

DO-IT-YOURSELF RESURRECTION

Mark 16: 1-8

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EASTER SUNDAY

One of those awkward and difficult things that we never talk about in the Christian church is the fact that the Bible presents us with four very different versions of the Easter story.

There's no getting around that fact. It is, as the saying goes, what it is.

They are not four parts of the same story. They don't complement each other. They don't complete each other. They are four separate, different, and distinct versions of the story. They are, in fact, the same story told from four different traditions, four different perspectives, four different geographical regions, and four different historical contexts.

If we try to deny that or soft peddle it we are just being dishonest and that's no way to approach Easter or any part of our faith, for that matter.

No, the only honest way to approach this story is the way I have often offered for many biblical stories: "I don't know if these things happened exactly this way or not, but I know this story is true."

Today, we're looking at Mark's version of the story. And we don't know if the first Easter happened exactly like this, but we know the story is true.

Mark was the first writer to put down on paper a written account of that first Easter. He did so, as close as we can tell, in about the year 73 of the Common Era. This was about 40 years after the first Easter. About 9-10 years after the death of Peter and Paul in Nero's persecutions. And it was just a few months after the end of the First Jewish War against Rome and the mass suicide at Masada.

Mark had been a disciple of Peter, and was now a traveling evangelist who moved about through Asia Minor and Syria and the northern regions of the Holy Land and saw the thousands of war refugees flooding into those areas, mostly Jewish but many of them Jewish Christians.

These Jewish Christians were coming to the Greek and gentile Christians of the northern church communities and asking them for help, for sanctuary, for food and shelter and maybe even a hiding place. They spoke a different language and they practiced their Christian faith differently. They were Christians but they held onto many of their old Jewish traditions some of which, to put it frankly, made them a little hard to take.

Two very different cultures were being thrown together and united by a single faith in the one named Jesus. And it is to these two groups of people that Mark writes his gospel message, to these two very different groups of Christians trying to find a way to live together and get along, that Mark gives this first ever written account of the first Easter morning.

Let's take a few minutes to look at it through the eyes of those first readers.

MARK'S EASTER STORY

Once again, we encounter that lean, spare writing style that is Mark's alone. His is the briefest, the most urgent of the Easter accounts and the least complete. Watch...

He begins by telling us the time. Mark is very time conscious. There is no time to waste. Things happen "immediately" in his gospel and that is true here.

Three women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and a third woman named Salome who we have never encountered before this day – have been waiting impatiently for the Sabbath to end. It was forbidden to touch a dead body on the Sabbath so Jesus was buried quickly, before the start of the Sabbath at sundown on Friday. The Sabbath ended, technically, at sundown on Saturday and the shops would have opened for a brief while, long enough for the women to buy the necessary herbs and oils that were used to anoint the corpse and prepare it for decomposition, but the women could not do this necessary work in the dark so they had to wait until sunup.

So, Mark tells us, very early, as soon as the sun has risen on Sunday, the first day of the week, they make their way to the tomb. Interestingly, the literal Greek words do not say they went to the grave but they "are coming" to the grave. Mark uses the present or immediate tense to put us in the middle of the action. These women are counting the minutes waiting for the interminable Sabbath to finally end and the sun to rise so they can get to it.

What do they expect to see when they get there?

Mark tells us. They expect to see a tomb and a dead body. They do not, DO NOT, expect to see an empty tomb or a resurrected Christ. He makes that clear by telling us what they were talking about on the way. They are discussing who they can get to roll away the stone that has sealed the tomb. Will there be anyone around, do you think? Maybe Joseph, the owner of the tomb has some people who will do it for us, maybe some servants or just some guys who won't mind helping. It's not an unusual request, after all. Tombs in those days were meant to be opened and closed.

The body would be left on a shelf in the tomb and then, after a passage of time, the tomb would be opened and the bones of the deceased would be placed in an ossuary or "bone box" and moved to a place where ossuaries were stored and kept. So, no one would think it amiss that three women were asking to have the stone removed from a grave, especially if, as Mark tells us, the stone was larger than what was usually used for such a purpose.

But, behold! The stone has already been rolled back. The tomb is open! Who did this? Why? What's going on, here?

They walk into the tomb, which is a hollowed-out space in a stone mound or hill, a shallow cave, expecting to see Jesus's corpse lying on a shelf, there. But that's not what they see. What they see is a "young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side."

Matthew, in his version of this story, calls this person an angel and that is probably the inference we are supposed to draw from Mark's account as well. Mark makes it clear, however, that this messenger person is not one of the Seraphim, those scary warrior angels with the bodies of men and the heads of beasts and three pairs of wings. No, this is a fairly benevolent looking being. Not all that scary. Just a young man dressed in white, sitting on a rock shelf in the tomb.

But benevolent looking or not, he is not what they expected to see and they are alarmed. What...is...going ...on...here? Who is this guy? And where is the body of Jesus? Did we get the wrong tomb? Have we made a mistake? Has something been done with the body? What's going on?

The young man speaks, trying to ease their fear. He starts with a version of the first thing angels always say when they make an appearance: "Be not afraid." His version is, "Do not be alarmed." But it's the same thing.

And then he tries to mitigate their confusion. "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." You haven't gone to the wrong tomb, in other words. You have come to the right place. This is where they put him.

What do you suppose they expect the next words to be? What would you expect the next words to be?

"There's been a mix-up and we had to move the body." Or, "I've got some bad news..." Or, "Yeah, about that. I'm afraid there's been a change of plans." Or, "Joseph has changed his mind about letting you use the tomb, so we..."

But that isn't what he says. He says the one thing that we do not in a thousand years, expect to hear: "He has been raised; he is not here."

He has been raised!!!

Then he tells them to do something: Go tell Peter and the others that they should go back to Galilee where it all began, back to the beginning, and there they will see him, which is, by the way, exactly what he told you would happen if you had been paying attention.

And do they follow his instructions? No. Mark tells us that they were so terrified and amazed that they ran away and said nothing to anyone.

CROSSING THE BRIDGE

And that's where Mark ends his version of the story.

His ending is so unexpected, so abrupt and uncomfortable that, years later, copyists and editors would decide that it was unacceptable and add their own ending to the story. But Mark, in his genius, ends it at verse 8. They ran away and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. One can almost hear Mark laughing mischievously to himself as he puts away his quill and inkpot. "So, Christian, what do you think of them apples?"

The demons recognized him but they aren't going to say anything.

The centurion recognized him but he sure isn't going to say anything.

The women are too afraid to say anything.

What about **you**? Are you going to say anything? Is anyone going to say anything? Who will take the risk of speaking, of declaring that Jesus Christ has been raised from death to life?

This is the point where we do what preachers call "crossing the hermeneutical bridge." We take the story of what has happened in the past and we bring it up into our present and our future. We stop listening to it and start encountering it. We place ourselves into the story and we put the story into our time and place.

We ask Mark to speak not just about the life of Jesus but about our lives as well. And as I do this, a couple of things occur to me:

DO-IT-YOURSELF RESURRECTION

If you Google the word "resurrection" and its derivatives, as I did this week, you will discover, as I did this week, that resurrection is a thing much desired in our modern, popular culture.

Lindsay Lohan wants it.

We are told in the entertainment pages of the newspaper and the celebrity sites on the internet, that she has bleached her hair and gotten plastic surgery and completed her community service and she is now ready to resurrect her career.

Madonna wants it.

All those who follow such things were sure that she was going to resurrect her career with her Super Bowl appearance but it lacked that electric enthusiasm that is necessary for successful resurrection. Some said she just went through the motions, so no resurrection for her. Too bad.

Joey Voto wants it. He says he's not too old to keep playing baseball and that's what he wants to do but he's not getting any offers. Well, that's not totally true, he's getting offers from broadcaster's television and radio sports programs and he got a tenuous offer from the Toronto Blue Jays but he's just not getting offers to play baseball every day which would resurrect his career more than being a broadcaster would

Just Google the word "resurrect" and there's no escaping the fact that everyone is looking for resurrection these days.

Cincinnati is trying to resurrect the downtown with new hotels, recreations sites, retail boutiques, and hip restaurants.

Donald Trump is trying to resurrect his presidency while representatives Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) and Jamie Raskin (D-MD) are working to resurrect a bill to ban him from holding federal office by barring him from appearing on any ballot.

Crystal Pepsi, Coca-Cola Surge, Zima, Flip Phones, Vinyl Record Albums, Slinky, Levis 505 Jeans, Polaroid Cameras, Nintendo Game Boy, and the Mad Libs party game are all products whose manufacturers are currently trying to resurrect. Some will probably succeed, some already have, and some never will.

In popular culture resurrection is simply a matter of getting your act together, getting a plan in place, doing your due diligence, and working really hard. It's a do-it-yourself kind of a thing.

Not so in scripture.

In Mark's very brief and abruptly ended account of the first Easter he leaves out much of what we have come to associate with the story. But about this one thing he is very clear. When speaking of the resurrection he places these words on the lips of the "young man dressed in a white robe, sitting" near the tomb: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

He ***has been*** raised. The present perfect tense. He is not the doer of the action but the recipient of it. He did not raise himself. The raising did not happen as the result of something that he did or did not do. It was done to him, for him. It was a gift.

In Acts 10, Luke recounts Peter's sermon wherein he tells of the events of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Peter is quoted as saying: "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but **God raised him** on the third day and allowed him to appear..." (39b-40)

Again, biblical resurrection is not a do-it-yourself thing. It is God who is in charge of this resurrection business. It is God who resurrected Jesus and allowed him to appear. Resurrection is not a human thing that can be figured out and replicated if we use the right formula. It is a God thing, filled with awe and mystery.

And if we take seriously the witness of scripture, the appropriate human response to resurrection is a strange mixture of fear, awe, wonder, disbelief, skepticism, and jubilation, all at the same time.

It is always tempting at Easter to just tell the story and let it lay there, to stay on the safe side of the bridge. But an authentic respect for the text demands not just a hearing of it but an encounter with it.

The Resurrection is not just a nice thing that happened to Jesus a long time ago, an historic event that happened once and has never been replicated. The Resurrection is as much an existential reality as an historic one.

Resurrection is a continuous possibility for us, not as an accomplishment that we can achieve by our own hard work and self-imposed moral virtue but receive as a gift from God. It is not a do-it-yourself curative for the problems that drag us down. It is an act of grace by which God raises us out of whatever grave we have fallen into.

What death do we fear most?

Is it the death of ridicule and dislike? Do we fear most that people might think or speak critically of us or laugh at us or think us foolish? Is that the grave we fear? God can raise us up from it.

Is it the death of failure? Do we fear most that we will work hard and fail to meet our goals, that our time and sweat and investment will have been wasted? Is that the grave we fear? God can raise us up from it.

Is the death of error? Do we fear most that we will be shown to be wrong, to be a fool, to be uninformed and thought by others to be stupid? Is that the grave we fear? God can raise us up from it.

The celebration of Easter is not, as in the popular culture, a celebration of what we can do for ourselves, but of what the God of life and promise can do for us, with us, through us.

It is the celebration of life as a gift of God over the powers of death and darkness.
It is the celebration of new life over despair and new hope over hopelessness.
It is the celebration by which we cry out in spontaneous glee: "Praise the Lord, Christ is Risen!"

He is risen indeed!

AMEN