

Mark 16: 1 – 8

*“Once upon a time there was a Prince, swashbuckling and heroic.*

*There was also a Princess brave and beautiful.*

*But they lived their own separate lives and never met.*

*The End.”*

Oh! Kind of disappointing somehow – you were expecting the wedding ... right? And they all lived happily ever after?

Well, they might have lived happily – you don’t know ... But it doesn’t follow the conventions of story-telling does it? It seems to jar and jolt us rather than leaving us feeling satisfied.

**Today’s Gospel passage (Mark 16: 1 – 8)** ... early in the morning, these women came to the tomb, just as the sun is coming up ...

Then a bit of dialogue – moving the story forwards – **‘who will move the stone?’** It’s the obstacle that our ‘leads’ need to overcome.

**‘But oh!’** Twist – **‘It’s been moved, the massive stone has gone!’**

**Why – what happened?** Well they went into the tomb and the body was gone – instead there was a young man – telling them that **Jesus had been raised!**

**The women ran from the tomb** – confused and shaking – too afraid to tell anyone what had happened.

**The end?**

Really? **The end?**

No neat ‘tying up’ ... no ‘and they lived happily ever after?’

Well, there are two contested further endings to the story that maybe go somewhat towards this – and contested or not that they are included in our Bible means God can still talk to us through them – and I invite you to go and look at them for yourself, perhaps in a quiet moment – **Mark 16:9 onwards** and pray through these endings too.

It’s a bit like one of those books where you determine the ending – have you ever read one of those? Where ‘turn to page 10 if you think the band of travellers went into the cave’ or ‘page 20 if you think they went off towards the forest’ type thing.

In some ways this is a bit like that – with almost ‘alternative endings’ ... And because we have the rest of Scripture we know that they did in fact go and tell the disciples, they did in fact see Jesus again!

So why does the Gospel writer – why does Mark – just leave it so open ended? I think

**PTO**

because we are so familiar with the story of the Resurrection and the Early Church we skim over this very quickly. We know the story and so we in some way lose some of the “shock factor” of that first Easter ... Perhaps this is meant to jolt us?

Let’s take it a little slower once again:

**Firstly** the women are coming towards the tomb of Jesus – Jesus the Saviour, Jesus the great teacher, Jesus the Son of God – **Jesus the dead and the buried** ... I can’t imagine how they must have been feeling, their hopes pinned on something and then seemingly destroyed. And they were coming to pay their last respects to their great leader.

Now Joseph would have prepared Jesus’ body before burial, the body would already have been embalmed according to custom. But for the women, they wanted to pay their own respects, their own worship to Jesus. And so they too brought some spices to put on Jesus’ body.

**One thing to take from this**, I think, is that just because someone has payed respect or worship to Jesus doesn’t hinder or take anything away from our own worship or our own devotion to him.

Their conversation on the way seems a little odd – is it only now occurring to them that they couldn’t actually get to Jesus’ body to even put the spices on – it was an overwhelming desire to pay their respects that led them out – they sought Christ first, and considered how to overcome obstacles second.

How often do we see the potential problems with something we think God may be calling us to do, that we decide not to even try? If we believe that we are being called to something, are we willing to at least push the door? No matter how big or heavily locked it may seem!

**Next the stone is rolled away!** The tomb is empty and we have a young man in white ...

What is the first thing this Angel, man in white, says? **“do not be alarmed”** or “do not be afraid.” How many times do we need to hear this? I think perhaps one more ... I think it’s natural to be a little afraid, a little fearful even if we don’t show it – **“Do not be afraid, alarmed, Jesus is alive!”**

And this is the **good news** this morning! **JESUS IS ALIVE!**

Then Peter is mentioned by name – why Peter?

**Peter** – I wonder how he’s feeling right now? Right at that moment – early on the Sunday morning? How had he spent his Saturday? Like a good Jew he probably went to the Temple – but if he did ... did he hide at the back? Hoping no one would speak to him afterwards!

**Sometimes we feel like we’ve gone too far** – we’ve pushed the limit and surely we can’t be forgiven for XYZ – but the particular mention here of Peter, I think, hints at the restoration, the forgiveness to come – but also that God hasn’t forgotten Peter. Peter has a chance to start again.

And so do each of us – we can never go too far – we can always turn back – perhaps that’s what you need to hear this morning – that God hasn’t forgotten you, turn back and you can be forgiven.

And then ... well, and then ... The women go out, confused, shocked, and tell no-one ...

**(next page)**

Do they tell the disciples? Well they must do, surely – but why don't we hear about it from Mark? Because, I think Mark might be pointing us to something different here.

The Gospel tells us the good news – plainly and clearly – **Jesus is not here, God has raised him to life.** Yes, and Mark points to a future event – a future even when Peter and the disciples are to meet Jesus in Galilee. The disciples did spread the message.

But the women's reaction, I think, is not out of place for how the followers of Jesus respond all through Mark's Gospel. It's often something of a confusion, a reluctance, and there's a sort of 'pulling in' that Jesus does with his followers. Mark's Gospel has a sense of pace and of heading from scene to scene very quickly – and builds up the readers' understanding of what it means to follow Jesus even through this reluctance. **"Follow Me"** are some of the first words of Jesus in Mark's Gospel, and they are in Galilee.

And I think that theme of 'pulling in' is echoed here, as the Gospel ends, it is now over to the disciples, the followers to tell the next part of the story, it's that same 'follow me in Galilee' moment. Jesus' disciples are invited to once again head to Galilee, to follow Jesus – there meet the risen Christ – which although not described here, is promised by a faithful God in Mark 14, and repeated here.

Before this moment the disciples had forgotten, they were scattered, scared, not knowing what to do – Peter had disowned Jesus, the other disciples are nowhere to be found – one of them has run off naked ... Only a few remained after Jesus was arrested, and even then from a distance, watching things unfold, but at a loss as to what was coming next.

The women were afraid, and didn't tell anyone what had happened ... and we are left there.

Does that feel like a bit of a drop? I wonder if something of that sense of 'oh ... ok ...' has accompanied you this year? Has this year been something of an 'oh' kind of moment ... a wondering if this is well ... 'it'? Will things go back to normal? And there is hope there, but it seems somehow far off ...

As Christians, as followers of Jesus, we want to be people of hope, people who point to the redemption of the world and the promises found in Jesus, and yet when faced with a devastating pandemic we've been left with lots of questions, and it's been testing times. There's been times when perhaps we've felt a bit like those women, when we've heard of the resurrection, but we're shocked and confused, scared ... not sure what to do next.

But as we head into Acts we begin to hear from the disciples again, names re-appear – put it this way, the Gospels, including Mark are like the first part of the story – the next part involves the disciples, that's the Book of Acts – and we have Peter, telling us his part, his witness, his testimony of what happened.

Peter is preaching here to Cornelius and presumably his gentile friends, and we have a summary of his sermon – he begins by putting them on an equal footing. He speaks to them as a Jew, who would normally have seen themselves as superior to Gentiles, but he wipes that out right at the start. I wonder if he hadn't done this they'd have always felt a bit 'inferior' or that they weren't good enough – but Peter assures them that Jesus' good news is for all who worship God and do right by him – do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God – everyone!

So that means the Good News is for all – for us – and we are to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

Peter then speaks directly of the account of Jesus – something that was perhaps at this point hearsay or rumour – perhaps the Gentiles heard of this ‘Miracle Worker’, but didn’t see him, perhaps they’d heard of the Crucifixion, but hadn’t seen it. And perhaps they had believed the rumour that the body had been stolen by the disciples. Peter seeks to address this by appealing to personal testimony, personal witness.

Testimony and witness are very powerful pieces of evidence – story is powerful – but testimony, personal experience, personal witnessing to Jesus is also powerful.

The disciples were to go on telling the story, their purpose was to tell others about Jesus ... his life, his death, his resurrection. And then to announce that all who have faith in Jesus will have their sins forgiven – that is what Peter is telling everyone to do and this is what Mark is inviting his readers to do – to enter into the story.

Reading and hearing the words of the life of Jesus is powerful and meaningful, and that’s what we have in Mark, but telling of their own experiences, their own encounters with the risen Jesus, and doing so through the strength of the Holy Spirit is what the followers of Jesus were called to do next.

I wonder why you come to Church? Why did you first decide to become a Christian? For many it is because they were invited ... invited to be a part of something, invited to join the story, invited to come along.

Invitation seems scary sometimes – seems like it’s going a bit out on a limb – what if they don’t listen, what if I stumble or get it wrong? What if I don’t know what to say?

Well, the women and disciples are assured by Jesus, and reminded again by the man in white, that Jesus goes ahead of them, goes ahead of them to Galilee, and will go ahead of wherever they go – calling them to follow.

Pushing on that door again, following what we believe to be right and perhaps discovering that Jesus has already gone ahead of us.

And empowered by the Holy Spirit we, like Peter, can stand as witness to Jesus’ work, and can invite people into the story ...

Perhaps, like the readers of Mark, we feel like we’re just moving forwards, everything builds to a crescendo – we see God doing amazing things, we feel that sense of anticipation, people seem to come to a place where they are ready and then ... and then ... when faced with that anti-climax of confused and scared followers, those who still question, who still search – and now a pandemic ... how do we respond?

The followers, the women are in the in-between moment – the moment between Jesus’ resurrection and heading into Galilee.

And it doesn’t always go smoothly, there will be turns, unexpected ones, and setbacks – because the story hasn’t ended yet.

Leah and I have recently been reading together, and reading books that each of us have read before, enjoyed and read to the other one. So usually one of us knows how it ends!

**(next page)**

Sometimes I joke by reading the last two words on the last page – well if I think it's not giving anything away that is – but sometimes it's nice to know how a story ends isn't it – because in the midst of the ups and downs, the twists and turns, the struggles, the battles – we know the outcome.

We are in a similar moment between Jesus' resurrection, and the accounts here and the new heaven and new earth promised in Revelation – that will be the final closing of the book – that will be the final victory for Jesus and his followers – the victory already won, the promise already there, the hope to come.

And that's good news! **It's good news** and an ending that spurs us on, spurs us to action.

So over to you – this Easter we are full of the joy of the resurrection, we rightly celebrate **'Loves redeeming work is done'** – but how are we going to respond?

I think Mark's Gospel invites readers in, invites them to read, to discover, to take on board and to believe. And then invites them to **"get on with it!"** promising them that Jesus goes ahead of them no matter where they go – Jesus goes ahead of us.

For we too are witnesses to Jesus, we too are witnesses to the amazing work of God – **"Ours the cross, the grave, the skies"** – but it's no good if we don't tell anyone! We just leave it left, we leave people with the same sense of disappointment. We're called to join in!

If we proclaim, if we tell the story of Jesus, with the Spirit's help, and tell of how he changed our lives, I think we'll be surprised to find that Jesus has gone ahead of us, just as he promised.

Amen.