

THE FIRST TO ANNOUNCE

Mark 16:1-8

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Passage

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another,

‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them,

‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’

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.

As always on Easter Sunday, I appreciate the large crowd. There have only been only one or two Sundays in my ministerial life in which I have awakened with the feeling: “Oh, I gotta go to work today.” I cannot imagine having that feeling on Easter.

- Many of you are here because you worship in this Sanctuary nearly every Sunday and you wouldn’t think of missing this central event of the Christian faith – our celebration of the resurrection of Christ.
- Some of you are here from places near or far; you, too, would not miss this occasion for the same reason.
- Some of you are here because this is one of a handful of Sundays on which you worship. We do not disparage you for that pattern but are grateful that this is the place to which you turn seeking hope and life.
- Some of you are here out of deep loyalty to someone you love; because this service is important to them, it is important to you. We appreciate being part of your loyalty and love to them.
- And some of you are here because something has happened in your life, in your work, in the politics of our nation or its relation among nations of the world, that has drawn you here out of some fear, some grief, some hunger, some hope, for a better world and a clearer, more peaceful place within it for your own heart and mind, your soul and your citizenship.

Whatever has brought you here today, we are glad that these are the doors through which you chose to walk, the hymns you have chosen to sing, the sanctuary you have chosen in which to seek sanctuary. Welcome to Westminster.

Let us pray: *Emerson wrote: "Faith should blend with the light of rising and of setting suns, with the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers." Lord, let our faith blend with and even exceed these things of beauty on this Easter day. Amen.*

I.

A few of you may have returned this Sunday to see how I was going to resolve last week's cliffhanging sermon.

You will remember that last Sunday's sermon focused on a certain young man who appears only in the Gospel of Mark. Following the *arrest* of Jesus, when Mark (along with Matthew) says: "...all the disciples deserted him and fled," Mark alone adds:

A certain young man was following Jesus,
Wearing nothing but a linen cloth.
They caught hold of him,
But he left the linen cloth and ran off naked.

In the sermon, I covered a range of options concerning who this young man might be.

- I mentioned that he may be a *teenager* awakened in the middle of the night by noise outside his window.
- He may be an adult *bystander*, drawn by curiosity to police activity in the middle of the night.
- He may be a recent follower of Jesus, not a disciple, but someone who had "left all" a few weeks earlier, someone Jesus was mentoring in newfound faith.
- I also raised the possibility that this young man might be the author of the Gospel itself, just like Alfred Hitchcock wrote himself into cameo appearances in 37 of his 52 films.¹

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If indeed this young man is Mark, I added, his writing himself into his Gospel would be an act of *confession* on Mark's part. In confessing his own lack of *courage*, Mark would be calling us, his readers, to *confess* times in which we have allowed our own *courage* to fail in a particular situation in which we have turned out to be less than what God would have us do and be. The young man fleeing into the shadows thus holds up for us the importance of both *confession* and *courage*.

But at the end of the sermon I also said we do not know with a certainty what happened to this young man.

As I have thought about this this week, I have wondered:

- Once this young man started running, did he, like Forest Gump,² just keep running?

¹ See <http://www.filmsite.org/hitchcockcameos.html>.

² *Forrest Gump*, directed by Robert Zemeckis, (Paramount Pictures, 1994).

- Did he, like the Prodigal Son,³ waste all that he had in a very short period of time and find himself pining for home?
- Did he, like Peter, “[weep] bitterly”?⁴
- Did he, like Judas, find himself in desperate solitude and considering taking his own life?⁵
- Or was there something that began to pull him back?

We do not know. We do *not* know. All we see is the young man fleeing into the shadows, his linen cloth left in the clutches of those who have arrested Christ.

II.

But there is another possibility I promised to share with those of you who returned this Sunday. Follow me along with this possibility.

- In all four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – the women who first go to the tomb the third day after Jesus’ death⁶ find the stone rolled away from the opening to the tomb.⁷
- What they find next varies from Gospel to Gospel:
 - In Matthew, they encounter an “*angel*,” whose appearance is “like lightning” and whose “clothes [are] white as snow.”⁸
 - In John, it is “*two angels*” dressed in “white.”⁹
 - In Luke, it is “*two men*” in “dazzling clothes.”¹⁰
 - And in Mark, they find a “*young man*” dressed in a “white robe.”¹¹

What is interesting to people who have looked at this is that the word Mark uses for the “young man” at the tomb is the same word he uses to describe the “young man” who flees into the shadows when Jesus is arrested. Mark uses this word for “young man” nowhere else but these two instances.

We can thus ask:

- Is it possible that Mark intentionally connects the “young man” who ran away the night Jesus was arrested with the “young man” dressed in white the morning Jesus was raised from the dead?

³ Luke 15:11-32.

⁴ Matthew 26:75.

⁵ Matthew 27:3-10.

⁶ The names of the women vary from Gospel to Gospel. In Matthew 28:1, it is “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary”; in Mark 16:1 it is “Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome”; in Luke 24:10 it is “Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women”; and in John 20:1 it is “Mary Magdalene” alone.

⁷ Matthew 28:1-2; Mark 16:1-4; Luke 24:1-2; John 20:1.

⁸ Matthew 28:2-3.

⁹ John 20:11.

¹⁰ Luke 24:5.

¹¹ Mark 16:5.

- Is it possible that the young man who fled the young man in the tomb?

If this is the case, then *the last to flee* when Jesus was arrested becomes *the first to announce* when Jesus is raised from the dead. Whether this represents Mark writing himself into his Gospel or not, in Mark's Gospel *the last to flee* becomes *the first to announce*.

III.

Now I must stop and say here, that many of you may be surprised to encounter a discrepancy among the four gospels concerning who exactly was at the tomb. "A young man," "two men," "an angel," "two angels." Those of us who place high value on accurate information and documentation might expect more precision concerning such an important event as the resurrection of Christ. This discrepancy can give us pause concerning how *accurate* the Bible is as a book and therefore how *reliable* and *valid* it is as the most important document of our religious tradition.

If you have these questions, yours is not the first mind in which they have arisen. Joining with others across the centuries, the short response I can give is this:

- Each of these Gospels was written thirty to sixty years *after* the death and resurrection of Christ
- Each writer – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – wrote from *a basic set of beliefs held in common by the early church* – the birth, teaching, deeds, death, and resurrection of Christ.
- Within these *basic and common beliefs*, each Gospel writer sought to convey *emphases* about Christ that grew out of and spoke to the community of Christians from which he was writing, as well as the larger audience he hoped to reach through his Gospel.

Each gospel is entitled "The Good News according to" "Matthew," "Mark," "Luke," or "John." The *commonality* they share is "the good news." The particular *emphasis* each brings unfolds with the name of the Gospel writer that follows the "according to." Each gospel expresses a *particular* message concerning Christ each writer seeks to convey.

Thus, when we are reading "The Good News According to Mark," and we see in Mark that "the young man" who flees into the shadows when Jesus is arrested might be the same young man who announces the resurrection, we ask: "What is Mark trying to teach us in presenting the last to flee as the first to announce?"

IV.

There are two parts to the answer to this question.

(a)

First, in all four Gospels, there are numerous people who "leave all" to follow Jesus but who do not follow him to the end.

- In Matthew and Mark, "all" the disciples *abandon* Jesus and flee upon his arrest.¹²
- In all four Gospels, Peter *denies* knowing who Christ is when Christ is on trial and Peter is outside the courtroom.¹³

¹² Mark 14:50.

¹³ Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-27.

- In all four Gospels, Judas *betrays* Jesus.¹⁴

Yet in all four Gospels, the disciples don't stay away forever. With the exception of Judas, they gather after Jesus' death and resurrection:

- On a mountain in Matthew¹⁵
- In Galilee in Mark¹⁶
- In the Temple in Jerusalem in Luke¹⁷
- In an Upper Room and by the Sea of Tiberias in John.¹⁸

Jesus *appears* to them at their gatherings, and they are welcomed into the fold.

- Peter is rehabilitated and made leader of the Church.¹⁹
- Thomas is allowed to ask hard questions, demand signs of proof, and express his not uncommon doubts.²⁰

The welcome these returning disciples receive is both *widespread* and *personal* – in some cases even *individualized* to specific disciples.²¹ The breadth of the welcome the disciples received after fleeing leads me to say, as I said last week, that had Judas not acted prematurely and taken his own life, he too would likely have been welcomed back.

It is in this context of *welcome* that it makes sense to me that the young man who was the *last to flee* when Jesus was arrested became *the first to announce* “He is risen.”

(b)

Second, to take this one step further, the resurrection of Jesus Christ was such a stone-rolling, earth-moving, lighting-marked event – originating *in* the cosmos, far *outside* the realms of history and nature, that in the words of the Apostle Paul, the resurrection “makes *all* things new”²² and “reconciles *all* things, whether on earth or in heaven.”²³

Among things reconciled in the resurrection are people like you and me who fail to follow through, who let down on a commitment at a crucial moment, who use none of our courage but hold on to it as if it is a diminishing resource.

¹⁴ Matthew 26:47-56; Mark 14:43-40; Luke 22:47-53; John 18:1-11.

¹⁵ Matthew 26:16.

¹⁶ Mark 16:7.

¹⁷ Luke 24:53.

¹⁸ John 20:19 and 21:1.

¹⁹ John 21:15-19.

²⁰ John 20:24-29.

²¹ This is particularly true in John 20 and 21, where general appearances on the part of Jesus to disciples are intermingled with appearances to specific persons: Mary, Thomas, Peter, the Beloved Disciple.

²² II Corinthians 5:17.

²³ Colossians 1:20.

- In the resurrection we are welcomed like Peter.
- In the resurrection, we are welcomed like the other disciples.
- In the resurrection, we are welcomed like the young man who fled into the shadows.
- Like him, we are given the voice to proclaim “He is risen.”
- Like the other disciples we are sent to serve and proclaim.

Not only does the young man who is the last to flee become the first to announce, but all of us who for whatever reasons flee can – in and through the resurrection of Christ – become proclaimers and announcers, “watchers and holy ones.”²⁴ This welcome is deeper than even the forgiveness of sins, for it is “all things” being “made new,” “all things” being “reconciled,” “whether on earth or in heaven.”

It is the hope for such newness, such reconciliation that likely drew you here today.

V.

A second question that arises is this: “*If in fact Mark has written himself into his Gospel just as Hitchcock wrote himself into his movies, what is Mark trying to convey to us?*”

The answer to this is simpler.

Mark introduces his Gospel with these words: “The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ.” He asserts that his entire Gospel is only the *beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ. By writing himself into the beginning of his Gospel, he is subtly inviting us to join him, to write ourselves into the Gospel as well, to write its ending with the way we live. If the Good News begins with the story of Christ, we help write its ending with the story of our lives.

Thus, Mark is asking us, person by person: man, woman, youth and child, by man, woman, youth, and child:

Where are you going to write yourself
Into the story of the good news of Jesus Christ?

Are you ready to take pen in hand,
Place yourself within that narrative,
Help move its plot forward?

Are you reading to write yourself
Into the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Amen.

²⁴ Athelstan Riley, “Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones,” 1906.