

**Set Your Hearts On Things Above**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
April 17, 2022-AM Easter Service  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Mark 16:1-8

So what I'm about to read is the end of Mark. Mark ends at verse 8. I know for you regular pew sitters; it's disconcerting to have this big chunk of text with a footnote telling you this probably doesn't belong in the Bible. But the footnote is telling the truth. There is strong and broad agreement that the longer ending was added later and verse 8 is the original ending. And when you hear this morning's reading, you will understand why people wanted to add more words to Mark's gospel. Because Mark's ending is strange. It's not an ending that neatly ties things up in a bow, it's an ending that jolts you, looks you in the eye and says, "Are you paying attention!?" Maybe you've seen a movie that ends in a way that surprises you, and you go home from the movie and everyone in the car is saying, "what was that about?" And you spend the whole ride home trying to figure out why the movie ended that way. That's what the ending of Mark does to you; that's what the Holy Spirit wants the ending of Mark to do to you. Let's read Mark 16:1-8.

In October of last year, near Houston Texas, 3-year-old Christopher Ramirez suddenly went missing. He disappeared into the woods near his home. He'd been out shopping with his Mom when he chased the family dog into the woods. Somehow he got turned around in the chase. The dog came back, but Christopher didn't. Police were called, search parties were assembled. A day went by, and no one found him. Two days went by, still no sign of Christopher. Fears were mounting. Hopes were fading. How could a three-year-old possibly survive that long on his own? But then on the third day, a man searching the woods five miles from the family home heard the sound of a small child in distress. It was Christopher. He was weak, he was hungry, but he was otherwise unharmed. The searcher picked Christopher up and carried him out of the woods to the police who brought Christopher home. News of his rescue spread like wildfire. One moment everyone was under a cloud of fear and concern; the next moment that cloud was swept away! "He's alive, Christopher is alive!" Searchers hugged each other. Relatives broke down and wept tears of joy. If you look online you can find pictures of Christopher's mom holding her boy, and she is ecstatic. After three days of fear and sadness, her boy is alive.

That's a wonderful story, and I tell it to you today because I want to zoom in on one aspect of the story. I want us to zoom in on the reaction to the rescue. When Christopher is found, everyone reacts exactly the way you would expect: tears of happiness, hugs, smiles, ecstatic joy. This is the reaction you expect when a missing person is miraculously rescued. Contrast that with the reaction of the women in our story. The women come to the tomb under a cloud of fear and concern. Three days ago they lost someone who was the center of their life. Jesus had meant everything to them. Jesus had loved them like no other person they'd ever known. They'd left everything to follow him. But three days ago they saw him cry out in pain, and they saw his head sag and his body grow limp. And when the light went out of Jesus' eyes, the light went out of their world. But now, three days later, an angel appears to them and tells them, *"Don't be alarmed! Jesus is not here! He's risen! See his body was right over there, but it's gone. He's alive. He's gone ahead of you into Galilee! He's planning to meet you and the disciples there. Isn't this great! Go and tell the disciples! Go tell everyone! Jesus is alive!"*

What's the reaction to this "rescue?" Do the women weep tears of joy? Do they embrace one another and say, "Oh thank goodness! Praise the Lord!" Do they smile and laugh and sing? Nope. "*Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.*" The women receive wonderful news, life changing news, world changing news, but instead of rejoicing, they tremble and run.

Can we just stop for a moment and realize how the reaction of these women completely runs against the good news of the angel? The good news of the resurrection is proclaimed to them, and they completely fail to live out of it. The angel says to them Don't be alarmed! Don't be afraid. And what do the women do? They are trembling and bewildered and scared out of their minds. The angel says to them, "Go tell the disciples and Peter!" And what do the women do? They say nothing to anyone. The angel tells them to go to Galilee. It's not a direct command, but that's clearly the implication of his words. "He is going ahead of you into Galilee! There you will see him!" There's no direct command, but the implication is: "Go to Galilee! Jesus is waiting for you there!" And what do the women do? They flee from the tomb. The angel gives them a clear path to walk, but their steps are not guided by the reassuring voice of the angel; they flee, which is to say, their steps are guided by the voice of their fear.

So the women completely fail to follow the angel's instruction. I don't want to pile it on, but there is one other way in which they fail: they react with fear and confusion even though Jesus told them this would happen. All this is "just as he told you," says the angel. Jesus had told them that he would rise at least three times!!! Mark 8, Mark 9 and Mark 10. "The Son of Man must suffer and he must be crucified, but after three days he will rise again." Three times he said this. Mark 8:32 says, he spoke plainly to them about these things. He didn't use parables, he didn't use the strange symbolic language of a book like Revelation, to describe these events—he told them plainly: I will rise from the dead. And still they flee.

It's tempting to look at all this and think, 'Wow what's the matter with these women!?' How could they react that way to such good news?! Why didn't they rejoice like normal people?!' But to do that is to miss the point of Mark's ending. When the Holy Spirit inspires Mark to end his gospel this way, He is holding up a mirror. Ponder this strange ending long enough, reflect on it long enough, and you realize that when you're looking at these three women, you are looking at yourself. Watch these women long enough and you say, "That's me! That's us! Every single day!"

We are just like them. Has the good news been announced to us? Have we been told, 'He is not here, He is risen!?' Yes. We've shared that news with you many times this morning. Is this good news 'just as we have been told?' Have we been given advance notice of God's plans to raise his son and defeat evil and to make all things new? Yes! Most of us have heard about God's plan for our lives and this world our whole life.

And having heard this good news, do we live lives of fearless joy? Not really. In short bursts maybe. For a few glorious moments maybe. But if we are honest, a lot of our life is spent in the place where these women are: trembling, bewildered, afraid. Hobbled by our grief, paralyzed by our worries. We said that, instead of letting their steps be governed by the word of the angel and heading towards Galilee, the women's steps were governed by their fears—they flee. It's their fear and bewilderment that drives them along. That's me every day. I start every day with good intentions, but every day—every day—fears and passions and responsibilities come along, and so do tragedies and perplexities, and all of a sudden they are driving me along. This is not just me. You all know exactly what I mean. "*Trembling and bewildered the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.*" That's us.

It's not good. When human behavior is driven by fear, bad things happen. A couple of weeks ago in an article he wrote, David French—who is a Christian social commentator and thinker—made a point that I've heard some other people make. He points out the sharp growth in anxiety among young people. You've probably heard these statistics. Between 2009 and 2019—so this is the 10 years leading up to the pandemic—the percentage of teens who reported “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” rose from 26 percent to 37 percent. In 2021 that number rose to 44 percent. “Persistent feelings of sadness and hopelessness.” Why the increase? There are multiple causes I'm sure, but French wonders if many of these children are simply channeling the adults they see around them. Let me ask you adults, adults, is there any fear and anger in our world right now? Are we fighting about anything these days? Is there more or less of it than there was 10 years ago? Our children are simply watching us. That's how children learn, by watching adults. They see us living out of fear and anger, they see us worrying our way through our days, and they follow suit.

*“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb... because they were afraid.”* Mark uses verse 8 as a kind of mirror. We look at these three women and we see ourselves. As we've already seen, when he holds up that mirror, Mark is challenging us. He's challenging us to be resurrection people, he's challenging us to live with more joy and less panic. But I don't think that's the main reason he holds up the mirror. I think he holds up the mirror for our encouragement. Mark shows us the fear and bewilderment of the women as a way to say, “This is us people. This is what it means to be human. This is what we humans do.”

That's a message he's been trying to send through the whole gospel. Remember the theme of our Lenten sermon series? We went through the gospel of Mark and we saw how all human powers and human institutions and human good intentions fail to do right by Jesus. The religious leaders, the crowds, the political leaders, his family, his friends, they all fail Jesus. Human failure is like a theme in Mark. And now in the very last verse of his gospel, by showing us these bewildered women, Mark hits the theme one last time. Once again we completely miss the mark. You might say it's his way of proclaiming the doctrine of total depravity.

Maybe you're thinking, ‘but I thought you said this was a word of encouragement! How does showing us what a mess we are encourage us?’ It's encouraging because none of our mess, none of our foolishness, none of our sin, none of our failure, none of our doubt could stop God from accomplishing his purposes in Jesus. Mark's ending doesn't just show us total depravity; it proclaims more forcefully the absolute, merciful sovereignty of God. It doesn't matter what we humans do, Christ is risen! The religious leaders turn against God's messiah. Doesn't matter. Christ is risen! The political leaders fail to do justice. Doesn't matter, Christ is risen! The women panic and flee and don't do what the angel said. Doesn't matter. Christ is risen! You somehow manage to fall into your worries every single day. Doesn't matter. Christ is risen! That doesn't excuse our behavior. We are responsible for our sins and our failures. But when you belong to Jesus, when you take refuge in him, these sins may infect you, and they may torment you, but they cannot have you, because Christ is risen.

“Christ is risen... and he has gone ahead of you into Galilee.” That's an interesting little bit of information. Why does Jesus go ahead into Galilee? What's that all about? Galilee is home for Jesus and home for most of his disciples. Galilee is home turf. Galilee is the place of their common life and their common work, the place of their everyday tasks. When the angel tells the women that Jesus has gone ahead of them into Galilee, he's saying that Jesus has gone ahead of them into the places of responsibility and everyday worry and everyday work and everyday relationships. He's out ahead of them and he's working his resurrection power.

He's gone ahead of you into Galilee too. He's gone ahead of you into your everyday places of worry. You are a young person anxious about your future—will I meet someone who I can spend my life with? Will I find meaningful work? Will I find joy? The questions and challenges seems too big for you. Don't be afraid. Christ is risen and he has gone ahead of you into Galilee. You are a parent, anxious about raising your children in a world of so much conflict and anger. Sometimes your worry about your kids is like a kind of panic. Don't be afraid. Jesus has gone ahead of you into Galilee. He is making a way. Or maybe you are at a later stage in life, and, you or someone you love has been given a grim diagnosis. 'This is incurable. We will try to make you comfortable, but there's no remedy.' All of a sudden everything has changed. And you are full of fear and bewilderment. Don't be afraid—Christ is risen. He has gone ahead of you to prepare a place for you and by his resurrection power you will see his face. So fellow strugglers, fellow sinners, fellow worriers, fellow human beings, I declare to you the good news of Easter: Christ is Risen! The grave is empty! Jesus will have the last word!

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