

Easter Vigil 2021, Mark 16.1-8, The Revd Canon Patrick Curran

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

There is a hymn that people love to sing. The first line of the hymn goes, Blessed assurance Jesus is mine! Mark's account of the first Easter morn, the first day of the week, the eighth day, the first day of the new creation one of assurance, as I hear it today. Can we hear the message of assurance as made known by the mysterious figure of Mark's young man, I wonder?

Either side of the message of assurance we have the women who frame this passage. Let us look at the women together. They make their way to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body. They are mourning. They are looking down. They are exercised by a question. "Who will roll the stone away for us?" Only when they **look up** will they see that the stone has already been rolled away.

What we can learn or take from the picture of these women as they make their way to the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea laid him? Two things. The first is that we can become so preoccupied with our questions about God and God's strange ways that we cease to be expectant to see God at work in time, in our lives, in our communities and in our world, because our questions take hold of us in a way that don't allow us to look up. They do not allow us to see! Our questions do not allow us to see God rolling stones away, so that we may enter, and entering hear the message of assurance. The other thing – and it is connected to the first – is to always be ready to be surprised by the living God.

Let us return to the women who frame the good news encounter of this Easter gospel. The women are alarmed. They are amazed. They are frightened. They tell no one. They walk to the tomb grieving. They flee from the tomb in terror and amazement for they are frightened.

We often speak about the image of the Empty Tomb. It is empty of Jesus' body, but in truth the tomb in Mark is not empty. By the way it isn't empty in Matthew's or Luke's gospels either. The tomb is the receptacle for a message, a divine message, a

message of assurance. The message as we already heard as spoken by the mysterious figure of Mark's young man, "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."

Do not be afraid! Do not be alarmed! This is happening just as he told you. The women are told not to be afraid. Again and again through the course of God's interaction with a people God is telling them not to be afraid. It is a consistent message down the ages in answer to Adam's famous statement on hearing God in the garden, "I was afraid... and I hid myself". This Easter God's message to us is once again not to be afraid.

But there is more. The women are informed that Jesus is doing what he said he would. He is going before them. He is going before them to Galilee. They must tell the disciples and also Peter the denier that he, the one who was crucified, has been raised. The risen one is going before them. In Galilee he will meet with them. There he will converse with them. There he will be with them.

Peter is explicitly mentioned. With the Lord there is mercy. Peter broke the relationship through his denial, but the message of the Empty Tomb explicitly embraces Peter. For as we will say again and again presently in the Litany of Redemption, with the Lord there is mercy. The Lord's mercy endures forever. Again a deeply biblical notion that God is merciful through and through. We are assured that with God there is ample redemption.

The women lose sight of Jesus in the tomb. Here's where they laid him. The Crucified One is now the Risen One, who bears the marks of crucifixion in his body. They are assured that they will see him with the disciples in Galilee. This is the message. It is one of assurance. It is one of reassurance. In Galilee they will see him as he told them.

How do they react? They flee the tomb in terror and amazement. And what they are charged to do, they fail to do. As Mark relates, "Being afraid they said nothing to

anyone.” Is it because no one will believe them? Is it because they will be ridiculed? Is it because this encounter is an encounter with the living God ever young...? It is because they will have to change?

Many would urge us to leave it there with Mark’s final sentence, “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.”

But the story does not end there! The women will return to Galilee. They will encounter the Crucified One, now raised. But more than anything else the good news that they hear in the place assigned for the dead is that death does not have the last word. And this message wants to get out. This message will out! Their initial reaction to what they see and hear will be surpassed by the telling of the Good News of encounter framed by an invitation to not be afraid, by the message to bringers of a message that Jesus has accomplished what he said he would. He is not here. He who was crucified has been raised. He is going before you. He is going before us that we might have life in him and come to reign with him.

Blessed assurance, Jesus is ours!