



Sermon Transcript
Easter Sunday
April 1, 2018

Gospel of Mark: The Good News of Jesus
They Were Afraid
Mark 15:42 -16:8

This message from the Bible was addressed originally to the people of Wethersfield Evangelical Free Church on April 1, 2018 at 511 Maple Street, Wethersfield, CT, 06109 by Dr. Scott W. Solberg. This is a transcription that bears the strength and weaknesses of oral delivery. It is not meant to be a polished essay. An audio version of this sermon can be found on the church website at www.wethefc.com.

Sermon Text
Mark 15:42 -16:8

⁴² And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. ⁴⁵ And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. ⁴⁶ And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. ⁴⁷ Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.

¹ When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, 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 And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” ⁴ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Introduction

This morning we join *Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome* as they make their way to the tomb where Jesus was buried just a couple of days prior to this given Sunday. They know where they are going. They know exactly where Jesus was buried. According to the last verse in Mark 15, two of these women were with Joseph of Arimathea, as he took the body of Jesus from the cross and placed him in the tomb. These women watched, and most likely assisted, as Joseph carefully wrapped the lifeless body of Jesus in a linen shroud and laid him in the tomb. When they were finished, they saw Joseph take a large stone and roll it in front of the entrance of the tomb. And then, Mark 15 ends with this simple but important detail, “*Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James (who is also identified as the mother of James in our passage this morning) saw where he was laid.*” Therefore, as we follow these ladies this morning, we are confident that they know where they are going. We are going to the right place. We are going to the tomb where Jesus was buried.

These women are returning to the tomb of Jesus to anoint his body with aromatic spices that tempered the smell associated with a decomposing body. On their way to the tomb, they wondered among themselves how they were going to remove that heavy stone from the entrance of the tomb. From Matthew’s Gospel, we learn Roman soldiers were ordered to stand guard at the entrance of the tomb of Jesus to prevent his disciples from stealing his body. But these women didn’t know about that and so they were wondering how they were going to gain access to the body of Jesus. But to their surprise, when they arrived at the tomb, the stone was already rolled back from the entrance. No doubt, this discovery caused them to hasten their steps and when they entered into the tomb, to their surprise, the body of Jesus was gone. It wasn’t there. Instead, *they were alarmed* to find a man sitting there. He was a man *dressed in a white robe*. He was an angel. He then made this startling announcement to these ladies, “*Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.*”

I was reading this passage to someone recently and after I finished reading it, the person said, “I wonder what that must have been like for those women to come and find the tomb empty and to hear the angel say, “*He has risen; he is not here.*” Mark tries to give us some sense as to what it was like by telling us that it was alarming. A few days ago they saw the lifeless body of Jesus placed into the grave and the entry was sealed with a heavy stone. Now the body of Jesus is missing and there is an angel sitting there telling them that Jesus is alive.

I imagine that in this room this morning there are several different kinds of reactions to the news we celebrate this morning; “He has risen! He has risen indeed!” Some here may consider that to be foolish and a bit out of touch. Others are perhaps indifferent. I even wonder for some who believe this to be true, that perhaps this news is so familiar and ordinary to you that it possibly even lost its wonder to you. Your confession that Jesus has risen from the dead oddly becomes all so rather normal. And yet, for many here this morning, this news still brings great joy and awe, producing genuine hope.

But none of these reactions describe how Mark portrays the response of these women. He says of the women in verse 8, “*And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*” This is not the reaction I typically think about when I think of receiving the news that Jesus has risen from the dead. I think more along the lines of “joy” when I think of the news that Jesus has risen from the dead. As we ponder this central message of our Christian faith this morning, I don’t think we do so with a sense of being afraid. Strangely, we don’t find here the “alleluias” we are accustomed to singing on Easter. Instead, we see these women quickly book out from the tomb, “*for they were afraid.*”

As we reflect on the resurrection of Jesus from the dead this morning, I want to make four observations from this response the women had upon discovering the empty tomb. What is Mark telling us when he describes their response as he does in verse 8? “*And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*”

It is an Abrupt Ending

The first observation I want to make about verse 8 is that it is a rather abrupt way for Mark to end his account of the life of Christ. Now I understand that in your Bibles you have verses 9-20 that come after verse 8. But probably in most of your Bibles there is a note that precedes these verses that says, “Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include Mark 16:9-20.”

Without getting overly technical, the earliest and most reliable manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end with verse 8. Biblical scholars regularly agree that Mark concludes his gospel with verse 8. This abrupt ending has caused some to conjecture that perhaps we lost the original ending to the Gospel of Mark. Some wondered whether Mark keeled over and died after he penned this final verse. Either way, you have to admit, if this is the way Mark concluded his account of the life of Jesus, it leaves you hanging.

It leaves you hanging grammatically. I discovered this week that in Greek to end a paragraph, let alone an entire book, with the conjunction “for” - *for they were afraid*, is like us ending a sentence with a preposition. It goes against the rules of grammar. It leaves you hanging in the story as well. In verse 7, the angel told the women, “*to go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.*” But if verse 8 is the final words of the Gospel of Mark, all we know is that the women were paralyzed with fear and they fail to do what they were told to do. Mark says, “*they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*” This verse also leaves you hanging theologically. The resurrection of Jesus is the central truth in the preaching of the early church. We learn from 1 Corinthians 15 that we have no faith to hang our hats on if Jesus did not rise from the dead. In fact, when Paul is making his point about the resurrection of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15, one of his clinching arguments is all the people Jesus appeared to, all the witnesses who saw him. So in Mark, you would expect to have him tell us about Jesus appearing to these witnesses and giving them the Great Commission and ascending to heaven. And that is “the stuff” you find in verses 9-20, like you find in the other gospels. You can see why someone might be tempted to “finish the story.” There is nothing really wrong with what you find in verses 9-20. But it is not how Mark chose to end his account of the life of Jesus. He chose to leave us hanging. He ended by telling us that the women “*said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*”

Before we consider why Mark ended his account of the life of Jesus so abruptly, let's acknowledge what he did tell us. If you are in a conversation with someone about whether or not Christianity is true, one of the best things you can do is challenge that person to explain the empty tomb. When it comes to the historicity of Jesus, there are three facts that are generally agreed upon by scholars.

First of all, whatever your view is of Jesus, it is regularly agreed that he died by Roman crucifixion. Clearly Mark tells us about that in great detail in Mark 15. But even in his account of the resurrection of Jesus, Mark alludes to the crucifixion of Jesus when the angel says, “*You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.*” The second thing about Jesus that is readily agreed upon by scholars is that the tomb of Jesus was empty. Nabeel Qureshi, who converted to Christianity from Islam discovered that “an impressive 75 percent of scholars who study the subject acknowledge the empty tomb.”¹ William Wand, former professor at Oxford University concluded, “All the strictly historical evidence we have is in favor of [the empty tomb], and those scholars who reject it ought to recognize that they do so on some other ground than that of scientific history.”² Mark not only us gives testimony to the empty tomb, but through divine revelation it is disclosed as to why it is empty. The angel said, “*He has risen; he is not here.*”

The final fact about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead that is undeniable is that this was the testimony of the early church. Many scholars who don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead are at the same time willing to admit that the early church believed strongly that Jesus rose from the dead. That is the message that built the church.

Let us not forget that the Gospel of Mark is just one of four accounts of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Mathew, Mark, Luke and John, with varying degree of detail, describe for us the death and resurrection of Jesus. Because of this, where Mark leaves us hanging, others fill in the blanks. We know that these women didn't keep quiet for long. When you put the four Gospels together, we discover that they ran and told the disciples. Then Peter and John ran to the tomb to check it out for themselves. Then we see Jesus appearing multiple times to various people. We hear him give the Great Commission to go and spread the news of his resurrection to the world and then we see him ascend to heaven, promising some day to return. And yet, even though it is the most brief of the four accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, Mark lends his testimony to the fact that Jesus has risen from the dead.

So why then does Mark end so abruptly? *“And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*

It is a Common Reaction

For the past several months, we have been walking through the Gospel of Mark. We started in Mark 1:1 and we end this morning in Mark 16:8. Perhaps after making your way through the Gospel of Mark, it is not very surprising to you to find these women responding the way they did after encountering this supernatural act of God. The reason it doesn't surprise you to find the women *“afraid”* is because it is the common reaction we find in the Gospel of Mark when others encounter something of the divine through the works and acts of Jesus.

For example, when the disciples are in the boat out in the middle of a fierce storm, they witness Jesus speak to the storm and it stops. What was their reaction to this display of divine power? Mark says, *“And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?’”* Or consider the account in Mark 5 where Jesus encounters a man who is possessed by a legion of demons. This man was out of control, often naked, a nuisance to all and kept at a distance. But when Jesus encountered him, he delivered this man from these demons and the people from the

town found him clothed and sitting in his right mind. Clearly, this was an act of God and it says of the people, *“they were afraid.”* It is the same reaction that Peter, James and John have when they accompany Jesus to the top of a mountain and right before their eyes, Jesus is transfigured into his heavenly glory. All of a sudden, two prophets from the past, Moses and Elijah are standing next to Jesus. Then they hear the voice of God speaking from a cloud saying, *“This is my beloved Son, listen to him.”* Does it surprise you to hear that Peter, James and John *“were terrified”* at all of this? And so to see these women respond with fear at the greatest display of all of the divine acts of Jesus—the resurrection of the dead—should not surprise us at all. It is a common reaction when mere mortals get a glimpse of the immortal God.

When I was in college, the first two years I had a part-time job as a campus security guard. Standards were low back then. I graduated from the Barney Fife School of Security! The only weapons I carried with me were these “two pythons” - my arms - and a long flashlight. I didn’t even have the one bullet Barney Fife carried in his pocket. I tended to work what was known as the “graveyard” shift: Midnight to 4:00 am. Every hour I had to make my rounds and clock in at each station to prove that I was there. There I was, all alone, in the middle of the night making my rounds on this dark college campus. All I can say is that you hear things at night when you are all alone in a dark building that you don’t hear during the day when the building is full of life. I distinctly remember the first time I did my rounds in this secondary building on the back edge of the campus. I walked through the door that took me to a flight of stairs that led to the second floor. As the door was closing behind me, it made a swishing sound, that not only stopped me in my tracks, but the hair on the back of my neck stood up. For a split second, I had to assess whether or not that was the door. It was. But if it wasn’t? Like the women at the tomb, I would have fled, *“for trembling and astonishment would have seized me.”*

I tell you this story because it doesn’t take much to cause our knees to knock and to be afraid. I can only imagine what it must be really like to encounter not only the supernatural, but a glimpse of the glory of God. Mark tells us in the very first verse of this Gospel who Jesus is; *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”* Sure, to look at him, he looked like any other person you would bump into in the course of a day. But through his miracles—and now through his resurrection—we get a glimpse of his glory. Whenever that glory that comes with being God pierces into this world, it causes us to respond with a measure of fear. In other words, it puts us in our place. It causes us to realize that we are not as big as we think we are and when we encounter divine majesty and glory it brings us to our knees.

I think one reason Mark ends his account of the life of Jesus the way he does is because when we encounter the glory of God, it leaves us speechless and undone. Paul says of the resurrection of Jesus in Romans 1:4, that Jesus “*was declared to be the Son of God . . . by his resurrection from the dead.*” So when these women came and discovered the empty tomb and heard the news that Jesus has risen from the dead, they came into contact with the divine and it rendered them afraid. In fact, Paul says in Romans 1:4 that because Jesus rose from the dead he is “*Jesus Christ our Lord.*” He is not to be trifled with or ignored. Rather, he is to be worshiped.

In Revelation 4-5, the veil between heaven and earth is opened and we see the exalted Jesus in all of his glory. Every creature, whether angelic or human, who comes in contact with the glory of Jesus assumes the same posture before Jesus. Over and over again we are told that they “*fell down and worshiped.*” Mark begins his Gospel by telling us that this Jesus is the Son of God. He ends by giving us the clinching proof, “*You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.*” Like others before them, this is too much for these women to take in and when they encounter the divine, quite naturally they are afraid. I think this is one reason Mark ends with this abrupt ending. He wants us to consider the implication of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. As Peter said on the Day of Pentecost, after speaking about the resurrection of Jesus, “*know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.*” He is worthy of your worship and life.

An Invitation to React

The third observation to this ending of the Gospel of Mark is summed up well by David Garland. He suggests that Mark is “*goading us to react.*”³ In other words, the reader is now forced to fill in the blanks and to go back into the Gospel of Mark to find assurance that this is true. It gets to the question, “*How do I know what I know?*” How do I know that Jesus has risen from the dead? Do I know because I examined the facts and considered the evidence and so I have deduced that the resurrection of Jesus is the best explanation for the empty tomb? Or, do I know that Jesus has risen from the dead because of divine revelation? Does my faith rest on the evidence or on the proclamation of God’s Word? Clearly the evidence is there and there is a place for apologetics. But the power to save is in the Word of God proclaimed. I think Mark wants divine revelation to be the source of your knowledge that Jesus has risen from the dead.

So through this abrupt ending, you are forced to ask, “*what just happened?*” Therefore, when you go back into the Gospel of Mark, you find the explanation for the empty

tomb. What did we discover when we went through Mark 8-10? We listened to three crucial conversations Jesus had with his disciples. Three times Jesus told them that he would die on the cross and then three days later he would rise from the dead. The story of what happened on the Mount of Transfiguration was a secret between Jesus and the three disciples who were with him until after the resurrection. He told them, to not tell anyone until after he has risen from the dead. And then, in Mark 14:27-28, as Jesus and his disciples are in transit to the Garden of Gethsemane, he tells them *“You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered. But after I am raised, I will go before you to Galilee.’”* He told them this on Thursday night. This should be fresh on their mind. The angel said to the women, *“But go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee.”* In other words, he is doing what he said he would do. The proof of the resurrection of Jesus is found in the proclamation and the revelation of the Word of God. It is not found in the empty tomb.

I need to confess something to you this morning. While on one hand you might find Christmas Eve and Easter Morning the most exciting times to be at a church service, I find them the most challenging and often very stressful. How many different ways can I tell these familiar stories? I once saw a cartoon of a man shaking the hand of a pastor at the end of an Easter service. And he said, “Pastor, I only come on Easter Sunday and it was a good sermon. But you seem to be in a bit of a rut. I think you talked about the same thing last year.” And that is some of the challenge I feel. For those who may not be here on a regular basis, the temptation I feel is to try to convince you with all of the evidence that Jesus has indeed risen from the dead. I read an article this week on “How not to preach an Easter sermon.” One of the points was to not turn the sermon into an argument for why the resurrection of Jesus must be true. The article suggested, “You are not clever enough to impress unbelievers with your creativity or strong enough to mentally pull them to Christ.”⁴ Besides, the anchor of our hope and the assurance that Jesus has risen from the dead is found in the proclamation of the Word of God.

So as you interact with the revelation of Christ in the Gospel of Mark, you need to decide what you will do with Jesus. As Mark presents Jesus to us, we hear Peter confess in Mark 8 that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. When we come to the cross in Mark 15, we hear a Roman centurion confess, *“Truly this man was the Son of God!”* And so, what about you? Mark emphasizes the shocking claim that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, the Son of God and that God’s love was revealed by Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. And so Mark’s lack of closure forces you and me to react. What will you do with this message that has been disclosed to us through divine revelation? Will you too run away from Jesus or will you recognize the crucified and risen Jesus as your Savior and King?

If you are seeking for the answer, one of the best things you can do is do what Mark is goading you to do. Turn to the Scriptures, weekly sit under the proclamation of the Word of God and God will reveal himself to you through the revelation of his Word.

It is True to Life

Finally, *“For they were afraid”* is also rather true to life. For our final observation, we need to keep in mind who Mark is writing to. He is writing to the church in Rome. So at the outset, this Gospel is being written to people who have already heard that Jesus has risen from the dead and have already believed. In fact, Mark’s account of the resurrection of Jesus follows closely the formula of the gospel presented in 1 Corinthians 15. Here Paul says what is of first importance: *Christ died for our sins . . . was buried and raised on the third day . . . appeared to Cephas [Peter] and then the twelve.”* That is Marks outline, too. The angel said to the women, *“You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified . . . see where they laid him . . . He is not here, he has risen from the dead . . . Go and tell his disciples and Peter.”*

When the readers of the Gospel of Mark read the end of Mark’s Gospel, *“And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid,”* like us, they already knew the story. Garland says, *“They did not fret, ‘Oh, those foolish women who never told the good news! Now no one will know what happened!’”*⁵ The people Mark was writing to know already know the good news of the resurrection that has been clearly proclaimed to them. In fact, they have already embraced it. But the people Mark is writing to are living in perilous times. It is a church facing persecution.

And so the question remaining for the reader, which includes you and me, is this. Will we meet up with the risen Jesus in Galilee, from where we will be sent to proclaim the hope of the resurrected Christ? Or will we be silent and fearful like these women? It is interesting that when Mark presents the story of the temptation of Jesus, like his story of the resurrection, we are not told much detail or how Jesus does in the wilderness where he is tempted. But the next thing you know, he is in Galilee proclaiming the gospel and calling people to repent and believe. And now here is the resurrected Jesus, meeting up again with his disciples in Galilee from where they will be sent to proclaim the good news of the resurrected Jesus. This abrupt ending asks the reader whether or not we will join them in proclaiming the hope of Jesus. May we not be silent or fearful.

It is a reminder to us that just because Jesus rose from the dead, doesn’t mean that from

now on we will all live “happily ever after.” There are troubles we face. There is cause for fear. There is ambiguity to life. But to the Roman reader, there is the invitation to meet up with the risen Jesus and participate in the spread of the gospel. To the member of WEFC, there is the invitation to meet up with Jesus and proclaim the hope of the Gospel to an unreached people group like New England. This is why we are committed to church planting. May this abrupt ending cause us to ponder our response to our surroundings. Are we running to meet up with Jesus in Galilee or are we running in fear and keeping silent? May the words “*fear not*” encourage us to proclaim the hope of Jesus to a needy world.

Conclusion

“And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Yes, this is an abrupt ending, I admit. But is not an uncommon reaction of those who encounter the divine. If nothing else, it calls us to worship Jesus. He is worthy of our worship and our lives. It also forces us to react and to search the Scriptures for truth. If you are seeking God this morning, keep coming. I believe a steady diet of the Word of God will reveal the truth of the risen Jesus to you. I recently challenged a man who was seeking to come to church every Sunday for the next three months. I am convinced that if you hang around long enough, you will believe. And finally, fear is common reality of life and faith. But may we overcome it and may we be found pointing others to the risen Jesus. I don’t want it said of me or of us as a church, *“and they said nothing, for they were afraid.”* Rather, may it be said of us, *“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’”*

He has risen! He has risen, indeed!

¹Nabeel Qureshi *Seek Allah, Finding Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) 164

²William Wand *Christianity: A Historic Religion?* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1972) 93-94

³David Garland *Mark: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 618

⁴Steve Tillis “Preachers Toolkit: How Not to Preach an Easter Sermon”
www.thegospelcoalition.org March 26, 2018

⁵Garland, 622

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COMMUNITY GROUPS

Getting To Know Me Questions

1. Share with the group an instance when you were frightened. What was it about that experience that made you afraid?
2. Reflecting back on Good Friday and Easter Sunday, what did God impress upon your heart as you reflected on the cross of Jesus and the resurrection of Christ?
3. What is one thought you took from the sermon on Easter Sunday?

Diving Into The Word

4. Read Mark 15:42-16:8. Much was made in the sermon about the abrupt ending to the Gospel of Mark and his account of the resurrection. That aside, what important details does Mark tell us about Jesus in this passage? Compare this to 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. What parallels do you see between these two passages?
5. Read Mark 4:41; 5:15; 6:50; 9:6 and 16:8. Why is fear a common reaction to encountering the glory of God? What does this tell us about ourselves (Psalm 62:9)? What does this tell us about Jesus (Mark 1:1)?
6. Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. What does this passage tell you about the power of the proclamation of the Word of God? How has God shown himself to you through the preaching of the Word of God?
7. Read Mark 16:8 again. What it is that tempts you to be silent and fearful when it comes to being a witness? How can you overcome this fear?

Taking It Home

8. What is one step you can take this week to be a witness? Who is someone you want to reach out to?
9. Pray for the church residency program and for the potential of church planting.