

The Last word

Well, if you have come to church today on this Easter Sunday morning hoping for a bit of spiritual uplift, if you've come for a bit of a religious pick-me-up, you might well be disappointed by our reading from Mark's Gospel. It has one strange and very downbeat ending. These three women have come early in the morning to the tomb to anoint the corpse of Jesus. They had wondered who might roll away the large stone which sealed the tomb, but when they got there they found the tomb open and the stone moved. And they enter the tomb and to their astonishment they find only a young man in a white robe and, not surprisingly, we read that 'they were alarmed'. Of course they were alarmed, but the young man tells them not to be. They are looking for Jesus who was crucified but he is not here. He is risen – look, see the place where they laid him! And then the young man tells them to go and to tell Jesus' disciples that he is going ahead of them to Galilee and that they will see him there – there they will rendezvous with him. Brilliant! What fantastic news. And at this point, if we were following Matthew's Gospel we would read, 'so they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to his disciples'. And then, still following Matthew, we would read of Jesus suddenly meeting them and saying 'Greetings!', and that they took hold of his feet and worshipped him. That Gospel ends on a high. But that's not what we find here in Mark. In Mark Jesus doesn't even show up. There is no resurrection appearance. And unlike Matthew's Gospel these women do not run to the disciples to spread the good news as they're instructed. No, Mark ends on this bum note: '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.' And so this Gospel ends with word 'afraid'. That is the last word. A book that is called the Gospel according to Mark – 'gospel' meaning 'good news' – ends with fear. Hardly a tonic for our faith!

Well, not surprisingly there is much debate about the ending of Mark. There is something unsatisfying about it and some have thought that there must be something missing and maybe a bit got torn off and not surprisingly, as we note in our Bibles, alternative endings are on offer

where the women do as they are told and Jesus appears. These, however, are certainly later additions, and the best thing for us to do is to stick with the ending as we read it, assume it's what Mark left us, and see what we can make of it. So what might Mark be trying to say here?

Well, surely, the point is that in the end even the women fail Jesus, and that is significant. You see, the last chapters of Mark make pretty grim reading, as Jesus is systematically let down by absolutely everyone. Go back to Thursday of Holy Week and we have Judas betraying Jesus, and Peter denying him, and the other disciples deserting him. And as the week goes on everyone else forsakes him too – the religious and political authorities, the upholders of justice, the crowd. And finally, apparently, even God deserts Jesus, for who can forget that tortured cry wrung from Jesus in his death throes: 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

But we had high hopes for the women. After all, we are told that they watched from a distance as Jesus was crucified. OK – they keep their distance but they'd done better than most. At least they didn't run away like all the male disciples. So there's hope for them. And now these valiant women arrive at the tomb on the Sunday morning to anoint Jesus and that means that they can be the ones who were faithful to the end and we like that. After all, I'm a feminist – I don't have a choice with a wife and three daughters - and we have the makings of such a good feminist narrative here which goes something like this. The gospel of the resurrection was entrusted to women. They were the first to witness the empty tomb - lowly, put-upon, down-trodden, oppressed, 1st century women. In those days women's testimony was not even accepted in a court of law and yet God entrusted them with testimony to his son's resurrection. And they told it to the men who were too clueless to be trusted with it and so our faith is built upon the testimony of women. Brilliant! And there is something of all that in the other gospels but sadly, not here. In Mark terror and amazement had seized the women and they nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Terror and amazement! You'd think that the amazement might have trumped the terror. You'd think that amazement might have given way to joy and obedience. But no, even the women fail him, and fear wins and has the last word.

So what might Mark be doing by presenting you with this scenario? How might it speak to us? Well, what we can say about the world that

Mark presents us with here is that it is realistic. It's the world we know only too well, one where it seems that fear often does have the last word. After all, given the enormity of the problems and the threats facing the planet and the human race, we might have good cause to be afraid. For example, in the past 12 months the spectre of nuclear holocaust has once again become a feature of political discourse, with nations issuing threats and boasting about the size of their nuclear arsenals and with 'nothing ruled out' - including pre-emptive nuclear strikes. In our world strength is construed not in moral or ethical terms but is equated with the ability to obliterate. And that's frightening. And the news on the global warming front never seems to get any better, and however much we attribute it to human activity the fear factor remains – the erosion of the ice caps and the rising of sea levels and climate change are still a terrifying prospect. And the world portrayed by Mark in the closing chapters of his Gospel is all too familiar to us. It's one where too often religious and political power end up on the wrong side of justice and truth. In short, we might say that Mark's world, like ours, is one that is waiting for resurrection, one that is desperate for an infusion of new life. And the same is true of the characters we meet in the story. Think of Peter, shamed by his threefold denial of Jesus despite his boast that he would be faithful to the end. He's in need of resurrection! And think of the other disciples, scattering in fear. And these dear women: yes, they proved more faithful than the men but even they are now silent and afraid. All these are in need of resurrection! And what Mark is doing is locating us in that world, one that is crying out for the risen Lord.

By way of contrast, turn to our reading from 1st Corinthians and we read there of resurrection already at work. We read of Jesus appearing to Peter, the failure, and we read him appearing to the twelve, the deserters. And we have him appearing to over 500 people at one time, and finally to Paul – Paul the Pharisee who had also been on the wrong side of truth and justice as he persecuted the early Christians. Paul too had been in need of resurrection, locked into an old world and badly in need of the new. And finally Jesus had appeared to him, and his resurrection had begun. In these verses from 1 Corinthians it's all started. People are beginning new life in the new world, the new world of the risen Lord. But not in Mark. Here in Mark, Jesus has risen. The tomb is

empty. The young man declares that he has been raised. But we are still living in the old world, the old narrative whose final full-stop is fear.

So what will become of these women? Well, if they are to experience resurrection they need to make a move. They can't stay where they are – they need to move to a different place. And so must the disciples who are in hiding somewhere... 'go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' In other words they must embark upon a journey, a journey of faith. Jesus is risen, but they must now make a move to meet him. They can sit here in their world of fear, and they can bemoan a world where good people die and where injustice too often seems to triumph. They can stay put, where they are. Or they can make a move – to where Christ promises to meet them. It's not a move out of this world. It is not an escape. But it's a move to a different place, a different spiritual space where Jesus is acknowledged as alive and Lord of all. This is where resurrection begins. It's that place where, in due course, Peter and the disciples will come to; and the 500 and eventually Paul. It's the place of encounter with the risen Lord who promises to receive those who come to him. It's the place represented by this table to which we will come shortly, the table where Christ is present calling us, 'come to me, all who are weary and heavy laden...'; come to me all who know only a world where death finally wins and where the last word is fear...; 'Whoever comes to me I will never turn away!', says Jesus. You will meet me here – and beyond! So come, and let the last word be not fear but joy. Amen.

Glorious and gracious God,
Life giving, death defying, Jesus raising God,
we praise and bless your holy name.

Today we join with the church throughout the centuries in proclaiming
that Jesus Christ,
who suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead and was buried,
rose again on the third day.

Today we join with the women who went to the tomb

with their spices, expecting to embalm Jesus' body
and who found an empty tomb and the message
that he had risen.

Today we join with the many who encountered
the risen Lord and whose world
was transformed and made new.

O God forgive us when we are like those who did not believe;
forgive us when we are like those who were too frightened to say
anything;
forgive us when we are like those who were too locked
into the old world where the dead stay dead.

O God for all our faithlessness,
for all our betrayals of the truth,
we pray for forgiveness

Come to us we pray, as you did to the first disciples,
and make us new,
and transform us into your witnesses to the world.

Come to us as you did to them.

Assure us of your forgiving love,
send us your Spirit

and raise us up to new, resurrection life.

We pray in the name of Jesus, the risen one. Amen.