

April 1, 2018 – The Resurrection of Our Lord
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Mark 16:1-8; Acts 10:34-43

The Foolishness of God

You've got to be joking, you might be thinking when you hear the last line of today's gospel—that last line of Mark's gospel being that after the women went to the tomb and found it empty “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The end.

You've got to be joking, that's how Mark ends?

Sort of. There are other endings to this gospel. If you grab a Bible and flip to the end of Mark, in most Bibles you'll find other verses—but a decent study Bible will note those verses don't appear in the earliest manuscripts. No, the earliest written accounts of what many believe is the very earliest gospel all end abruptly, as we just heard, with the women saying nothing, for they were afraid. Even on a grammatical level this ending is abrupt: in the original language, Greek, the sentence ends with a preposition, something along the lines of “they were afraid for...” But in Greek, as in English, ending a sentence with a preposition is not unheard of. That's how sentences sometimes end up. People talk like that when there are urgent things to talk about. It could even be said that breaking conventions is what the greatest stories are for.

The end of Mark has had later editors, and grammarians, and people writing dissertations spilling much ink. But that's not what you came to hear about, on Easter—which this year happens also to be April Fool's Day. Actually, I think the confluence of Easter and the first of April is helpful here. I think the end of Mark is meant to elicit just this response—you must be joking—and something more. After the silencing fear, after the terror that swallows up sound, after that terribly abrupt end of all hope, there should be a heartbeat in which no one speaks, no one even breathes—and then there should be a dawning of delight, a grin of recognition, maybe even an outright guffaw.

They said nothing to anyone? Then how did this gospel get written? They said nothing to anyone? Than how did Peter, to whom the messenger at the tomb specifically directed the women, how did Peter give that speech we just heard, that was recorded in the book of Acts? Remember, too, where we last left Peter, on the other side of the tomb. Remember what we last heard from him: how he lied and denied he ever knew Jesus, said it with a curse. But somehow Peter has come to know that his Redeemer lives, can speak of it with clarity, to anyone who will listen. Somehow the Messianic Secret is not so secret anymore.

I much admire this about the evangelist Mark: that though this gospel can be rough and stark, its inexorable climax of reversal works even on an internal level. I love how very meta Mark is—and how appropriate that is, for this most meta of narratives. What looks like tragedy becomes the mystery of salvation, something that we can barely wrap our heads around. As another part of scripture puts it, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (and women, too).

We should all be laughing today. We should all be laughing after the end of Mark's gospel, for we know this is not the end of the gospel—and what good news this is! God took what was wretched, and transformed it into triumph.

The suffering that came with this, the pain God endures on our behalf, is not to be glossed over, not to be denied. But this does not make us dour—as Jesus himself commands in another gospel. In fact, on the very night that he is staring down death, Jesus has a remarkable thing to his disciples, he says, “In this world you will have tribulation,” (that's not the remarkable thing, that's rather obvious), “in the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.” Be of good cheer. Tribulation there will be—tribulation

is what God took on—but be of good cheer, for God is. God rejoices to overcome the world. God rejoices to come as one of us, to be God with us, to save us.

As the melody of that Christmas hymn our Bell Choir played as a prelude today, in jest, as the melody of that Christmas hymn so ably captures, God's coming into the world is a descent of joy. And on a silent night, a holy night, God looked with joy out of infant eyes, as God was held in a mother's loving arms. And as a child, God laughed—fully human as he was, he laughed, and as a man, as with joy he gathered children and babes in his arms, and blessed them, to the befuddlement of disciples. On many other occasions as well Jesus said things that had those around him scratching their heads, wondering at the punchline. Parables continue to perplex us, pointing out our foolishness, how much we don't get. But the joke is not on us, it is for us.

There's actually very old theological tradition that notes that on Easter, God had the devil, and sin, and death all fooled. Evil gave its all, but God had the last laugh. And you know what they say about the one who laughs last: they laugh best. The joy of Christmas, the joy of incarnation, climbs yet greater heights at Easter, at resurrection, raising not only Christ, but us as well. The joke is not on us, it is for us. It is practical in that way, in what it accomplishes.

Because of Easter, women who were afraid, say something. Those women, Mary, Mary Magdalene, Salome, were terrified, shell-shocked, dumbstruck. Maybe the women didn't think they had a voice. Maybe it would have been easier to keep silent. Clearly, ultimately, they didn't. Take a minute to truly appreciate the significance of this, of what they did, and what happened after, what a difference it made, that women said something. They did so, because of Easter. Take a minute to appreciate that, and take heart, because the first witnesses didn't get it right, right away. At first they froze. But Easter doesn't end like that. Easter is bigger than our fear.

Because of Easter, a man who wept bitter tears after abandoning the best thing he'd ever known was later able to stand up and speak, on behalf of what he once abandoned, speaking with a poise no less passionate. That man, Peter, had had some low moments—even before that worst night of all. Much of the time he didn't even realize what he was doing. But there was no more denying it after the cock crowed. Peter thought then that all was lost, himself included. Instead, because of Easter, he became a leader. Easter is bigger than the worst thing we ever did.

Because of Easter, you are here. You didn't come here for April fools, you came to hear the gospel, and it is no joke. It is true today and every day: whatever fear your harbor, whatever mistake you have made, whatever humorless worldview you are being told is all one can sensibly hold, leave it. Leave it like the women left the empty tomb. Leave it like the nets and regrets Peter once had. Leave it, with great laughter, with laughter that rises to the rafters and joins with the holy laughter of God. We are all fools; be a fool for Christ. Know and share the joy that comes down and raises us up.