

Easter Sunday, year B

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Jesus is alive! Jesus is Lord!

The Rev Barbara Ballenger

The women who went to the tomb in today's Gospel from Mark were rock stars in their community. Interestingly they are all named Mary – Mary of Magdala was a leader in the early church. Mary the mother of James and Joseph was a matriarch among the Jesus' circle of apostles. They had helped hold the movement together during Jesus's public ministry. And when they took spices to the tomb to anoint Jesus' dead body, they were taking matters into their own hands. Their biggest concern was how to remove the stone that would block their way in.

But when they arrived, they found the stone rolled away, and they were met by an angelic figure who told them that Jesus had been raised from the dead and was no longer there. Then the angel gave them specific instructions:

“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 author of Mark's gospel tells us that *the women 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 end.*

Wait, hold on, what? The women didn't tell anyone? What about Mary of Magdala talking to Jesus? And Jesus appearing all over Galilee? What about him saying “Go Ye Therefore and teach all nations?”

What about the rest of Mark's Gospel?

What we heard today was the original ending of Mark, which is our earliest gospel. It ends right here on these women leaders who hear the first proclamation of Easter and are immediately too terrified to tell anyone. Mark ends his account of the Good News of Jesus Christ with people running away.

But that can't be the way he meant to end it, people of faith have long insisted. So an additional ending was tacked on to the Gospel of Mark. Matthew and Luke and John made sure to conclude their Gospels in a more acceptable way. No ambiguity there.

But today's Gospel takes us to that original ending – strange and troubling and sort of embarrassing on a day when we are dressed up in our celebration clothes, we've hired extra musicians, there's breakfast casserole in the oven and Easter eggs hidden in the lawn.

And this is what we get: They ran away. They didn't tell anyone. Because they were afraid.

Frankly I love this ending to Mark's Gospel because it is so honest. It reminds me of people I know. I reminds me of me. Oh I'd love to imagine myself as Mary of Magdala in the later stories, clinging to Jesus when she recognizes him in the garden. But I also know that I have run away from a good thing more than once – out of fear I was mistaken, or that it would end soon enough and I'd be broken

hearted again. I've kept silent over fear of being mocked or disbelieved. I've been known to panic at first. Anybody with me on that?

But while Mark's original Gospel ends there, the story doesn't. We wouldn't have the Good News of Easter to proclaim today if the Word hadn't somehow gotten out. And we wouldn't know of the women's rather humiliating part in the tale if they themselves didn't fill in those details.

Which is to say that the truth will out, that Easter will out, no matter how hard the world tries to keep the stone over the opening of the tomb. The risen Jesus must be reckoned with, even if you are not sure where he is going to show up exactly. Mark's Gospel ends where it does because the Word was still getting out, even as he was writing for his own community. Mark's audience would have to finish the story with their lives, and everyone after that would be part of the rest of the story.

One of my favorite books to consult during Holy Week is called *The Last Week: A Day to Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. In it they point out that all four of the Gospels tell a different story about Jesus' resurrection. None of them are same.

What's more important than what historically happened, they say, is what the story of Easter means – what it meant to those women with the spices, what it meant to the later audiences of early Christians, and what it means to us today.

Borg and Crossan suggest that no matter which Gospel you read on Easter morning they all proclaim two essential things about Jesus: That Jesus is alive among us. And that Jesus is Lord.

We say it this way: Alleluia! Christ the Lord is risen from the dead! And you say: The Lord has risen indeed, Alleluia.

Jesus is alive and among us still – which means that people who want to encounter the risen Christ will do so., and they will describe it in all sorts of ways. The Apostle Paul in today's passage from his letter to the Corinthians lists a whole bunch of people who had met the risen Christ – concluding with Paul himself, several years later after he had been persecuting Christians with a passion. Still, Jesus is alive, Paul tells the Corinthians. And if that's not true, then you're not alive either, in the way your heart truly longs to be.

But Jesus isn't alive after just any kind of death. God didn't raise him from a death by natural causes, or an unfortunate accident. God raised him from a death that was supposed to be the victorious blow of his enemies – the Roman Empire, the political leaders of the time, and all who colluded with them. Jesus was crucified by the lords of his time. And in raising Jesus, God said NO to their power and their conquest. By raising Jesus from a death by state-sponsored crucifixion, God undid its original meaning and gave it a new one: that Jesus is Lord. And Caesar is not. Now imagine what it would mean to proclaim that in Jerusalem while Caesar's centurions and Herod's henchmen are still roaming about.

Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. Jesus is Lord and we are not. Admitting that fact is like rolling the stone away from the tomb on Easter morning. In our own lives, letting go of our desire to lord it over others and God's creation, to control things, to put our needs before any other -that requires its own a kind of

death – a death to self-centeredness and ego and the soul sickness that spring from them, Borg and Crossan write. You can't have the resurrection without a death to rise from. Easter isn't just about Jesus' death and resurrection, but our own as well.

That's what we celebrate in the Sacrament of Baptism, which is why the church has long received its new members on Easter. And we're going to do that here once I'm done preaching. Maverick Woods and his family are going to remind us what new life in Easter is all about, and then we'll all get a good dousing with that baptismal water. Because Baptism is about dying to an old way of life, something we commit to every time we repeat those original promises.

Now that might seem a lot to ask of a baby who just got here a few months ago and who is still learning the ropes. But the old way of life that dies in Baptism and at Easter isn't our personal past, per se. It's the life of a world where Jesus isn't Lord, where love is not victorious, where God isn't walking among us. It's an old way of life because it's been around for a long time, probably from the beginning. It's the life that produces systems of oppression and injustice and hatred on immense scales – local and global, personal and political. It's always an option, and many take it. It's the weeds among the wheat.

We baptize infants to start our little ones out in the new life of Easter and the Lordship of Jesus, by firmly rejecting the other life and its lords. And the strongest vows made at infant baptism are our vows to support them and be for them by living the life of love that we want for them as well.

Growing up into that Easter life as followers of Jesus means that we'll experience plenty of Good Fridays. Because if you live like Jesus is your Lord, the other lords will push back. If you follow Jesus where he takes you after Easter, you will find yourself back in front of Pilate in one form or another. It's just that those lords will have no power over your Easter life. Their days are numbered. Jesus's days are not.

Borg and Crossan describe the resurrection life and Lordship of Jesus as the moment that God begins to clean up the world of its injustices – a clean-up that includes not only our personal lives, but all the systems we are in – all the places where people lord it over others. Our call as followers is to participate in that clean up in the name of love that is more powerful than anything the world can throw at us. And if that seems a bit overwhelming, like we might want to run away at first and put the invitation behind us, don't worry. We're in good company.

But we know by our very gathering today that Love will find us, help us catch our breath, invite us to inhale the full extent of the Good News that is at hand, and voice the Alleluia buried in our souls. It sounds like this: Alleluia! Christ the Lord is risen from the dead! And you say: The Lord has risen indeed, Alleluia!