tells us that "when the sun had risen" (16.2--I just love that play on words in English!), the women arrive at the tomb, discovering a "young man, dressed in a white robe" (16.5), there to interpret the scene plainly for them: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified," he is reported to say. "He has been raised; he is not here" (16.6).

Those are the words that preachers typically drill down on, because they best suit the obvious purposes of Easter, allowing us simply to ignore the rest. Not this morning.

This "young man" then commands the women to "go, tell his disciples . . . that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (16.7). Now here comes that final verse, which, I've got to warn you, is nothing but trouble. "So they went out," reads Mark, "and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and"--in clear contradistinction to the directive that they have just been given!--"they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16.8). End of Mark's gospel. What?!

--While we are assured by our best scholarship that Mark probably concludes with this baffling verse 8, we've got to admit that it is an absolutely horrid way to end this gospel! It leaves everything up in the air, and nothing really settled or resolved. Undeniably, it is a positively terrible ending!

Apparently those in the earliest generations of Mark's readers think so, too, doing what they can to improve the awkward situation, as is evident from the assortment of alternate endings that are subsequently written for this gospel. Check the rather voluminous notes on the same page following Mark's original ending (on page ___ of your pew Bible), where one clearly sees the lengths taken to have the gospel close instead on a much more satisfying and restful note.

In pointing out all this, I know I'm making a bit of a mess on your Easter morning. It's probably not at all what you've come expecting to hear. For that I do apologize, but we are on the way to grasping something uniquely important to this occasion, something usually left un-preached.

--When we think of what the empty tomb portends, what likely come to mind for us are such positive words as wonderful, astonishing, vindicating, comforting. And, sure enough, looking closely at those final eight verses in Mark, we do have mention there of "amazement" (16.8). As reassuring as that may be, however, more prevalently identified in this part of our tradition are more troublesome words like "alarmed" (16.5), "fled," "terror," and "afraid" (16.8).

In short, to enter into this final scene, as presented by the earliest of the evangelists, is to approach a dimension

to the resurrection that probably makes us a little uncomfortable. Simply put, the risen life disturbs.

Just ask any of Jesus' detractors and enemies, all of whom think that, with him crucified and safely buried, that is the end of it. With the agitator effectively neutralized, they can now carry on as usual. News of resurrection, then, word of the dead instead giving way to something radically alive, terribly disrupts and aggravates all sense of false security.

--It likely appears that I'm talking here about just Jesus, but I'm actually speaking about us, for we come here on this morning not just to remember and celebrate what God did for him, but also to nudge ourselves awake to what God is prepared to do for us--namely, to facilitate the movement from an old, established, very basic and low-level way of life (tantamount, really, to a kind of entombment) and to a new, very different, remarkably enhanced and superior way of life (a life of fullness and completeness and depth). That is resurrection, a "standing up" (the precise meaning of the Greek words that are translated as "resurrection") in a whole new human way.

For Jesus--and for you and me!--it is nothing less than the passage to a "risen" form of human life.

And what Mark shows us in the rather dissonant ending to his gospel is that this new life startles and disorients. How destabilizing and annoying that can be! New life alarms and complicates. Who knows where it might take us? New life rattles and scares. Who can predict what risks, what changes, what sacrifices, it might require of us?

For all the superficial, sugary descriptors that we bring to a typical Easter morning, the harsh truth is that, at the personal level, the prospect of new life has us instinctively pulling back and running away--amazed perhaps, but probably fleeing in fear, just as the women are reported to do. To come face to face with the present possibilities of new life is admittedly quite the fright.

The unnerving truth is that, if we were even half as excited as we pretend to be about this new life, we would already have been totally embraced by it. There is simply nothing standing in our way to prevent that. The fact that we haven't totally embraced it already in no way suggests that God is withholding it from us, but that we are avoiding it or resisting it for all we're worth. If God perennially offers us a new and risen life (and God does), if God persistently offers new life freely (and God does), and if God in fact wants nothing more than to have us accept and receive it (and God does), then it is only we who stand in our own ways to having it burst forth from within us. As the women in headlong flight suggest, we are the single greatest obstacle to our God-driven step into transcendence.

All those inspiring Easter hymns aside, it seems that we actually prefer not to have the stone rolled away from in front of the tomb. It's too, too frightful a possibility. It's sad to confess that, while this day we celebrate Jesus' victory over the grave, showing us the path forward, we all-too-often prefer the security and predictability of the dark, confining space of the tomb over the bright light of a new day and a new way.

--So, surely, Easter is about Jesus, but it's not only about Jesus. It is also about what, articulated in the very details of his living and dying and being raised, Jesus is pointing us toward--and that is a "risen" life which changes us, and the world itself.

Is this, then, to be the Easter where unspoken alarm and fear do not carry the day?
Is this to be the Easter where life--and where our life together--becomes new?

Or shall we continue merely to go through the motions of something that will forever leave us incomplete and unfulfilled?

Only you can say for sure.