

Preaching Easter from the Gospel of Mark

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One of the challenges before the Easter preacher is to recognize and respect the differences in the various Gospel accounts. We all know that each evangelist has a different slant on the story of Jesus, a particular theological angle of vision, and we have learned that recognizing and honoring these discrete perspectives provides a theological feast of many dishes and a savor to our preaching.

However, when the Easter account in the Gospel of Mark rolls around in the lectionary, as it does this year, it is tempting to toss out all that high-minded allegiance to canonical diversity. Who among us wants to tackle Mark's spare, perplexing, inconclusive, fear-riddled Rubik's Cube of an Easter narrative when we can easily cut cross country to something more congenial, like the Emmaus road story in Luke, or book ourselves into a sunnier clime, like John's lovely and touching encounter between Mary Magdalene and the risen Christ?

But the Gospel of Mark is what we are given this Easter, and its forbidding account stands there like a dare, beckoning us to brave its depths if we are preacher enough to try. So let us gather our courage and go with Mark to the empty tomb.

Mark 16:1-8: Get Me Re-Write!

According to the Gospel of Mark, the first Easter did not exactly get off to a roaring start. If Mark 16:8 is the original end of the Gospel, as is the scholarly consensus, then we have here a curious narrative to undergird the church's most holy festival. We find no joyfully amazed women rushing back with news of the empty tomb, no awestruck exclamations to the disciples that "he is risen!" and no reassuring appearances by the risen Christ himself. What we do have is an unnamed "young man" (who is this?) outside the empty tomb, dressed in a white robe, who announces the resurrection and then issues two commands to the frightened women: don't be afraid and go tell Jesus' disciples that they will see him in Galilee. The Gospel ends, however, with the women violating both of these instructions: "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." In Greek, Mark is even more emphatic, employing a double negative. The grammar is suspect, but the point is sharp: "They said nothing to nobody."

So there we have the Markan Easter. Fear and silence. No joyful response "He is risen indeed!" Just nothing said to nobody. Only fear and silence.

New Testament scholar Don Juel tells the story of a student of his who became fascinated by the Gospel of Mark and decided to memorize it and recite it orally in a public performance. This was no hastily contrived skit; the student prepared himself for several years, carefully studying the text, mapping the dramatic structure, grappling with the multiple characterizations, memorizing his lines.

The first performance was held in a large church, and the student, standing in front of the altar as he spoke, rendered a moving performance of Mark, bringing the Gospel to life. However, when he delivered that last line, "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid," the audience sat there waiting in breathless anticipation, as if to say, "Yes. Go on, go on." The student, for all his preparation, had not completely thought this through. Unsettled by the audience's impatient gaze and unsure how to

make a graceful exit, he shifted nervously from one foot to the other. Finally, after several seconds of awkward silence, he brightened and said, "Amen!" The relieved audience burst into enthusiastic applause.

Later, the student admitted to Juel that in that moment he had felt the same pressure of incompleteness as had some of the scribal editors of Mark who provided longer conclusions to the Gospel, a hunger to provide some kind of ending other than fear and silence, some sense of closure, some satisfying resolution. The next time he performed Mark, though, he resisted the temptation to resolve the dangling ending. After saying the last line, he paused for a few dramatic seconds and then silently exited. There was no applause. Instead, "discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious, and as people exited the sanctuary the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of nonending."¹

Yes, it is disconcerting to have Mark's Gospel end as it does. Indeed, one noted Markan commentator is so bothered by the abruptness of 16:8 that, after admitting that we have no evidence whatsoever of a lost ending of Mark and acknowledging that the longer endings we do have must be viewed as canonically inauthentic, nonetheless goes on to provide twelve—count them—*twelve* reasons why there just has to be a lost ending of Mark somewhere.² Get me re-write!

Déjà vu All Over Again

However the key to discovering some resolution to Mark's Gospel does not lie hidden in the desert sands of Sinai or in a lost parchment stuffed in a jar in a Dead Sea cave. It resides, rather, in the Gospel Mark itself. We need to remember that Mark, to put it mildly, lacks confidence in human ability to fathom what God is up to in the world. The crowds remain outsiders to the kingdom, and the disciples have hardened hearts and stumble their way blindly through the narrative. Even the women outside the empty tomb, who have come to the very edge of the mystery, rush away in fearful, dumbstruck silence. Jesus the Sower broadcasts the seed of the Word in the fields of humanity, but the soil is hard, shallow, and full of thorns. If Mark's Gospel were shelved at Barnes and Noble, it would not be in "Spirituality" or "Self Help" but in the "You Just Don't Get It" section.

Mark is not about human potential. Mark is about the action of God. Mark is not about getting a committee together of well-meaning people to improve society. It is about a battle between the holy and the demonic for control over humanity. It is about Jesus the exorcist, who confronts and drives out the demonic in desperate human circumstances, in religious institutions, in nature, and even in well-meaning people (like his closest followers). Mark is not a script for a Miss America contestant who wants to "just light one candle in the darkness and leave the world a better place." It is about a God who will not let human deceit, stubbornness, hardness, greed, and shallowness thwart the divine will to bring life to a world where all the candles have been blown out. Mark is not about a delicate and domesticated gospel that invites us to figure out some ways to work the kingdom into our Palm Pilots. It is about a kingdom that arrives like a storm, a break-in, a revolution, and places upon us all the urgent task of finding ourselves in the new reality. Mark is not about promising human prospects, it is about a promising God, a God who makes and keeps promises even on the tattered edge of human failing.

As such, one can say that Mark could not have ended his Gospel any other way than

he did. Mark is not going to say “Amen” on the last page and let us breathe a sigh of relief, experience the satisfaction of a play neatly resolved, fold our programs, and head out to the parking lot to get into our cars and drive off to our same old lives. Instead, Mark is going to leave us dangling and uncertain, asking ourselves, “Now what?”

The proper response to all this is not to complain that Mark has no ending, but to realize what actually comes to an end here. Easter does not end the Gospel of Mark; Easter ends the world as we knew it. The only viable response to Mark’s story of Easter is not, “Get me re-write. We need a proper ending,” but to pay full attention to the ending we do have, which means paying full attention to the God who makes promises outside the empty tomb. Mark’s Gospel does have an ending, but it is an ending that can happen only for those who have given up all assumed endings, given up the arrogance that this story will end as all other stories do, with the world we have grown accustomed to still intact. Mark’s Gospel does have an ending, but it is God’s ending, not ours. Mark’s ending can be seen, but only in the Easter light, only by those whose blindness has been healed by the risen Christ.

Here is the Easter promise uttered outside the tomb: “Go to Galilee and you will see him.” That’s it.... “Go to Galilee and you will see him.” So we’re sitting there in the audience when the Gospel of Mark comes to its abrupt end, and we either grumble that this wasn’t dramatically satisfying or we realize that we sat through this entire performance stubbornly blind, like the disciples, with hardness of heart and blind to what was truly happening, blind to the ways of God. If we want to see again, really see again, then we have to go to Galilee. “Go to Galilee and you will see him.”

Going to Galilee means, of course, to go back to the beginning of Mark, to go back to the words “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God” (1:14); in short, going to Galilee means re-reading the Gospel. Read it again. Follow Jesus again as he moves from Galilee to the cross and—here is the promise—our eyes will be opened and we will see the risen Christ. Go back to Galilee and read again the stories of Jesus and—here is the promise—our blindness will be healed and we will see what the risen Christ is doing right now in the world.

We’ve heard these stories before. We’ve already traveled this territory with Jesus once, but now Easter has dawned. Only in the light of Easter morning, only after the mysterious young man outside the empty tomb sends us scurrying back to Galilee, do we realize that these stories of healing, and teaching, and casting out demons are, in fact, not only stories of the cross-bound suffering servant but also stories of the risen Christ. They are post-resurrection appearances.

Sightings of the Risen Christ on the Way of the Cross

If we go back to the beginning in Galilee and follow once more the journey to the cross, what do we see? Many things, of course. We see evil powers confronted (1:25), the sick healed (1:34), sinners forgiven (2:5), the hungry fed (6:42), and life and hope arising out of despair (5:41), and when we see these things, there is the risen Christ at work.

Every story, every encounter with Jesus, is now discovered to be a post-resurrection appearance. Just to sample what this may mean, let us look briefly at three of these “sightings” of the risen Christ.

A New Teaching? — Jesus hardly gets his ministry going before he has a dramatic

Sabbath encounter in the synagogue in Capernaum (1:21-28). Among the congregation is a man with an unclean spirit who shrieks, "What have you to do with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the holy one of God." Jesus rebukes this demonic spirit, and it comes out writhing and screaming, throwing the afflicted man into convulsions. Watching this exorcism happen before their very eyes, the congregation exclaims, "What is this? A new teaching—with authority!"

A new teaching? Suppose a visiting preacher in one of our congregations were to show up on Sunday and cast a demon out of a parishioner convulsing in the third pew. Needless to say, probably the very last thing the congregation would do is to exclaim, "This marks a innovative breakthrough in Christian education!" What would they say? "Incredible!" "Terrifying!" "Awesome!" "Unbelievable!" "Powerful!" Something like that. But never, "What is this? A new teaching!"

But Mark connects resurrection power and power over the demonic with teaching. Mark wants us to look for the presence of the risen Christ in authoritative, life-changing, and redemptive teaching. In other words, good teaching is casting out demons, and vice versa. As a teacher myself, I must admit this idea needles me a bit. Never can I recall that a lecture of mine resulted in anything like an exorcism. Much of my pedagogical energy seems spent trying to keep the students in the back row from drifting off, not battling the apocalyptic forces of evil.

But if I think about this more deeply, I can recall moments when students came alive to some new truth, moments when learning became more than just data gathering and was genuinely healing. I remember, for example, a transforming incident not from one of my classes but from that unlikeliest of venues: a seminary public lecture. Years ago, Frederick Buechner was speaking at the seminary where I taught, and he had decided to forego the usual academic lecture with footnotes in favor of an attempt to tell his own life story honestly and with theological insight. With great courage and with exquisitely crafted language, he began to talk about family secrets and their power to damage us. Not as an act of psychological exhibitionism, but as an event of deep theological probing, Buechner began to tell of painful, long-hidden events in his own life. As he spoke, the auditorium was electrically silent; people were listening with intense expectation. For weeks after these lectures, people who were there reported that what they had heard prompted them to go out and seek healing in their own families and relationships, to speak words of forgiveness across old gaps, words of love into relationships grown cold, words of honesty where secrets kept the truth at bay. What is this? A new teaching, with authority? What happened was the result of Buechner's skill, courage, and insight, of course, but what happened was more than can be attributed to any merely human influence. "Transforming" was what many called it. "The work of the risen Christ" is perhaps the way Mark would have termed it. Indeed, wherever people are healed by truth so searing, so personal, so life-changing that it sets them truly free, then we see the risen Christ "teaching—with authority" (1:27).

Fully Clothed and in Our Right Minds — As we re-trace our steps following Jesus through Galilee, hoping to see the risen Christ, we cross over to the country of the Gerasenes, and there we see a tormented, demon-possessed man among the tombs, a wretched man so under the sway of the evil powers that no one was strong enough to subdue him, no chains stout enough to restrain him. After his encounter with Jesus, we see quite a different picture. We see him "sitting there [i.e., in a position of authority],

clothed, and in his right mind,” and then eventually proclaiming “in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him” (5:1-20).

Now where, in the light of Easter, can we see such people today, people who have been released from demonic possession and are now fully clothed and in their right minds? I would suggest that we see them every week in the pews, and I am not speaking only of those who have been healed of some devastating emotional disorder. In fact, later this spring many churches will observe special services of worship to welcome new confirmation classes. These confirmands who have been instructed in the gospel and the holy mysteries will stand before their congregations and publicly claim their faith. Parents and other relatives will beam with delight and capture it all on the Camcorder, often blithely unaware that they have witnessed nothing less than an exorcism. What appears to be a mild ceremony of socialization is, in fact, a divine standing down of the demonic powers. The confirmands are being asked to renew their baptismal vows, to renounce evil, and to turn again to the promises of the risen Christ. In sum, they are publicly turning away from the world of Enron values, greed, warfare, environmental disregard, bomb-‘em-if-they-get-in-the-way attitudes, and all other evil powers that not even the chains of law, society, and decency can contain, and they are embracing the turn-the-other-cheek, Father-forgive-them, way of the cross. When we really think about what they are renouncing and what they are embracing, we have to say they look for all the world like fools. But Mark would say, to the contrary, they have seen the risen Christ, and standing there not in designer fashions but in their baptismal garments, telling the world how much Jesus had done for them, they look to Mark like they are fully clothed and in their right minds.

Not One Stone will be Left — In our travels following Jesus once again down the road from Galilee to the cross, we come at last to Jerusalem and to the temple. In Mark, the temple is a symbol for what happens when the demonic powers get control of a religious institution. As one theologian noted, “The demons don’t cluster in brothels and dens of sleaze where it is easy to spot them. They hide in churches.” What is the risen Christ doing in the temple? He is announcing its destruction: “Not one stone will be left here upon another.” The power of the resurrection will protect the widow and the orphan, and any institution that seeks to devour them will be abolished, no matter how sacred.

In a recent issue of the *New Yorker*, Hendrik Hertzberg notes the evangelical Christian flavor of the current Bush administration and points out that any staffer arriving late for a White House meeting “is apt to be greeted with the reproach ‘Missed you at Bible study.’” However, after reviewing the provisions in the President’s “economic stimulus package,” Hertzberg wonders “just which Bible these good people have been studying.” Maybe the one that reads, “Sell all you have and give it to the rich.”

To President Bush’s claim about the stimulus package that “ninety-two million Americans will keep an average of \$1,083 more of their own money,” Hertzberg replies, “[T]rue, but only in the sense that it is also true that if Bill Gates happened to drop by a homeless shelter where a couple of nuns were serving soup to sixty down-and-outers dressed in rags, the average person in the room would have a net worth of a billion dollars. Average, yes; typical, no.” The bottom twenty percent of the work force will get a dime or a quarter a week in tax relief. George Bush’s personal break will total as much as \$44,500, which is nothing compared to Dick Cheney’s windfall

of \$327,000.

Hertzberg concludes his essay by suggesting another Bible passage for the next meeting of the White House Bible study group, a text, by the way, from the Gospel of Mark that tells of Jesus' confrontation of the powers in the temple: "And Jesus sat over against the treasury..."(12:41).³

So, let Mark be our guide this Easter. Next year we can let Luke help us see the risen Christ in the breaking of bread, and the year after that we can go to that mountain in Matthew to hear the Great Commission. This year, though, let us go back to Galilee in search of the risen Christ. Let us follow once again on the way of the cross and see the risen Christ teaching and healing and confronting the powers of evil. Let us experience the hardness of the human heart, the resistance of the soul, the willful blindness of the human spirit, and then let us see the risen Christ casting his own life into soils seemingly too poor to sustain life and then springing up on Easter thirty fold, sixty fold, and a hundred fold. Let anyone with ears to hear listen!

Notes

¹ Donald H. Juel, *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 172.

² Robert H. Gundry, *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1009-1012.

³ Hendrik Hertzberg, "Dividends," *The New Yorker*, January 20, 2003, 29-30.