

**When Morning Gilds the Skies**  
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**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Easter Sunday, 4/1/2018**  
**Mark 16:1-8**

God lived and dwelled among us in the person of Jesus. This is a remarkable truth. A miraculous truth. A world-changing truth. For the author of Mark's gospel, this truth is the centerpiece of the story. And because this truth is SO big and SO true, there's not a lot of need for Hollywood beginnings or endings.

The gospel starts: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And within in a dozen verses, Jesus of Nazareth has been baptized, God has proclaimed him a son with whom She is well pleased, and Jesus' ministry is off and running in the Galilee. You heard me right: no manger, no daring escape to Egypt, no eloquent prologue. We just get to the gettin'. The same is true with Mark's ending.

Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm notes that Mark spends five chapters detailing the Holy Week events leading up to Jesus' death. But the gospel only dedicates eight verses to the events of Sunday morning, and Jesus isn't even present in the story. This is in Mark-ed contrast (pardon the pun!) to John's gospel, which we read during today's sunrise service; it's twice as long, and Jesus is present, and the reader isn't left to wonder what happens next.

I often ask our adult Bible Study if they would feel a little cheated if we read Mark's beginning at our annual Christmas Eve service in lieu of Luke's? Most of them don't hesitate to offer a resounding "YES!!!" And if we're honest, we might have the same sentiment about today's reading: "Can't we read something more interesting, more hopeful – something with more clarity and resolve?"

But if you can allow yourself to get past that initial reaction, you may find that Mark offers THE most poignant, and THE most significant of all the Easter accounts. So let's do this!!!

It's Sunday. And when morning gilds the skies, two Marys, one they call the Magdalene, and another who raised James right, and Salome, their hearts awakened cry: "May Jesus Christ be praised!!!" And alike at work and prayer, to Jesus they repair.

If you read too quickly, you might assume their task is morbid and daunting – the preparation of a body now nearly 36-hours in decay. But they have not come to prepare Jesus, they have come to anoint him. This verb is SO vital. These woman witnessed the events of Friday. And these women witnessed the events of his ministry. Patriarchal writers and centuries-full of chauvinistic theologians have pushed them to the margins, made us to believe that Jesus only shared ideas of discipleship and service with twelve men. But these women were there. And they listened. And they loved. And they served. And they made sense, real sense, of who this person was. They followed him to the cross, and they followed him to the tomb. And they were bound and determined to mark the significance of this remarkable friend – God in their midst.

When morning gilds the skies,  
My heart awaking cries:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Alike at work and prayer,  
To Jesus I repair;

May Jesus Christ be praised!

We often volunteer for tasks that are difficult. We do them out of love. And that love makes us wonder less about the details of how a task will be completed, and instead, allows us to faith that our work will happen. Parking spots near the door appear on rainy days when we visit sick friends in the hospital; kind strangers somehow sense that we need someone to hold the door for us when we've got a heavy load; checks appear in the mail, even when we're anxious that our budget may not be met. And massive stones are rolled away for three women determined to anoint the Christ.

As the three determined women approach the tomb, their gazes are downward, or at least not upward – they're wondering how in the world they'll roll away this stone. And upon seeing the stone rolled away, they gaze upward, in awe that their initial anxiety has been relieved.

Does sadness fill my mind?  
A solace here I find,  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Or fades my earthly bliss,  
My comfort still is this:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

The women enter the tomb, but instead of a body, they find a young man dressed in white – let's call him an angel, or at least a mysterious figure they don't recognize as human – and they are alarmed. Ottoni Wilhem points out that the Greek word *ekthambeomai*, translated as "alarmed" in our reading, is best described as a mix of fear and amazement. It's the same word used to translate the feeling that the disciples experienced during the transfiguration. And it's very likely reminiscent of what Moses might have felt at the burning bush, or the Israelites on Mt. Sinai, or Elijah in the silence of God, or a young Samuel as he heard God's voice in the temple.

But here's what's really cool. This mysterious, glowing man, allays their fears by saying, "Do not be alarmed." He senses exactly how these women feel, and he names it, and he offers comfort. Isn't that what the presence of God does? God identifies our fears, our needs, our longings, and God addresses them. And isn't that what Jesus did?

When sleep her balm denies,  
My silent spirit sighs,  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
When evil thoughts molest,  
With this I shield my breast:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

"Jesus of Nazareth is who you are looking for," the angel says. "He was crucified, but he has been raised. And he is not here. But look over there. You can see where his body was. Jesus, the man you know, has gone on ahead to the Galilee – the place where you met him, and loved him, and served him. And he's waiting for you there. I promise!"

"Jesus told you all of this. Many times. And I've been sent to tell you, because God knows that you Mary, and you Mary, and you Salome, have listened, and have loved, and have served your friend. And because God trusts you, and because Jesus loves you, the three of you have been entrusted to tell Peter,

and the other disciples. Tell them to go to the Galilee and meet Jesus. Tell them to go now, because it's all happening."

Again, be careful not to speed read. There's a lot here. Three things stand out:

One: Jesus is returning to where it all started, the Galilee. Two: God entrusts three women, people who would never be considered as credible witnesses to this event by either Roman or Jewish authorities, as the primary messengers of resurrection. Three: In naming Peter and the other disciples, Jesus makes clear that despite their betrayal, they are offered grace, and offered an invitation to create the same kind of ministry as his: teaching, preaching, healing, loving, and serving.

God's realm has not only burst into this world, it has shattered the power of Rome, and even the power of death. But there will be no parade. God's inbreaking is announced to marginalized women; God's ministry is led by flawed doubters; God's presence is birthed in a place where "nothing good comes out of," and God's re-emergence is made manifest in a rural-outpost of poor fishermen and day laborers.

WHAT. A. STORY!!!

The night becomes as day  
When from the heart we say:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
The pow'rs of darkness fear  
When this sweet chant they hear:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

But Mark's not done. Just when we think the writer will stamp this story with an iconic panoramic of heroines riding off toward the sunrise to tell their friends of this good news, we get the exact opposite:

"Mary, and Mary, and Salome, went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing, to anyone, for they were afraid."

Oh sure, there's an epilogue in your Bible. But the original text didn't include it. And for good reason. Jesus doesn't live in epilogues. Jesus lives in Galilee. And if you've ever been to Galilee, you'd know.

Here's what I think happened. No, here's what I KNOW happened. Mary, and Mary, and Salome, three remarkable women, left that tomb in awe. Not in awe of angels. And not in awe of resurrection. But in awe of a life in Galilee. I think in that very moment, a flood of memories washed over them – scenes of healing, scenes of loving, scenes of dignity being bestowed upon every kind of God's children. I think in that very moment, they realized the wholeness of Jesus. And in that moment, they were overwhelmed with the idea that Jesus invited them into that same wholeness – made them initiates into God's possibilities. I think, as Carl Boberg says, when they realized the vastness of God, and their inclusion in that vastness, "they scare could take it in."

In heav'n's eternal bliss  
The loveliest strain is this,  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Let earth and sea and sky  
From depth to height reply,

May Jesus Christ be praised.

We know the story was told. We know that Mary, and Mary, and Salome eventually summoned the courage to share their witnesses. And we know that their witnesses inspired Peter and the other disciples to summon courage and confidence in their ministries as well.

But I want to tell you, I don't believe in Mary, and Mary, and Salome's witnesses because of what I've read in epilogues, or other gospels. I believe in their witnesses, because of the women and men they have inspired in my life.

Hands prepare fried chicken and green beans, and notes of heartfelt sympathy for families who grieve; Prayers, creative prayers, the-Friday-kind-of-prayers are spoken for neighbors, some we know and some we don't; Little ones are loved by people as if they were their own; Grass is cut, and gutters are cleaned, and flowers are clipped and placed in chicken-wire crosses, and eggs are fried at IHOP, all to in order to sing to the song a little louder; Tables are set, some of them fancy, some of them makeshift, but somehow there's always enough to eat, and always plenty of ingenuity to find another seat for late-arriving guests; Christ's peace is passed, sometimes tangibly, sometimes virtually, but always effectively; Scriptures are read, and questions, authentic, diligent, important questions are asked; And women and men, wake early – some make coffee, or start the fire, or turn on the lights, or attend to the candles or offering plates, or ready themselves at the door to offer greeting...

This is the work, the early morning work of anointing the Christ. Ordinary people, empowered with the resolve to do God's extraordinary bidding. It is the resolve to follow the Christ to the Galilee. The zip code's not precise, but the spirit is.

Resurrection Sunday contains a cross. And it contains victory over such a cross. But such victory is not a script for Hollywood. Easter victory is the steadying of our wobbly knees. And the openness to overcome our doubts about a God who can be SO good. And to overcome our doubts about what this good God can and does do through each of us. And to take that first step back to the Galilee, where Jesus, and all of God's possibilities await. And it is the celebration, of all those saints before us, who like Mary, and Mary, and Salome, said, "It is so. And we must go."

Be this while life is mine,  
My song of love divine,  
May Jesus Christ be praised!  
Sing this eternal song,  
Through all the ages long:  
May Jesus Christ be praised!

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.