

Mark 16:1-8

16 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. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 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. 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. 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.” ⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.^[a]

Sermon: Carried-Away Church

Mary, and Mary, and Salome rise early in the morning, though morning is a generous term. Is it really morning in those pre-dawn hours where a boggy darkness betrays any conceivable hope for the smallest sliver of sunlight. No, this darkness is heavy, thick even, and it seems in no hurry to dissipate.

There’s no reason to believe these women are neophytes in their act of service. They know all too well the consistent cruelty of Rome’s colonial might – it’s as stubborn, and cyclical, and haunting as the pre-dawn darkness. They aren’t here to prepare a body – they know that’s already happened. Rome might be cruel, but She’s also litigious and

procedural. Surely by now, there are linen wrappings on the corpse, and it's been tucked into a makeshift tomb. These preparations are as cold and distant as a coroner's sheet.

These women don't come to prepare. They come to anoint. They come to acknowledge the significant value of a friend, a brother, a child of God, who has been discarded, with neither pause nor purpose. They will right this callousness. They will honor their loved one. They will say, with their thankless actions, "Here is One who mattered. The world is better because he lived in it. We are better because we knew his presence."

I don't want to romanticize this story. I believe these three women have made too many trips to too many graveyards like this one. They may not have all been in Jerusalem – I get the sense Rome's cruelty had been made known in the Galilee and other forgotten map dots. And would first-timers really be knowledgeable enough to be anxious about the rolling away of stones?

Mary, and Mary, and Salome know what it is to grieve. And they know how to do the work that grieving requires.

I believe it's also true that Mary, and Mary, and Salome aren't confined to a singular time and place.

I wonder, just this week, just this very morning, how many mothers, and daughters, and sisters have waded through a boggy darkness to anoint the bodies of discarded loved ones: lives lost to gun violence, or political abuse, or war, or addiction, or homelessness, or poverty, or alienation, or racism, or marginalization, or any of the yucky biproducts of systemic greed and neglect.

I say all of this today, because we need to be mindful of the layers within this story.

The loss of Jesus is deeply personal for the women who knew him, followed him, loved him, and partnered in life and ministry with him. They are carrying the grief of that loss. But this loss is even more magnified, because it occurs in the context of a domination system that discards the lives of people like Jesus every day. They grieve, we grieve, on both a personal and systemic level.

This is the weightiness with which we meet the Easter morning.

When I read this text, I imagine there's a kind of hardened precision to the work of Mary, and Mary and Salome – the same kind of measured but compassionate focus you might find in a trauma nurse or a social worker. They are prepared to offer compassion, to do what is needed in shocking and uncertain situations, because they've seen too many shocking and uncertain things.

The story continues, and the author reveals two crucial details in one simple verse: 1) the large stone has been rolled away and 2) there's a man, dressed in white, sitting to the right, and his presence is alarming for the three women.

Remember, always remember, the Gospel of Mark has a quick pace. It's in a hurry. It uses its words efficiently; in the same way these women work efficiently. Big boulders don't just get rolled away. And men dressed in dazzling white don't just linger on Sabbath mornings. And how many accomplices to grave-robbing hang around at the crime scene? These accomplished women are alarmed because they aren't experiencing normal (even for them!) circumstances. They've

encountered something supernatural, perhaps an angel, an agent that is strong, and mysterious, and captivating.

This isn't an ordinary morning. This isn't an ordinary occurrence. The presence, the power, the mystery, the awe of the divine are afoot.

"Don't be alarmed," the young man says. "I know why you are here. You've come for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. But he is not here. He has been raised."

Note the tense. Not Jesus is risen, but Jesus has been raised. In other words, the power and presence of God, something incomprehensible, even to an astute and experienced team of caretakers, is on display. God has, God does, God keeps on intervening in the human experience.

"Take a look. You can see right there, in that very spot, that's where he was," the angel says. "But now, he's gone on ahead of you, back to the very place where it all started, in Galilee, just like he told you, and that, friends, is where you see him. Don't hang around here. Go tell the disciples, and Peter, and others to seek him out."

And what happens next? Mary, and Mary, and Salome "went out and fled from the tomb." As they scattered, "terror and amazement had seized them." And the text tells us, "They said nothing, to anyone, for they were afraid."

The Gospel of Mark ends, at least before the redactors decide to add a nice epilogue, with the flight, shock, and silence of three faithful women.

And I'll raise my hand with you, I've been spoiled by neat and tidy Hollywood endings, not the kind that win awards, but the ones that keep me entertained. And I find myself asking, "What, that's how it ends? Three faithful people ignoring the good news of the One they'd come to anoint. That doesn't seem right to me, does it to you?"

It isn't right because it's an inaccurate interpretation of the ending!

We've got to go back to the beginning, Millbrook. At the very beginning of Mark's Gospel, Jesus implores us, disciples of every era, to repent, that is, to turn toward the good news of God's limitless possibilities. We've got to turn away from the systems, and the structures, and the ideas that give us a false sense of security, and value, and purpose, and toward new windows of possibility that God reveals. We've got to get off the interstate of independence. Find an exit. Look for a break in the median. Punch in new directions on our GPS. We've got to turn around and follow the path of interdependence – with God, with neighbor, and with land.

The women turn and flee this place of death, and stench, and disappointment. Maybe, for the first time in their whole lives, these women realize that theirs can be a story beyond memory-keeping, beyond trauma-taming, beyond heart-mending. Maybe for the first time in their whole lives, these women can envision a story that transcends, and quickly, the brokenness, and the woundedness, and the work-arounds required in a world dependent upon and dominated by Caesar. Maybe it occurs to them, we don't have to stay on this course. We can turn, and follow, and not just visualize the radical hope of God – that thing let loose in the Exodus and Exile and Existential wanderings of our faith story – but we can actually believe, take hold,

experience God's radical hope. That is to say, God has raised life in the face of Rome's overwhelming darkness and death.

And let me tell you something, such a thing IS terrifying, and stupor-inducing, and out-of-this-world. If the journey of repentance, that is the journey of following the risen-by-God Jesus into Galilee isn't terrifying, or stupor-inducing, or out-of-this-world for those who experience it, then I would say it's inauthentic.

I would argue that knee-knocking is not unfaithfulness, but rather it is the very definition of faithfulness. Easter is not being overwhelmed by the cruel and forceful power of hate. Easter is being overwhelmed by the depth of God's love, so much so that we can scarcely take it all in.

These faithful women, turned, and fled that place. And their knees were knocking the whole way. And they said nothing, to anyone, because they were afraid. They kept silent.

But could it be that they were kept silent. In their own subtle ways, without the benefit of vocal platforms, or societal status, they offered voice and dignity for lives discarded in the only way available – anointing bodies, in darkness, on the world's day off, while the men stayed home, perhaps for fear of confronting the very traumas these women faced head on, and daily. Could it be, that having witnessed the most remarkable, and spiritual, and compelling moment of their lives, they were afraid, not of telling the story, but rather of the dismissive way the privileged would cheapen, and discredit, and systematically dissect and destruct the authenticity of their experience, all because it didn't follow protocol. Maybe they needed to hold onto this amazement for just a moment longer. Maybe they needed to be silent, at least for a time, to speak well.

But here's what I really think. Silence is a tool of systems. If it isn't said out loud, it isn't true. It doesn't exist. It isn't real. But God transcends silence, not to mention all those things that seek to be silencers. When I read this story, I know that strong, faithful, determined, loving women like Mary, and Mary, and Salome are never silent. For even if they are prohibited from speaking gospel, theirs are lives that never cease to live gospel. And I know this. God is not silent, nor will God be silenced. Ever.

On this Easter morning, we are reminded that the living God transcends death, and transcends silence, and transcends all that would prevent us from wholeness and healing.

God's response to the death of Jesus is not systematic. God's does not meet the violence of Rome with violence, but rather, with life-giving creativity. God takes all that Rome has broken; reshapes, remolds, recreates it, and even offers the grace of this new life to the very ones who sought to destroy it. Name me a system, in the history of the universe, ever, that offers such creativity.

And name me a person, in the history of this universe, that when first presented with the magnitude of this cosmic and compassionate creativity is not also stunned, frightened, and silenced.

Easter is a reconfiguration and reimagining of anything we ever believed was possible.

On your bulletin cover, there's a quote from Clarence Jordan. He says that the "crowning evidence that Jesus lives in a not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church."

When I imagine Mary, and Mary, and Salome, I imagine three women who were reflective. Who took some time to process the vastness of what they'd seen and experienced. And then I imagine their liberation. We can speak of God. We can be the Jesus the world so desperately needs. We can be the love to others that he has been to us. And we can do it all in the light of day. I see in these remarkable women a spirit-filled fellowship and a carried-away church.

We want the Easter story to be one that helps us better maneuver and navigate the levers of existing systems. Such change is not terrifying. We don't flee from it. It does not silence us. It does not awe us. We can comprehend it.

But the Easter story has no use for existing levers. It rips the steering wheel and gear shift right off our expectations. It sends us on a path of unbridled compassion less controllable than a bucking bronco. It shocks us. It scares us. It takes our breath and voice away. And it should!

One person can so wholly and fully love humanity that God finds solidarity and understanding in that experience. A ragtag band of believers, who were really unbelievers, or kind-of-believers at best, can turn back toward Galilee and find both voice and footing. This group of believers can receive and share God's spirit. And for a time, this group can circumvent the systems around them, and provide for every spiritual, emotional, and physical need. And two thousand years later, their spirit, not to mention that of the risen One, can still stir in us.

I hear the story this morning, and it scares both the step and the voice out of me. But I see a hundred believers in this room. And I've seen the sunrise this morning – it dissipated a thick darkness. And I want to believe, in fact, I must believe, that somehow, someday, God can and

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God will, channel our collective efforts and faith into a creative expression of healing love. I believe, Millbrook, that we can be the next story of resurrection. I believe, Millbrook, that we can be a spirit-filled fellowship. I believe, Millbrook, that we can be a carried-away church.

May God give us the faith and courage to turn toward Galilee, to steady our knocking knees, and to find our own voices to tell the story. And may it all begin this morning. Amen.