

Prayer: Roll the stone away, O Lord, of our hearts. Enter into our fear, our amazement, and our silence, and speak your word of truth. Renew our faith in the power you possess to renew and redeem life and all creation until the day when you make all things new. Amen.

Mark 16:1-8

16:1 When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

16:2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

16:3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

16:4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

16:5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

16:6 But he said to them, "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.

16:7 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."

16:8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

Proclamation of the Word

Perhaps you have had the chance to read Ron Rash's novel *Above the Waterfall*. We live in the area in which many of Ron's stories are set. Ron's words evoke a sense of place and emotion. In the beginning of the novel, the county sheriff Les is just a few weeks away from retirement. Far from riding off into the sunset, Les finds himself embroiled in lots of unfinished business. There is the escalating conflict between the owner of the local fishing resort and a cantankerous elderly neighbor suspected of poaching. Another dark problem lurks in the woods, plaguing the people of the backwoods hollers, where crystal methamphetamine labs are numerous. Les knows the people affected by meth- the skin sores, rotting teeth, paranoia, and the consequential social problems which ooze like wounds. After one particularly disturbing meth bust that makes him almost physically ill, Les realizes the world in which he lives is growing darker and more disturbing. He gets back into the squad car and sits behind the wheel, when suddenly he has a flashback to his childhood.

I had been bad to sleepwalk as a kid. There were times, for some reason, always in the summer, I'd make my way out of the house and end up in the yard. Folks back then, at least country folks, didn't see the need for a porch bulb burning all night. I'd open my eyes and there'd be nothing but darkness, like the world had slipped its leash and run away, taking everything with it except me. Then I'd hear a whip-poor-will or a jar fly, or feel the dew dampening my feet, or I'd look up and find the stars tacked to the sky where they always were, only the moon roaming.

I turned onto the main road and drove back toward town, all the while remembering what it had felt like when the world you knew had up and vanished, and you needed to find something to bring that world back, and you weren't sure you couldⁱ.

Mark's gospel ends with the same sort of loose ends. The women come to the tomb before daybreak under the cover of darkness. Mary, Mary, and Salome come with fear and uncertainty, and leave just as afraid as they arrived. Something had changed, perhaps the world they knew "had up and vanished"- dead people didn't stay dead. They feel disoriented, shocked, reeling from the trauma of the past few days. And here they learn that Jesus has "had slipped his leash and run away."

Maybe the tacked on ending of Mark, was a way to bring the world back, to tie up the loose ends. We are not usually comfortable with sitting in that kind of fear. We want resolution, peace, and if possible, a happy ending. But Mark gives us the unending gospel. Scholars agree that the next verses were added somewhere after the 3rd Century. It simply ends with

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

Can we blame them? The disciples are hiding out. These women are risking their lives to go tend to Jesus. They are pious for they waited until the Sabbath was over. They are going in secret for safety. And they are concerned about which one will roll the stone away. Did they draw straws, I wonder? And what if the stone was too heavy? They seem to be on a fool's errand.

When they arrive the stone has been rolled away. At first this is not good news! Would Jesus' enemies have come and violated the body? Or thieves? Would they still be inside lurking and waiting? Put yourself in their shoes. They are not in an Easter Resurrection frame of mind. And when they arrive they realize that the "world they knew had up and vanished." For one, if Jesus who brought God's love, healing, and peace could be executed by Rome, imagine what terrible things they could do to us. And secondly, if we cannot count on dead people staying dead, what can we count on? The trauma of Jesus' trial, beating, and crucifixion is still ringing in their hearts and minds. They are disabled by fear.

Serene Jones has written a wonderful book, *Trauma and Grace; Theology in a Ruptured World*.ⁱⁱ In the book she describes attending a self-defense class at her church basement in New Haven, CT. She was the only church member in the class. In the group she met women who had mostly been referred by

the local domestic violence centers in the city. They did not talk theology. They mostly kicked, punched, and discussed the violence that had been done to them. The last self-defense class happened to coincide with Maundy Thursday. Much like in our church the other night, they celebrated the Last Supper and tell through reading the gory details of Jesus' betrayal, trial, and crucifixion of the passion of Christ. In dramatic form they enter the darkness until only one light- the Christ Candle remains lit. And maybe like our church, someone like Mary Barron in a lone single voice sings, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

Jones found herself surprised to find four of the women from the self-defense class slip into the back pews just in time for the start of the service. Two sat alone, two together, and just as they lost themselves in the growing darkness of the liturgy, they all wept, silently, profusely. So did most others. Jones tells us,

After the service, Mari spoke to me first, rubbing the knuckles she had bruised in class; "The cross story...it's the only part of this Christian thing I like. I get it. And it's like he gets me. He knows." She hugged me and walked out. Shanika left next, saying something about her ex-partner, taking blows meant for her, keeping her safe. Sarah her closest friend from the shelter, disagreed, smiling, "He's the King, man. He's throwing your ex's sorry butt [sic] in hell's jail soon as he can." Joanne the last to leave, didn't say anything but gestured toward the cross with a slight shrug just before walking out the door.

Jones was shocked to learn that for these women, Jesus' journey to the cross, made them feel empowered and understood. The way of the cross and Jesus' suffering was a way for them to weep the necessary tears and emerge a little more whole. Rather than being traumatic, it was healing in some way. Like Mari said, "I get it. And it's like he gets me. He knows." On Thursday, I was in the Emergency Room for part of the afternoon with someone who has suffered a long-time. She was writhing in pain and gripping my hand while praying. Watching her in pain so terrible, it made me weep. And like a split screen I could see Jesus' suffering on the cross, and prayed stay with us, Lord. Do not abandon your child.

If anyone gets it, God does. Jesus knows.

We have to walk the way of the cross, to appreciate and really understand the Resurrection. And maybe Mark ends with their fear and silence because he wants us to pause and ponder such suffering...the silence, the secrets, the pain, the separation.

These women on a fool's errand to prepare the body find an angel seating on the right. Mary, Mary, and Salome come to the tomb and are stunned. They cannot really hear the words of the angel; he sounds more like an evening news reporter:

Jesus is not here. He is Risen.

Leave- go tell the good news to the other disciples.

Go to Galilee. Jesus will meet you there. He is going ahead of you, just as he told you.

I wonder if maybe resurrection is just as terrifying as the crucifixion. Resurrection makes no sense. Resurrection does not seem possible. For those living with violence in their homes or in their city, the possibility of a different way seems inconceivable. For those who feel powerless over those in positions of power, it is hard to imagine anything ever changing. For those who see no hope for a cure or a healing of a broken relationship, the thought of new life seems incompatible with reality.

Maybe resurrection is just as terrifying as the cross. And the women say nothing to anyone for they are afraid...

but I wonder if the ability to name the reality of the cross and where we see it today...I wonder if that is the place from which God will renew us. I wonder if those who can step into the darkness with others are the ones who will see God's power most realized. On this April fool's day be reminded that Paul writes,

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God (I Corinthians 1:18)

The way of the Cross is the way to resurrection...it is how we are saved by the power of God. So we go to dark Gethsemane and follow Jesus to Golgotha willing to look upon the suffering of our Lord Jesus. And we go to the local community meeting and school board, to the hospitals and healthcare wing, and even into a home where fear lurks. It is not because of our fear that we keep moving, it is in spite of it. Resurrection happens...in its own timing. The impossible will take some time. God's power shows up, maybe not in the way we imagined it. Because while we may not be able to believe it at first, that does not make it untrue.

The story is told about Galileo. It may be legend, but nonetheless insightful. Forced to recant that the earth moves around the sun, the story goes that Galileo said, "And yet it moves." In other words, people's inability to see the truth does not make it any less truthful. Mary and Mary and Salome and perhaps you and I may be so stupefied, terrified and flummoxed at life where we expect death that we tell no one nothing, and yet, Jesus has still been raised and that truth will not be squelchedⁱⁱⁱ.

In their fear, they are silent and afraid. It is because they act as any of us would, that we are in need of God's power. God's power makes all the difference. Otherwise, how would any of us be here worshipping today? How would we have heard the good news, been drawn into the embrace of God's gracious love?

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The fact that we are here this glad morning, this April fool's day, is testimony to the work of God's victory over fear and death. And at some point the women and the disciples moved from fear into faith. We do not need to be afraid. We are called to go back to Galilee- into our daily lives of work, family, service, and community. We do not go alone. For Jesus is going ahead of us. We will see him there. Maybe Mark stops with silence because it is our job now to witness to the power of God.

It may seem like the world we know has "slipped its leash and run away" sometimes.

But the God we know in Jesus Christ by the power of the Resurrection has been unleashed on the world.

The abrupt end of the Gospel of Mark is a new beginning for all of us...the fractured place from which God makes all things new. The cross, death, and the tomb are not the end. Jesus is risen- Alleluia!

And even if we cannot believe it, it does not make the news less true.

Prayer: Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief for Christ's sake. Amen.

ⁱ Ron Rash, *Above the Waterfall* (New York, Harper Collins, 2015), 73.

ⁱⁱ Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace; Theology in a Ruptured World* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2009), 76.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jill Duffield, "Looking Into the Lectionary for Easter Sunday" for Mark 16:1-8, April 1, 2018 sent from the *Presbyterian Outlook*, March 26, 2018.