

They were afraid.

On first appearance, this seems a strange phrase to use at the conclusion of a gospel account, and an even stranger phrase to read on Easter morning.

But if we dig deeper, we'll discover that these three words are masterfully composed.

Consider the source. Mark's community existed toward the latter third of the first century BCE. Jesus-followers are constantly persecuted. Jerusalem will be sacked by the Romans if it hasn't been already. Mt. Vesuvius will erupt, covering an entire continent in a black, ashy cloud. Human rights for the most marginalized communities are non-existent. And as the Jesus-movement enters adulthood, its momentum seems to be fading. For Jesus followers, and particularly for believers in Mark's community, it feels like the world is ending. And they are afraid.

And we're reading Mark's gospel in 2021. We have been sucked into a Zoom vortex. We are processing the loss of a half-a-million Americans to a virus. Polarization is rampant in every area of life. The economy, institutionalized racism, classism, and sexism, the environmental crisis, isolation from friends and family...all of these issues make us anxious. We're even anxious about talking about these weighty subjects in substantive ways, and in mixed company, because it's so good to actually have company and to actually have socialization in any form, we don't do anything to jeopardize it. I think it's safe to say, that we too, as people of faith, are living in traumatic times, and we, too, are afraid.

And this morning, Mark tells us of three women, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, who shake off their grief, or perhaps cloak themselves in it, to go and anoint a friend, and a teacher, and a kindred spirit. It's hard to imagine that their devotion to a radical teacher who disrupted societal norms was celebrated by their peers. One might infer that like the suffragettes a century ago, they navigated their interactions with a mix of pride and caution; perseverance and heart break; and they would not have been immune to heckling and cruelty both from those within their station and above it. I dare say, this is a story of three women, who just like us, and just like Mark's community, are living in traumatic times, and they, too, are afraid.

But these three faithful women, Mary, and Mary, and Salome, followed Jesus. They listened to him. And they loved him. And they learned how to serve and be served alongside him. And they protected him. And they stayed by him. They witnessed his ministry. All of it. While the disciples stayed huddled in the upper room, these women witnessed his crucifixion; they made sure they knew where his body was buried; and they rose early in the morning to do faithful but unpleasant work: they went to anoint Jesus' body in order that the tomb might not be filled with the stench of death.

It's interesting, too. They worried about the massive stone covering the tomb. They were anxious about how it might be moved, almost in the same way you and I might be anxious about the floral arrangements or the musical accompaniment at the funeral of a loved one. Their anxiety about a stone might also reveal the way that grief distracts us. What reasonable expectation might three women have (or three men for that matter!) of moving a massive boulder? And before business hours to boot? About as much as you and I would have in unlocking a slot at the mausoleum on a Sunday morning without the assistance of a key and staffer.

I am also struck at the way our grief can distract us, I think in a healthy way most times, and give us space, before we process the reality of loss. I can't tell you how many times music moves me in a funeral service, because I'm done planning the details, and my mind finally confronts the urgency and significance of my loss. I think in some small way, this stone, yet unmoved, and this anointing, yet to be done, is providing a few more moments of space, before Mary, and Mary, and Salome have to confront the loss of their friend.

And then, there is a flurry of activity.

The stone is rolled away! No small feat. But is this a righteous feat or a mischievous one?

Inside the tomb, there is an angel, dressed in white, gleaming, I'm sure, and sitting on the right side, that's the righteous, loving, banquet side, of where the body rested the day before.

Mary, and Mary, and Salome are alarmed, and I would argue, rightly so. If the stone has been moved in a natural way, it would have had to be done by a group with resources – at least a few very strong and skilled men –and it’s reasonable to assume that resourceful people in this setting are not aligned with the Jesus movement; they would most likely have ill intentions for the body.

I will also intuit that our three heroines are both brave AND perceptive. They’ve seen enough in the ministry of Jesus to know the terrifying and awestriking power of God. I have a feeling Peter and James and John may have had loose lips, and the transfiguration event, and its gleaming whiteness and weirdness may have been recounted to the inner circle. How could it not have been? And I feel certain these three women remembered every word Jesus spoke; they would have known about sheep and goats, and the angel’s positioning in the tomb would not have been lost on them.

I think they are alarmed, startled, shocked, afraid even, because they have just walked into an event beyond their comprehension and reckoning.

The angel says:

Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But 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.

Wow! As if they didn’t already have enough to process! The naming here is really important. Jesus of Nazareth, the man you knew, full of humanity just like you and me, was crucified. Not only did he die, but he experienced the shame, and the abandonment, and the humiliation, and the pain, and numbness that so many marginalized persons have felt. He also shared in their joy. But Jesus has been raised. Note the distinction – not he rose, or raised himself, but God has raised Jesus. And the risen Jesus doesn’t linger in the stench of a tomb. The risen Jesus is living in Galilee, the very place it all started.

And it gets even more extraordinary. This risen Jesus isn't residing there to exact revenge, or to hold grudges, or to be kept secret. This risen Jesus is residing there, filled with the same grace and spirit and power of the One who resurrects. The twelve have abandoned him; Peter has even betrayed and denied him. But Jesus calls them to Galilee, to join him, to be present with him, to continue the beloved community.

And most important, note that the angel doesn't say, tell Peter and the others that he is going ahead of them, and will see them, just as he told them. The angel says, "you." I think that's an inclusive you – The angel is reminding Mary, and Mary, and Salome that Jesus isn't making them message-takers. Jesus is entrusting his witness and ministry to them.

So...Mary, and Mary, and Salome, left that place, in silence, and they said nothing, at least for the moment, to anyone, for they were afraid.

Well I don't blame them one bit! You mean to tell me that three women, who prior to meeting Jesus, had never been heard, or been taken seriously, or had the opportunity to impact public and recognized change; who had to endure all of the atrocities of Roman occupation with a tenth of the dignity afforded to men; now, all of a sudden, these women are entrusted and empowered to continue the ministry of Jesus. That's a scary proposition, one that affords the grace to be afraid.

But Mark's gospel isn't interested in tidy epilogues. It lays out the life of Jesus by letting us know the kingdom has come near in the form of a beloved community in Galilee. An unknown man, from a forgotten region, who sees value in forgotten people, channels the divine, and new life is created. And even better, Jesus invites everyone else to join him in this new life. Mark's gospel not only tells what Jesus did, and how Jesus lived; it also spells out what Jesus calls us to do.

Mark's is a story written by a community who was afraid and is received today by a community who is also afraid. And Mark's story describes a group of women who allowed the fullness of their experiences with Jesus, and the hope of resurrection to overcome their present fears.

They swallowed the lump in their throats. They maneuvered their wobbly knees, one awkward shaking step at a time, and found their friends. And they told the story. And they traveled home to the Galilee. And there, they dared to believe that they could replicate and emulate the same actualized love that Jesus shared with them. And that love is resurrected; it travels through space and time; it fills our fearful, weary bones, and reminds us that we, too, can resurrect God's love.

There's a lump in my throat. Sometimes I try to swallow it so hard, I feel it deep down in my chest. It's this fear. A fear for the world my daughters will inherit; a fear for the welfare of the homeless neighbor I ignore at the stoplight because I'm in a hurry and my shame for prioritizing trivial pursuits over human needs; an anxiety about our creation and our lack of care for it; a sense of doubt that my seemingly insignificant gifts can create any kind of impactful inertia of good, in a world with so many complications.

But today, the sun slowly creeps over the horizon; the tomb is empty; and Jesus resides in Galilee – that place where people find their value in God; where people find empowerment in beloved community; where there is hope in God's possibilities; where our care and concern for neighbor, practiced, lived, felt consistently, just as Jesus showed us, builds meaningful relationships, and slowly chisels away the hurt, and pain, and blah of corporate, finite, institutionalized hate and greed in our world. Jesus resides in Galilee and calls us there, to be seen, and known, and experienced.

Yes, Sardis, I am afraid! But today, I step with growing confidence toward Galilee, faithful that I will remember not just what Jesus has done, but what Jesus calls me to do. I think that you and me, all of us, have a love to give, and valuable gifts to share, and I believe our collective love will relieve our fears, and empower us to see, to know, to experience, and to ultimately be, the resurrected Jesus in the world.

Easter!!!

Friends may it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.