

Mark 16: 1-8 "Through the Cemetery" Rev. Janet Chapman 4/4/21

I attended college in the 1980's taking classes part-time at the University of Oregon while attending neighboring Northwest Christian College. This allowed me the best of both worlds, a small Christian college experience along with the advantages of a major state university. At that time, the schools had a working agreement to partner in their degree programs but that has since ceased. My U of O classes were often at night, and occasionally I had to travel through the historical Pioneer cemetery to get back to the dorm after class. It is a beautifully old cemetery founded in the 1870's and includes several dozen Civil War veterans, women and children. It is a nice place to stroll and read the gravestones along the way, unless it is pitch dark. On those dark nights when the wind blew through the towering pine trees and the forested carpet made walking so silent it was frightening, I sometimes chose the longer, less direct route home. But when it was raining, (and seriously, when isn't it raining in Eugene?) I wanted the shortest route possible. As I trudged through the graveyard, I would make noises and scuff my feet, hum a song, do anything to break up the silence. There was one spot which veered off the path and led through the gravestones that would have cut my trek down even more, but it meant walking over the graves. More than once, I remembered the words of my Resident Assistant, Holly, "When you go through the cemetery, don't step on the graves. Graves are sacred ground so don't step on the graves." But it was dark, the gravestones were short, worn, and toppled over, so how did you know where the graves were? I must have looked pretty funny tiptoeing and taking long steps and then short steps trying to avoid what I didn't know – but maybe this is sacred or maybe this spot. I would get back to my dorm and complain, "I can't tell what part is sacred" to which Holly would say, "Well, maybe just treat it

all as sacred, then you'll never miss." It wasn't particularly helpful for a college freshman trying to hurriedly get across a cemetery in the dark rain, but that's just the way Holly was. I discovered more than once that the endings of her conversations were short and to the point – nothing more needed. Treat it all as sacred...

When the sacred day of sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, mother of James, and Salome went to the cemetery, not like ours, but no less a cemetery. Most of us know that following a death, there is nothing to do, and there is much to do, but all of it operates on sacred ground. Nobody goes to work, nobody goes to school, nobody is hungry, nobody has much to say. Helpers are helpless, and often in the way. There is also much to do: legal matters need attention, a tomb must be located, the body must be prepared for burial. It was the latter to which the women were attending as they headed out early in the day to do their sacred duty. There had been much speculation among the Romans & Jews that someone might come and steal Jesus' body so it needed to be well-secured. Because of such suspicions, the women were risking their very lives by even approaching the cave. In addition, who knew how they were going to move that huge stone protecting the tomb? In their mind, there was no choice but try anyway. As they arrive, they are stunned to see the stone has already been moved and inside the tomb is a young man dressed in a white robe. Mark doesn't identify him as an angel so we are left to wonder who is he and how did he get there? The Easter message they receive is brief: do not be afraid; Jesus was crucified; he was placed here; he is not here now because he has been raised. Then they receive an Easter commission: go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. In Galilee, they will see him. Instead, afraid and

confused, the women run from the tomb. The Gospel ends with the surprising statement that, "They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Short and to the point. End of story.

All credible biblical scholars agree this is where the original gospel of Mark concluded. It is an awkward ending as there is no appearance of the risen Christ to the women or anyone else. The last 4 words, "because they were afraid," is hardly a shout of victory over death. Early Christian scribes and the early church felt that the ending didn't suffice, therefore they added verses 9-20, incorporating a summary from the other Gospel resurrection appearances. Those subsequent editors buried the women's final words of fear by adding more verses that are as thick with physical beauty and promise as the bouquets of flowers we bank around a coffin to hide death. However, today, we are sticking to the original verses, accepting this text as Mark's original Easter account that we might hear what it says and doesn't say.

Whereas some critics claim there is no resurrection in Mark's Gospel without the last 12 verses, that is not true. Mark clearly communicates that the resurrection has taken place. Jesus, who appears in Mark's gospel as an entirely trustworthy character, predicts four times that he will rise from the dead. Similarly, the young man at the tomb, another reliable character, announces that Jesus has risen. He says they will see him later in Galilee therefore there is no doubt in the author's mind that Jesus rose from the dead and this his disciples saw him alive. Although many theories have been tossed around as to why Mark didn't say more, the most likely possibility is that Mark wanted to end his Gospel with a call for faith over fear. Faith cannot be coerced, even on Easter. Faith is a response to a divine revelation, and Mark gives that from the mouth of the young man at the tomb. Mark didn't need an appearance of the risen Christ to affirm his faith in the resurrection. Faith can be expressed by adding an

appearance after death and burial, or it can be expressed by remembrance of Jesus' repeated promise of a resurrection. Mark chose the latter. Recalling the words of Jesus is the stuff of faith.

I can't tell you how many times simply recalling someone's words during an unusual time in my life has revealed their truth for me. Holly's statement "treat it all as sacred" echoes in my mind not just when I am at a graveyard, but when I walk along the banks of Whiskeytown Lake or through historic old Shasta or near Keswick Dam. Remembering that the ground I walk on has been scattered with the ashes of lives lost 2 years ago in the Carr fire, human and animal, makes it even more sacred than before. When I saw that old cemetery in college through the lens of being sacred ground, it was less scary and filled with more hope. The words of my Grandma Warner, "God works in mysterious ways" come back to me filled with truth and wonder whenever I am confronted with an unexpected miracle like receiving a tax refund just when the car breaks down. I have heard the words, they ring out in my heart but how will I respond to them? Will I respond with faith, proclaiming their truth to others or will I respond with fear and silence? Throughout Mark's Gospel, his stories again and again are a call to respond in faith over fear.

I recall hearing a story once about a 3 year old, Jane, who was driven by a cemetery every day on her way to preschool. As they went by, her older brother Tim would say, "Jane, that's where the dead people are." The idea of death was somewhat confusing to her, so he went on to say that the cemetery is where they bury people's bodies in the ground when they are dead, and their spirits go back to God. Several months later, on Memorial Day, the family went for a bike ride. Jane rode behind her mom in a bike trailer. With helmet on and her eyes

darting from side to side, she enjoyed the fresh air and sunshine of the day. They rode by the cemetery and it was filled with flowers and flags and people everywhere. Some were huddled in groups while others knelt alone in front of headstones. Jane saw the site and from the bike trailer began to shout, "They're alive! They're alive! Mommy, they're alive!" It may have been Memorial Day, but for Jane, it was Easter. You and I have heard the announcement of the resurrection. Will we retreat into silence and disbelief or boldly proclaim like the young man in the tomb, "He is alive! He's alive!" Will it be faith or fear? It is the question every reader of Mark's Gospel must answer.