

Easter, March 31, 2024 (Mark 16:1-8; Ps 118:1-2, 14-24; Is 25:6-9; I Cor 15:51-57)

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed, alleluia!** (repeat x 3)

News alert! After two thousand years, biblical scholars and archeologists have confirmed a startling fact: the three women who first went to the empty tomb were *Lutherans*. We know this by the fact that **they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid!**

Even though Mark was the first gospel written, it's sort of a *stepchild* between Matthew and Luke. Mark has no birth story. We meet Jesus at his baptism around the age of thirty.

And at the *end* of Mark—unlike the other three gospels—we never meet the resurrected Lord. We're told that he's risen, and we can see the place where he'd been laid. But we never see him, we don't get to hear his voice.

For some people, it doesn't *feel* like a resurrection at all. No glory. Just a starkly empty tomb, and words the three women couldn't understand. But this is the *gospel*, which means *good news*. And for me personally, in the last small paragraph at the original end of Mark, there are two words that contain some of the very best news in the entire New Testament! Listen:

Don't be afraid, the angel said. You're looking for Jesus, but he's not here. You can see where they laid him after his crucifixion. But he's risen! He's no longer dead! Here's his message to you: Go tell the disciples and Peter that he's going ahead of you to Galilee. There you'll see him, just as he told you.

***“Go tell the disciples and Peter that he's going ahead of you to Galilee.”
And Peter. Go tell the disciples and Peter.*** By now Judas has already killed himself. The other eleven disciples fled the scene when Jesus was arrested. Peter's the only one left, and he out-and-out denied Jesus.

So when Jesus says, **Go tell the disciples and Peter**, it's clear he wants to remain in relationship with them all—including outspoken, miserable Peter.

When Mark wrote his gospel, about 35 years after Jesus was raised from the dead, he was writing to *Christians*. Remember, there was no such thing as a *Christian* until after the resurrection. Jesus was born a Jew and died a Jew.

Only after the first Christian Pentecost did Jews who worshiped Jesus begin to be known as **Christ-ians**, followers of *the Christ, the Messiah*. So Mark wasn't depriving them of important details when he omitted the resurrected Christ. They all knew the story. The problem facing Mark—and facing the Church today!—was getting people to *do something* about it.

The resurrection of Jesus was world-changing, literally an earth-shaking event. And yet, the women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered. **They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.**

Two thousand years later we know the full story. We know the eleven terrified disciples who abandoned Jesus at his darkest hour remained hidden in the upper room for fifty days, until Pentecost.

Even though they themselves had seen their Lord, in the flesh and alive, they still feared the wrath of those who'd had him crucified. Only on Pentecost did the Holy Spirit descend on them like tongues of fire. Only then were they filled with a *living* faith, with courage to share the good news with everyone they met.

That Pentecost was the birth of the Christian Church—the body of Christ aflame with the Spirit, burning to share the good news so *no one* would be left out.

But Mark's gospel was first preached to Christians hiding in the catacombs in Rome—the city where Nero made Roman torches by burning Christians to light the streets, or fed them to lions in the arena. Rome, where Christians **said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.**

So Mark's gospel ends on that stark note, hoping to prod new witnesses to go out and testify. Perhaps they'd be ashamed of their fear and speak out. Perhaps they'd remember anew the *good news* that Jesus sent to **the disciples and Peter.**

That good news is for *us today!* The message they received told them Jesus **was going ahead of them into Galilee; there they would see him.**

For the disciples, Galilee was where it all began, three years earlier. In Galilee Jesus first called his disciples. In Galilee they first heard him preach and teach, and watched him welcome, comfort, and heal all sorts of outcasts and fringe people.

It was to Galilee Jesus called them after his resurrection, so they could continue the ministry he'd begun with them.

For those eleven disciples, and the women who were with them, the *good news* was that Jesus was going ahead of them, back to where it all began.

And for us, so far away in time and place, our call, too, is to return to the beginning. For us, that beginning was *baptism*, when we were *sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.* –The cross of Christ, on which he died to give us life. The cross of Christ, which could not hold him in death.

In baptism we died to this life and were *reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we were made members of the Church **which is the body of Christ*** (LBW 121).

Paul wrote to the Romans about baptism: **All who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a *death* like his, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection** (Rom 6:3-5).

Those words of promise are also a call to action! In baptism, **we have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us** (Gal 2:20).

Jesus calls us back to our beginning, just as he called the disciples ***and Peter*** on that first Easter morning. The gospel of Mark contains no resurrection glory—but the glory of our risen Lord will sustain *us* as we leave this place today, nourished by his very body and blood, and strengthened in the renewal of our baptismal promises. *And knowing, believing* in the forgiveness of our every sin.

For me, the best news of all has always been those two words: ***and Peter***. Jesus forgave Peter, who had actually denied three times that he even *knew* Jesus. How can I doubt that Jesus also has forgiven me for a lifetime of things done and left undone, said and left unsaid.

You can't out-run God's love. You can't out-sin God's love! Jesus has extended his grace and mercy, to *me, chief of sinners though I be*. That has been life-giving.

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As far as the east is from the west, that's how far he has removed our guilt and shame from us. He died so I could believe in his promise that sin, death, and the devil have been defeated once *for all!* *That* news is worth sharing!

The women were told, **Go and tell!** I say to you all likewise, **Go and tell!**

Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed, alleluia!** (repeat)