

Sermon: “They Were Afraid”

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, March 31, 2024)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

It was a terrible death, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. For those of us who worshipped together this past Friday, the so-called Good Friday, you have already got an earful from me about this terrible business of the death of Jesus.

He was betrayed of one of his own, Judas; denied by one of his closest, Peter; tried by the Jewish religious authority, the Sanhedrin; handed over to the Romans to face Pilate; mocked by soldiers and bystanders with the title ‘King of the Jews’; beaten, flogged, and finally crucified. Adding insult to injury, with his dying breath, according to the Gospel of Mark, 15:34, Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Like a suffering servant, as prophesied by Isaiah,

*“Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.”* (Isaiah 53:4-5)

You have also got a sneak preview on Good Friday, about the coming Easter Sunday, today, as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When Jesus humbled himself to the will of God, and became obedient to the point of death on a cross, God the Father proceeded to raise him from the dead. By that one singular act, God has not only reversed all that had transpired, all the things that was done to Jesus, God has, in effect, exalted Christ even more highly, and has given him ‘the name that is above every other name’. So that at the name given to Jesus, every knee should bend,

every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:9-11)

There are things we find in the Bible that stretch and strain our modern sensibility, our enlightened rationality. I know some Christians, faithful church goers, who would pick and choose what they believe, what they profess to be true. Some do not believe in virgin birth; some question the whole business of casting out demons; some write off miracle healings; Some take issue with the patriarchal context upon which the Bible was written, organized, and canonized. I smile when I come across those views. I try to engage but not criticize, for faith is truly a gift of God, and truth be told, I sometimes have doubt. Something that I have picked up along the way in life, that is: the more I learn the more I realized there is much more I can learn.

However, the one issue, the one truth that I will insist upon is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, might I put it so bluntly, is the core of the Christian faith. For as the Apostle Paul put it so eloquently in 1 Corinthians 15:14, *“If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain and your faith is in vain.”*

Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. Let us move past doubt, and celebrate, with Hymn 254, Jesus is risen from the grave; Jesus is risen from the grave; Jesus is risen from the grave; Hallelujah. Not so fast! Not quite yet!

The Gospel reading, on this glorious Easter Sunday, is Mark 16:1-8. It takes us back to the very first account of the three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, who were first told by an angelic young man of the good news that Jesus is alive, he has been raised from the dead. They were instructed to share this news with the other disciples. The author of Mark wrote of the reaction of these three women, listen carefully of this: “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.**”

Adding to this troubling description of the three women, the earliest Greek manuscript of this gospel, codices Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, end at Mark 16:8, with the women fleeing in fear from the empty tomb. The majority of recent scholars believe this to be the original ending, and that is supported by statements from the early Church Fathers Eusebius and Jerome. The longer ending we find in most Bibles is apparently a later addition, with accounts of the resurrected Jesus, the commissioning of the

disciples to proclaim the gospel, the ascension of Christ, not to mention the handling of snakes and drinking poison. All these were added later by an unknown author, or authors. Parts of these accounts do bear striking similarity to that of the Gospel of Matthew and of Luke. Scholars generally agree that the authors of Matthew and Luke had the Gospel of Mark as their source, but as to this longer ending of Mark, no agreement exists. Authorship in the ancient time is actually quite complicated, and I don't wish to dwell on it much longer.

The point that I am trying to stress is this: according to the original author of Mark, his Gospel ends with the three women fleeing from the empty tomb, telling no one about what they saw or heard, for **they were afraid**.

Now, in relation to the earthly ministry of Jesus, these three women were no 'spring chicken'. Mary Magdalene was an early disciple of Jesus, though not explicitly identified as a disciple, she was nevertheless with Jesus pretty much right from the beginning. Mary the mother of James (and Joseph) according to the other gospel accounts, was the sister of Mary the mother of Jesus. Salome was the wife of Zebedee, the mother of the disciples James and John. This Salome was the one who came to Jesus with the request that her sons sit in places of honor in the kingdom (Matthew 20:20-21).

These three women had ministered to Jesus back in his Galilean days. They had followed Jesus all the way to Jerusalem, witnessed his crucifixion, stayed by his side when all other disciples fled. They were, in essence, tried and tested, battle hardened. Yet when they were met with the empty tomb, informed by an angel that Jesus had been raised, and had gone ahead of them back to Galilee, their reaction was that of fear and disbelief, their action was to flee and to tell no one.

That is how the author of Mark ended his so-called the good news of Jesus Christ. Allow me to quote Diane Roth, a Lutheran pastor and blogger, in her 2018 article published in the Christian Century magazine, "The Gospel of Mark is the gospel of failure. It is the theme that runs through the whole book, and it doesn't resolve during those last eight verses—it's like a piece of music that ends on a discordant note."

A quick survey of how bible commentators and preachers have handled this text, this ending, seem to centre around readers' response. In theory, such unsatisfactory ending is supposed to engage us, to enrage us even, and to provoke us into action. In theory, where the disciples failed

Jesus, we shall stand our grounds; when the women failed to pass on the good news, we shall share it with all; while fear gripped those closest to Christ upon the news of the resurrection, we will rejoice and celebrate, in theory.

In reality, I am not so sure that we the readers of this gospel truly get it. I am not so sure we the followers of Jesus truly follow, nor we the Church have truly lived up to its calling. Deep down inside, truth be told, I think we are still afraid. Now if you want to prove me wrong, and say that you get it, you are not afraid. Good for you! Go right ahead. I challenge you to then live up to it, by telling the next, oh let's say three strangers you meet, that Jesus is alive, he is resurrected, he lives. Be sure to let me know what happens afterwards. This is just my humble opinion: if we are the ones to finish this story, this unsatisfactory ending of the Gospel of Mark, I am not confident that it would be a good read.

Nevertheless, the Triune God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer is also the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. Christ is the author and finisher of our faith. It is not up to us to write this story, ultimately, I believe it is left to God. It is left to God to complete the story and resolve the discordant note. It is left to God to overturn our failures and re-create the church. It is left to God to raise the dead, to resurrect even us.

The women ran away and said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. The disciples miss the point and never seem to quite get it. The church leaders bicker amongst themselves and set the wrong priorities. The people are petty and small. And here we are, small, afraid yet seeking to be faithful, lifting high the cross on this fine Easter Sunday, listening once again to this music of failure, to some, yet to us the triumph of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**