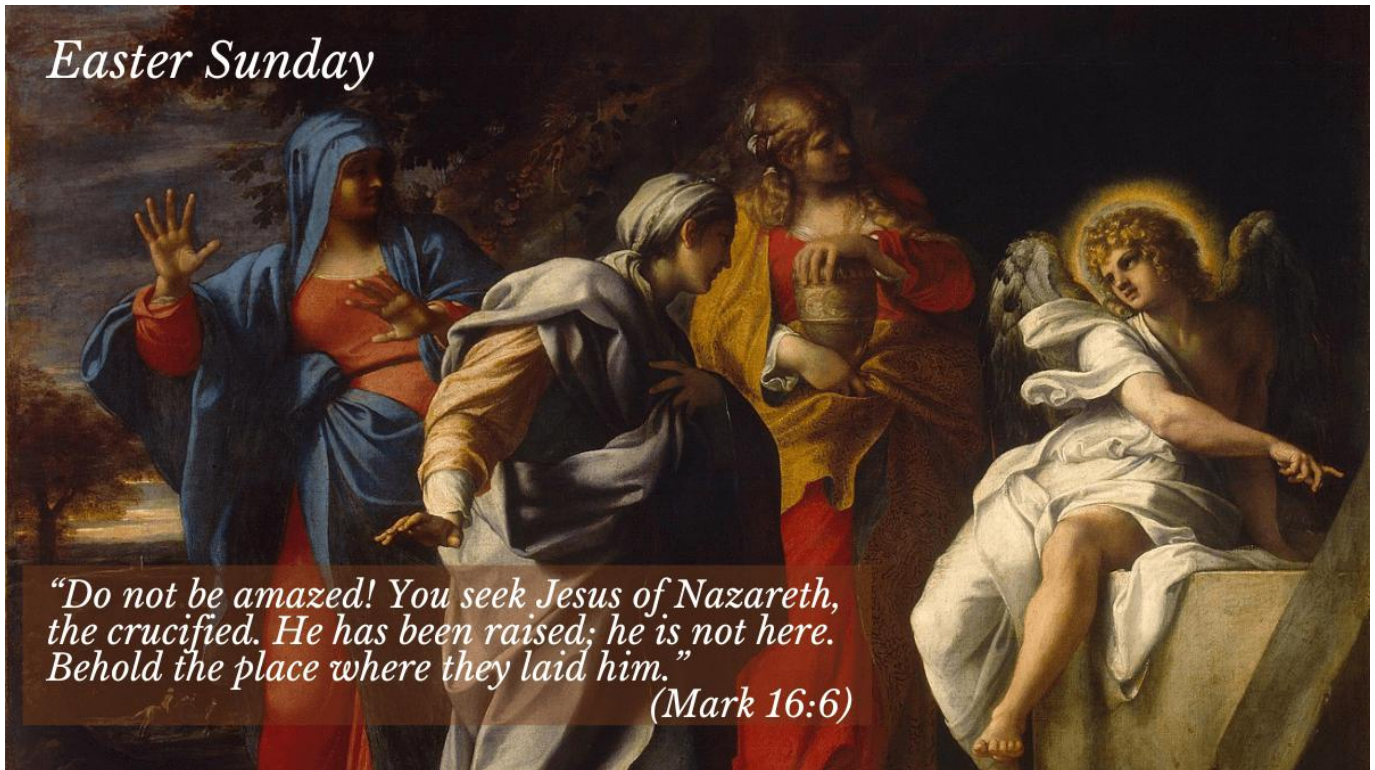


Easter Vigil - Year B

Mark 16:1-7

¹ When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. ² Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb. ³ They were saying to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large. ⁵ On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. He said to them, ⁶ "Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. ⁷ Behold the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter; 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.'"



Holy Women at the Tomb of Christ by Annibale Carracci, 1585 | Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg Russia | PD-US

The Gospel of Mark is quite succinct and sparse in the telling of the trial, crucifixion and death of Jesus in Chapter 15. For example, the Way of the Cross is told in a single verse: "They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross." (Mark 15:21) However, the gospel is more descriptive in describing the burial of Jesus:

⁴⁰ There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome. ⁴¹ These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him. There were also many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem. ⁴² When it was already evening, since it was the day of preparation, the day before the sabbath, ⁴³ Joseph of Arimathea, a distinguished member of the council, who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God, came and courageously went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁴⁴ Pilate was amazed that he was already dead. He summoned the centurion and asked him if

Jesus had already died. ⁴⁵ *And when he learned of it from the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph.* ⁴⁶ *Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down, wrapped him in the linen cloth and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb.* ⁴⁷ *Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph watched where he was laid.* (Mark 15:40–47)

Women Witnesses. Mary Magdalene is well known to readers as she was the woman released from demonic possession (Luke 8; Mark 16)) and traveled with the company of Jesus and helped support his ministry out of her resources. In all four canonical gospels, Mary Magdalene is a witness to the crucifixion of Jesus. All four gospels identify her, either alone or as a member of a larger group of women, as the first to witness the empty tomb and, either alone or as a member of a group, as the first to witness Jesus's resurrection.

Little is known concerning Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, but her sons appear to have been well known in the early Church (cf. v. 21). According to Mt. 27:56 Salome was the wife of Zebedee and the mother of the disciples James and John. The significance of the presence of these women to Mark is that they were eyewitnesses to the primary events proclaimed in the gospel, the death (Mark 15:40–41), burial (v.47) and resurrection (Ch. 16:1) of Jesus.

It should not be overlooked that women were to be the one to first receive the announcement of the Resurrection. This is significant in view of contemporary attitudes. Jewish law pronounced women ineligible as witnesses. Early Christian tradition confirms that the reports of the women concerning the empty tomb and Jesus' resurrection were disregarded or considered embarrassing. That the news had first been delivered by women was inconvenient and troublesome to the Church, for their testimony lacked value as evidence. The primitive Community would not have invented this detail, which can be explained only on the ground that it was factual.

Not far from the Kingdom. Near the end of Jesus' ministry in Jerusalem, he had met with a scribe who was "*not far from the kingdom of God*" (12:28–34), a response to Jesus perhaps more deeply held than the response of Jesus' own disciples. Similarly, in the burial scene, it is not Jesus' disciples who respond, but Joseph of Arimathea, "*a distinguished member of the council*" (15:43). He was bold enough to make the request of Pilate to bury Jesus - something generally not allowed for condemned criminals, often left crucified for the carrion. The request seems to have taken Pilate by surprise (v.44) given most people endured one or more days on the cross. Only after verifying Jesus' death does Pilate grant the request. This is an important detail for Mark. Such insistence on finality prepares Mark's readers for the most striking reversal of the entire Gospel, namely, the proclamation of the young man at the tomb that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb.

Sunset on Saturday marked the end of the Sabbath. And so on Sunday morning the women who had witnessed the crucifixion and burial purchased aromatic oils with which to anoint the body of Jesus. Spices were used to offset the odors from decomposition. This action would seem to indicate that the women had no expectation of Jesus' resurrection.

They were saying to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large.

Sealing the entrance to the tomb was a common practice to prevent wild animals from desecrating the body or from thieves seeking to remove valuable objects. The women, aware of the tradition, are rightly concerned if they will be able to move the rocks sealing the entrance. Although the text indicates that they were present at the entombment (15:47), there is no Markan record of their witness to the sealing of the tomb. Nonetheless, they were aware that the sealing stone was very large.

Inside the tomb. *On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed.*

The tomb was already open and upon entering the tomb the women encountered “*a young man.*” The Greek word is straightforward and is seemingly at odds with other accounts in which an angel in clearly indicated (cf. Mt 28:2). Does Mark mean angel, a word he used in Mark 1:13 “*and he remained in the desert for forty days, tempted by Satan. He was among wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him*”? The majority view of scholars is that Mark does intend the reader to understand *angelos*, that is, a messenger. The reasons are several: (1) the young man carries an important message for the women and to be given to the disciples (2) *clothed in a white robe* would be consistent with the appearance of a divine messenger; and (3) the reaction of the women - they were amazed, the Greek root word *ekthambeō*. It can mean “to be amazed, to be terrified.” Mark also uses the word when he describes Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane as “greatly distressed” (Mark 14:33). It's typical for angels to tell people to not be afraid of them (Daniel 10:12, 19; Luke 2:10) - the first words spoken to the women

The angel said to them, ⁶“Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. ⁷Behold the place where they laid him.”

William Lane [587-88] offers this insight:

The action of God is not always self-evident. For this reason it is invariably accompanied by the word of revelation, interpreting the significance of an event (e.g. Exod. 15:1–18 interprets the flight from Egypt as the action of God). The emptiness of the tomb possessed no factual value in itself. It simply raised the question, What happened to the body? God, therefore, sent his messenger to disclose the fact of the resurrection. The announcement of the angel is the crystallization point for faith. The women had been misguided in their seeking of Jesus. They came to anoint the body of one who was dead, but Jesus was risen from the dead!

The reference to “Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified” allows no equivocation concerning the subject of the emphatic statements, “he is risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him.” The resurrection presupposes the death and burial of Jesus, and both of these events are specified in the angel’s declaration. The statements which qualify the affirmation “he is risen” refer specifically to the shelf on which the body had been placed. They stress that the tomb in which Jesus had been laid on Friday afternoon was empty on Easter morning. This testimony is supported by primitive kerygmatic summaries preserved by Luke and Paul. The argument that David “died and was buried and his tomb is with us to this day” (Acts 2:29), which prepares for the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus, implies a reference to the empty tomb of Jesus which could be examined as freely as the traditional tomb of David. Peter’s formulation finds an echo in the gospel which Paul, in common with the Jerusalem apostles (1 Cor. 15:11), preached, that Jesus “died ... was buried ... and the third day rose again” (1 Cor. 15:3f.). While no explicit reference is made to the tomb of Jesus, the sequence death, burial, resurrection demands that the tomb was empty. It is significant that early Jewish polemicists never sought to dispute this fact. The story of the theft of the body (cf. Mt. 28:15; Justin, Dialogue with Trypho 108) simply confirms that the tomb was in fact empty. In the Gospel of Mark, however, the certainty of the resurrection rests solely upon the word of revelation. The empty tomb possessed no evidential value apart from this norm of interpretation.

Promise of Presence - “*But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.’*” (Mark 16:7)

The angel has delivered the message: *He is Risen* and that the disciples are to move out of the Upper Room and Jerusalem and begin the mission, starting in Galilee.

It is perhaps interesting (or perhaps reading too much into the text) that the instructions are to “*his disciples and Peter.*” Other gospels have Peter’s name appearing at the head of the group indicating his leadership. Peter has not been mentioned since his denial of Jesus (Mk 14:66-72). Does the order of naming perhaps indicate assurances to Peter that despite his failure, he has not been rejected by Jesus, and is still a part of the mission to Galilee and beyond.

But then again one should remember an earlier passage from Mark:

14:27 Then Jesus said to them, “All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be dispersed.’”²⁸ But after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee.”²⁹ Peter said to him, “Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be.”³⁰ Then Jesus said to him, “Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times.”³¹ But he vehemently replied, “Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all spoke similarly.

Perhaps the message was also intended for all the disciples that despite their abandonment of Jesus, after Jesus’ resurrection all the disciples would be regathered in Galilee. The fulfillment of the prophecy of failure and denial is to be redressed by the corresponding fulfillment of the promised restoration.

An Epilog

Although not included in the reading for the Easter Vigil, Mark 16:8 (the next verse) reads: “*Then they [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*”

Sources

John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Sacra Pagina v.2 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazer / Liturgical Press, 2001)

Wilfred Harrington, *Mark*, The New Testament Message, v.4 (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazer Press, 1979)

William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974) 76-83

Philip Van Linden, C.M., “Mark” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, ed. Dianne Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989)

PHEME PERKINS, *The Gospel of Mark*, vol. 8 of The New Interpreter’s Bible (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1994)