



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

They Were Afraid
Mark 16:1-8

¹When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But 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. 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.” ⁸So 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.

This text from Mark is the earliest account we have of the resurrection. The Sabbath was over, the Passover had been celebrated and now it was the first day of the week -- the roosters were crowing and throughout all Jerusalem people were packing their bags, carrying them to their carts, tipping the valets, grabbing a quick breakfast and trying to get an early start on their trip home. But outside of town, unnoticed there was a group of women taking spices to the tomb where Jesus was laid. On Friday evening everything was in such a rush. The Sabbath was upon them when they took Jesus down from the cross, but now early Sunday morning there was time to

do things right, and Jesus' body had not been properly prepared for burial, so the women were going to take care of things.

In their conversation they fretted over the stone that had been rolled in front of the tomb. It took six strong men to place the stone there and they did not know how they would ever move it. Maybe, just maybe, the Roman guards would take pity on them in their grief. Of course, that was taking a risk to ask the soldiers, for depending on their disposition they could be cruel. But these women had no other choice than to take the chance.

When they arrived at the tomb, it was like all heaven broke loose. The stone had been rolled away. Someone had been to the tomb ahead of them, but who? They went inside where they saw a young man. He was an angel dressed in dazzling white, proclaiming that Jesus who was crucified had been raised. They heard his thunderous and joyful voice, **“See the place where they laid him, he’s not there. Now go and tell his disciples, and especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, and there you will see him.”**

The women were astonished, confused, shocked, but more than anything else they were afraid. They didn't know what to believe. Is this some great hoax, or the best news they have ever heard? This news was simply too much for them to consume. They were traumatized, amazed, and completely silent.

Dr. Fred Craddock reminds us that languages allow us to occasionally break the rules of grammar in order to stress a point, and the literal translation of the reaction of the women would be: “And they did not say nothing to nobody for they were afraid.” They were silent. The angel said, “Go and tell.” And the women were simply too terrorized to speak, they were silent, and this is the ending of the Gospel According to Mark.

I know, I know, you who are looking in your Bibles see eleven more verses following verse 8, but these verses were added to the text many years later. It's a fact that the oldest manuscripts we have of Mark's gospel do not contain verses 9 – 20. And, of course, the older the manuscript the closer you

get to the actual text of Mark. If your Bible has verses 9 -- 20, you will probably notice an asterisk pointing you to an explanation. Even the most conservative Bible commentators such as Charles Ryrie, whose comments are in the Ryrie Study Bible, will tell us that verses 9 – 20 are not found in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts and, therefore, these verses should not be the basis for doctrine.

But, since the second century the church has not liked the ending of Mark. As Fred Craddock reminds us, “This is no way to run a resurrection, with women running quietly and afraid from the tomb.” Don’t you have to say something about an appearance of the risen Christ? So in the second century, maybe a hundred years after Mark wrote the Gospel, scribes tried to fix his ending. One scribe added to the text what is known as the short ending. Another added what is known as the long ending so there would be appearances of Jesus and people shouting “Hallelujah!” What could have happened is that Mark wrote about an appearance to the disciples, but the end of the scroll upon which he wrote was frayed or lost. So we are left with the ending, “and they were afraid.” I don’t know, but I am comfortable with the way Mark ends: “And they were afraid.”

The quietness and fear in these women makes them just as human as the men, so why not give them time to digest what they were hearing, give them some time to doubt? The men doubted; why not the women. It says in Matthew 28 that even in the presence of the resurrected Jesus, they worshipped but some doubted. In Luke we read that the disciples disbelieved with joy. Peter said, “I’m going fishing. And Thomas said, “I will not believe unless I see the scars in his body.” Do you hear the confusion surrounding those first days following the resurrection? So why not let the women be alone in their fear and silence?

They were hoping to get back to their routine. I mean Jesus was buried and dead. They had given away all his earthly possessions. Like we do today following a funeral, they had washed the dishes, sent the thank you notes, picked the dog up from the kennel, the guests have gone, now it’s time to get

back to the routine, but something has happened that will affect them forever and they were afraid, too afraid to speak.

Now, of what were they afraid? It very well could have been the authorities. In order to keep law and order they killed Jesus. He was a rabble rouser; he got people all stirred up, so they got rid of him in the name of law and order. Now if they were to go out and say what the angel told them to say, that Jesus was alive, then the authorities would turn their scorn on them. Of course, they were afraid.

It could have been that they were simply afraid of the unknown. Who wouldn't be afraid after experiencing what they heard and saw? Well, Mark ends with these women running away from the tomb, afraid. However, Jesus did make appearances to his followers.

According to Paul, Jesus appeared to some 500 brothers and sisters following the resurrection. But before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, according to Luke, that number had dwindled to 120. Imagine 120 believers in the world. That was it, there were 120 Christians on the day before Pentecost. When the sun rose on that day you could have fit every Christian believer in the world in this church building with a little elbow room – imagine that! And if Jewish historian Josephus was right and there were some two million people in Jerusalem. What were these three women compared to that throng?

Historians will tell us that at the end of the first century there were some seventy million people in the empire and maybe 40,000 of them were Christians. That means that as the first century came to a close, for every Christian there were 1,750 non-believers. If the ratio were still the same in Nacogdoches County today, there would be 33 Christians, 17 of which would live in town. Most of us don't know what it is to be a minority. Now think about those women when the ratio would make them a tiny, tiny minority. If they went around talking about a resurrection, they would be squashed like bugs. They were scared. They were very scared, and “they did not say nothing to nobody.”

Fear does that to you. You know full well how scary it is to talk. One of the things I hear from church people is this, “Preacher, I will do anything. I will mow the grass, serve communion, or work on a committee, but don’t ask me to say anything. I remember how afraid I was to preach my first sermon. There is a wall in the McMillan Building at Austin Seminary that heard me practice that sermon at least fifty times before I traveled to Burnet, Texas to preach it. I was scared. I understand that the number one fear people have is talking in front of a group, especially if you ask them to talk about something that has deeply affected them.

Actually, a lot of you can talk about most anything, the weather, the ball game, men can talk about women and women about men, but you ask them to say in a public place, “Jesus Christ is risen!” and we become so timid. Go to the coffee shop where people are chattering about all sorts of topics and say, “Jesus Christ is risen,” and see what happens.

I’m not sure, but maybe it was Jimmy Johnson, the former coach of the Dallas Cowboys who coined the phrase, “It’s not enough to talk the talk; you have to walk the walk.” Well, that sounds good, but it is backwards. For you see, it’s not enough to walk the walk you have to talk the talk. And the most difficult and profound thing you will do for Jesus Christ is to say something to someone else about what you believe.

Maybe the women were afraid, as we are, of the response we might get if we say something about the resurrection. I can hear the conversation at the Jerusalem version of Java Jacks on Monday morning. “Did you hear what those women said? They said, ‘He has risen.’” “Well, that sounds like a bunch of women who don’t have enough to do. But, my goodness, how do you explain it?”

“Well it’s obvious, they went to the wrong tomb. You know how women get all mixed up and don’t know which way is north or south. And there was a lot of confusion that day, and they buried him in someone else’s grave. It was early in the morning, and they probably couldn’t see very well. Wasn’t there a

lot of fog? I don't know. But they were confused and just went to the wrong tomb. How do you explain it?

"They moved the body. Like you said, he was buried in some else's tomb, so they went down and moved him to a different tomb. That's how you explain it; how do you explain it?"

"It's obvious; those disciples of his stole the body. That's right, they stole the body. They went down there before the sun came up, and as the soldiers slept they took the body; then they were going to tell us that he had risen from the dead. Maybe they didn't count on the women showing up to find the empty tomb before they made their announcement, but they stole the body. It's the oldest trick in the book. Now you see it, now you don't. How do you explain it?"

"Well I don't believe he was dead in the first place. You just think about it; he came around. Think about it. I've seen crucifixions where people hung on those crosses for two days, and this guy was only up there for about five or six hours. He wasn't dead. It was a premature burial. He got up and pried the stone away from the door and walked out. He wasn't dead. How do you explain it?"

I don't know about you, but I am fascinated with all the theories about the resurrection. They moved or stole the body. The women went to the wrong tomb. Or, my favorite is that he wasn't really dead; he only appeared to be dead, but he woke up and moved the stone. Now that would be quite a recovery, but it is a theory some believe.

But in the face of all the theories, I want to say this as clearly as I can. The Christian witness that Jesus Christ is raised from the dead is a Christian witness. It's something believers say. It's a church proclamation. It is interesting and intentional that Jesus Christ never made a post resurrection appearance in public. The only ones who saw him were his followers.

That's not the way I would have done it if God were to ask my opinion. I would have had Jesus make appearances all over the place. I think I would

have begun with the chief priests. I would wait for them to be having a dinner together, and in their conversation they would be laughing and congratulating themselves on getting rid of Jesus, then have Jesus just appear sitting in the middle of their table and stare Caiaphas the eye and say, "Want to try it again?" Or maybe I would have Jesus appear to Pilate, and just scare the pants off him. It would have been fun. Or remember those soldiers who beat him and put on him a crown of thorns and mocked him? I wonder if they would have been so tough. Yes, if I were in charge of the resurrection, things would have been different, but that only goes to show how small I am.

What happened is that nobody saw Jesus but his followers, and the truth of the matter and the challenge is that if the world is going to believe it, it is because you believe it and testify to it. As Peter addressed the crowd on that first Pentecost Sunday, he told them, the life of Jesus you all know, it's a matter of public record. The death of Jesus you all know, you saw it. The resurrection of Jesus, of that we are witnesses.

We are the witnesses of Christ's resurrection and saving power. And we cannot expect the public, the culture or society in general to sustain the real meaning of Easter. The message of Easter is a Christian message. It is a message that only Christians can give. One of the darkest moments in history came when a man stood up in front of his countrymen and said, "We cannot expect churches and the Christian family to carry the whole weight of ridding the world of atheism and communism. We have to put the power of government behind it." And so Adolph Hitler persuaded a country to put the government behind the battle against atheism and communism and he said, "God is with us."

The resurrection is and always will be a Christian witness, and if Easter has lost its meaning and has dwindled down to nothing more than going to church one Sunday a year, if it's only colored eggs and rabbits, and breaks at school, trips to the beach, and spring holiday, if it becomes no more than that, it's not the schools' fault. It's not government's fault. It's not society's fault. It's the church's fault. Easter is the church's message, and everybody

screaming about the schools ought to do this and the government ought to pass a law, well phooey on that! Easter is the church's witness, it is our message. Now what are you going to say? We cannot be like those who did not say nothing to nobody.

This is our witness. Our God is a God who gives life to the dead. It has been that way since creation. God called life into being at the creation. He took lifeless forms, dust, and breathed into it life. I don't know if he used real dust, but I do know there would not be life without the breath of God. God came to Abraham and Sarah, who as far as procreation was concerned, they were dead, yet Sarah had a child and called him "laughter." God comes to individuals whose lives are meaningless, they can be called dead, and God brings meaning and richness to their life. Jesus was dead. You ask the soldiers who took him off the cross: "He's dead." You ask his friends: "He's dead." Ask his mother: "Yes, Jesus is dead." Yet we believe God gives life to the dead. And you and I were dead in our trespasses and sins, and God has taken us and through the work of Jesus Christ he has made us alive. Do you believe that? Do you believe that on Easter morning the reason the women did not find the body of Jesus was because he was raised? Do you believe that these same women that morning met Jesus along the road? Do you believe that Mary, on going back to the tomb, saw someone she thought was the gardener and to her shock she recognized him as Jesus? Do you believe that because of the power of God to raise the dead we now have hope? Do you believe that because of Easter, that when we have a funeral around here, and over the past two years we have had far too many, but when we have a funeral that even in our grief there is hope and joy?

If you believe this, then can you think of a way of saying it? Can you say that to somebody? It's not enough to walk the walk, you have to talk the talk, for we cannot be a church that runs from an empty tomb silently. You have the gospel. You know of the resurrection. Now go find somebody who needs that hope and think of a way to tell them that Jesus Christ is risen. Amen.