

For They Were Afraid to Be Seen, Know, and Loved
The Easter Vigil
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Mark 16:1-8

In my previous two sermons, I have used the metaphor of a mirror to expand upon what has become a familiar theme over the past several months at St. Thomas's: that of being seen, known, and loved by God, and of seeing, knowing, and loving others and ourselves as God does.

On Maundy Thursday, I spoke of how Jesus holds up a mirror to the disciples to show how much he loves them—and by extension, how much he loves *us*—even as that mirror reflects who we are in all of our sinfulness. As Jesus knows, one of the disciples will betray him, one will deny him, and nine will flee—and yet he washes the feet of all, serves and loves them all, not just the one who will stay with him and bear witness to the end. It is we, not Jesus, who recoil against what we see of ourselves and others in that mirror. And too often, we respond not with Jesus' divine love and compassion, but with graceless human fear and loathing.

On Good Friday, we turn our fear and loathing against the One who loves us. We are no longer among his disciples in the Upper Room, but shouting and cursing among the human rabble condemning *Jesus* for *our* sins. In John's telling of the Passion, we see ourselves at our worst, as those who share in the guilt of putting a guiltless man to death. We have turned our backs on Jesus, and when we look into the mirror that John holds up, we see our betrayal front and centre, the blame squarely on us. But if we tear our eyes away from our self-absorbed recrimination and look deeply beyond ourselves, in the distance, in that same mirror, we see Golgatha, where we glimpse the love and glory of Christ reigning from the Tree. In John's eyes, we see a promise of triumph over tragedy, of love over death.

And tonight? What will we see reflected in the mirror that Mark holds up for us? Unlike the other Gospel writers, who focus on the resurrection appearances, Mark requires us first to confront what keeps us from facing the truth: our fear. Only then can we comprehend the joy of the Resurrection. Only then can we see, know, and love God, ourselves, and each other as God in Christ Jesus sees, knows, and loves us. For when we aren't leading with loathing and blame, we all too often act or fail to act out of fear.

As you just heard, Mark's gospel ends on a cliffhanger: "And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid." Fear and trembling.

"They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." With an ending like that, I imagine Mark could be a screenwriter for just about any TV drama or soap opera in this day and age.

A cliffhanger such as this is calculated to make the reader ask, "What happened next?" A good story, after all, is *compelling*; it draws us in and speeds us forward.

A cliffhanger such as this is also calculated to be intensely *disappointing*, even *unsatisfactory*. Mark's cliffhanger leaves the hearer straining for some sort of resolution. It's like cutting off a familiar tune just before the final note. Let me give you an example; feel free to provide what's missing: "Happy birthday to—" [you].

That's right. Without that final note, things feel incomplete, so much so that you just *can't stand it*, so much so that you're *compelled* to provide the final note yourself. In just this same way, the non-ending of Mark's gospel demands a response from *us*. In its abrupt and disturbing way, it calls us to a deeper and ultimately more *joyful* response than the "happiest" of endings ever could.

And because this gospel demands of us a *response*, I can't do this alone. I'm sorry to put you all on the spot, but in seeking some halfway decent mode of preaching on this text, I was reminded of the old call-and-response sermons of my boyhood. Maybe you've seen the movie "The Apostle," starring Robert Duvall. My favourite scene depicts two preachers in tag-team fashion ask: "Who's the King of Kings?" and the congregation responds in one voice "Jesus." "Before Abraham was, was *who*?" "Jesus." "Who's the First and the Last?" "Jesus." So it hit me: In the Anglican tradition, we have our own version of call and response. Let me give you a few examples. Help me out here if you will:

The Lord be with you.
And with thy spirit.

or,

The Word of the Lord,
Thanks be to God.

or,

Alleluia. Christ is risen.
The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

[I see we'll have to work on that one a bit more in Eastertide.] You get the idea.

And I've got an idea I'd like to try out this evening. Every time I quote from the end of Mark, saying, "they said nothing to anyone," I would like you to respond by completing the sentence, namely, "for they were afraid." Just four little words, but I need them nice and clear. (If it helps the die-hard Anglo-Catholics among us, just think of this as merely another liturgical *versicle* and response, not a protestant call-and-response.) Let's try it. Ready?

They said nothing to anyone,
For they were afraid.

Good. Here we go, for real this time:

They came expecting to find a corpse; being observant Jews, they waited out the night, and, “When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.” They came hoping to anoint his body as one anoints a king for burial, but they did not expect a resurrected Lord, and so:

They said nothing to anyone,
For they were afraid.

The most they hoped for was some Roman officer or strong gardener to take pity on them and consent to open the tomb, for “very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. They were saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?’” They thought their biggest obstacle to be removed would be a cold, hard rock. They hardly expected to find that cold, hard death itself had already been removed, and so in the end:

They said nothing to anyone,
For they were afraid.

“And looking up, they saw that the stone was [already] rolled back; it was very large.” At first, they might have suspected grave robbers; this was a rich man’s tomb, after all, donated by Joseph of Arimathea. But when it began to dawn on them that it was God’s own hand that had rolled away the stone,

They said nothing to anyone,
For they were afraid.

But that was just the beginning of their fear. For “entering the tomb, they saw a young man, sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed.” It probably wouldn’t have mattered what this heavenly messenger had said at that moment, for whatever it was,

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“And he said to them, ‘Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him.’” The women could sense immediately that he had authority, for he sat at “the right side,” like God’s “right-hand man.” He already knew what they were doing there, and whom they were looking for; and even though his first words to them were “do not be amazed,” still,

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For they were afraid.

The next words this man in white spoke were words of hope and reconciliation, yet all the more frightening because they were unexpected: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter”—Peter, the one who had denied Jesus three times—“that [Jesus] is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.” The women, faithful to the end, more faithful even than Peter and the disciples, at the last moment cracked under the weight of their grief. They were unable after all the tears, the bitterness, the hopelessness, to hear the word of hope, unable to carry out even a message of reconciliation. And who can blame them? After all that they had been through, “they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and...”

They said nothing to anyone,
For they were afraid.

Fear. In the “fight or flight” mechanism embedded in every living creature, fear is its trigger. So it is no wonder that, confronted with a reality that defied comprehension, those first Christians should flee from the empty tomb. I, too, have had my moments of flight, when I have run away from the empty tomb, when I have been too afraid to proclaim the Resurrection.

Most of the time, though, we are not held back by fear of the empty tomb or amazement at the good news, but by fear of what other people will *think* of us. Instead of fearlessly looking through *God's* eyes and speaking from that place, we project our fear onto God and others, and keep our mouths shut.

So, rather than *projections*, the ending of Mark's gospel offers an uncomfortable *reflection*. We refrain from sharing our resurrection faith out of *embarrassment*, whereas the women fled from the empty tomb out of *trembling* and *astonishment*—another translation renders this phrase “*terror* and amazement”—and at first, at least,

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For they were afraid.

Yet Mark's gospel is not about failure or despair. It is *not* the gospel of *terror*! Rather, the overwhelming good news of Mark's gospel is that even when we fail Christ, *Jesus never fails us*. Jesus *never* fails us; even death cannot hold him. The resurrected Jesus is always going on before us, “to Galilee”—in Mark an important symbol both of “the home front,” for it is where the disciples were called at the beginning of the gospel, and of “the margins of society,” for Galilee was the border between Jews and Gentiles, a region in which both groups mixed, albeit uneasily at times.

So we, too, are called to find Jesus both at home *and* on the margins (not merely in one place or the other, but in *both*). Jesus is faithful in accomplishing his purposes on earth even when we fail, always calling us back into fellowship with him, always seeing, knowing, and loving us—in our failings, in our terrors, in our amazements, in our trembling, in our embarrassments, and in our fears. Even though there's no “happy ending” to Mark's gospel, the oldest of the gospel accounts handed down to us, there is consolation: Jesus reaches out to us in love beyond the cross and empty tomb. Even when we are the ones who put him there. Even when we are running away.

Fear keeps us from believing that we can be seen, known, and loved. And so we hide parts of ourselves from others. We even try to hide our true selves from ourselves. Most absurdly, we try to hide our true selves from God, which is, after all, the very first thing Adam and Eve did after they ate the forbidden fruit. They covered up their nakedness and they hid from God.

As I said on Thursday and again yesterday, I say to you again tonight: Holy Week invites us to live the Christian life in its fullness. On Maundy Thursday, I talked about how that means asking God to take our hard hearts and give us soft hearts that beat in time with the Sacred Heart of Jesus. On Good Friday, I talked about how God's love is so perfect that there really is nothing we can do to kill God's love. And tonight, while we don't yet see the Resurrected Jesus in Mark's gospel for ourselves, Mark asks us to prepare our hearts to receive him by confronting our fear. Fear that the Resurrection can't be true. Fear that it's too good to be true.

When the truth is this: Perfect love casts out all fear. When we live in the Light of Christ, God's power, working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. When we truly see, know, and love the living God in Christ Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is that Spirit who, as the Bishop prayed over our confirmands, defends us with the Father's heavenly grace, that we may continue God's forever, and daily increase in that Spirit more and more, until we come to God's everlasting kingdom.

God is living and active, and wants to be living and active in me and in you, right here, right now. Even sin, death, and the grave cannot kill God's love for us. Thanks be to our God who sees, knows, and loves us both now and evermore. [Can I get an Amen?]

In the Name...