

(Mark 16:1-8 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup> They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup> When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> 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.

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## He's Going Ahead of You to Galilee

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The religious right says that the most important command in the Bible is the great commission, found at Matthew 28:19, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." I'm not sure it gets them as much as they think. The evidence in the Gospels suggests that the disciples are more than a little thick, more than a little obstinate, and more than a little self-centered.

In short, the disciples aren't paragons of perfection. They misunderstand Jesus. Peter wants Jesus to tell them that the bitter end he predicts isn't so. James and John want the best seats in heaven. The disciples don't know enough to let the children come. They want to go home when Jesus wants to feed the five thousand. They cry like babies in the middle of the storm because they have no faith and fear shipwreck. They can't stay awake with Jesus to pray. And in the end, in the end, the end we celebrate so powerfully on Maundy Thursday, they, everyone of them, flee and deny and betray Jesus and let him face his arrest and execution alone. "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." According to the best examples we have in the Bible, we may be closer than we think, but not exactly what the religious right has in mind.

I am not intending to be sacrilegious here. The disciples are much loved and revered, and I am not meaning to suggest that we shouldn't. In fact, quite the opposite. It's just that we miss the point, if we don't realize how the disciples constantly miss the point, get it wrong and abandon Jesus. These are not embarrassing things to pretend aren't true. It is the heart of the story. The story of Easter morning comes to us in this context.

My mother used to worry for my soul. She worried, when I was a teenager and told I wasn't sure I believed. My mother was a wonderful woman of faith, but on this point I think she got it wrong.

The Gospels do not go like this. The Gospels don't say: This is a story of Jesus and his closest friends and allies, and it goes like this. Jesus and his disciples lived long ago in the Galilee. They were a band of good people who preached the good news together. Wherever they went, some people accepted them, and some did not. But Jesus' disciples and followers always remained true to him. They knew

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that no matter what happened, their faith would pull them through. They had no fear and no doubt. They loved Jesus. They believed and understood everything he said. They were never selfish. They never thought about themselves. When the terrible events in Jerusalem came about that week, they stood fast with Jesus. And they weren't worried either, because they knew that everything would be alright. They knew that this was all how it was supposed to happen, and that in three days, on Easter morning he would rise, and they would all rejoice in hymns of praise. When Easter morning came, they all gathered at the tomb in faith and thanksgiving, certain in their faith, triumphant in their belief, ready to meet the risen Lord. They joined hands around the tomb in celebration. Then Jesus appeared to them and told them that everything was just as they had believed it would be. The disciples went home that night filled with joy and a warm feeling in their hearts and slept comfortably in the tender light of the resurrection.

Now, of course, that is not the way the story goes. It goes quite differently. Jesus' disciples were a mess, as we have discovered. They often miss what Jesus is saying to them, they turn their backs and ran when things came to their worst, and Easter morning they are nowhere to be found.

According to Mark, three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, came to the tomb on Sunday. Peter, James and John were not there. Phillip, Matthew and Thomas weren't there. Andrew wasn't there. And, of course, neither was Judas. None of these, nor others of the twelve, were anywhere to be found on Easter morning. Nor were the cheering crowds of Palm Sunday. Only three of Jesus' followers were there, Mary, Mary and Salome. And even they did not come to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. They came to the tomb on Easter morning to honor his death. They came to anoint his dead and battered body. Everyone, even the three women who came to pay their respects were numbed by defeat and sorrow. One might say that there wasn't a shred of faith, there wasn't a shred of belief to be found in Jerusalem that first Easter morning.

I have to tell you, I prefer the story the way its written to some version where everyone was sure things would just turn out fine. I prefer the story the way it is written for two very good reasons.

First, things weren't just fine. Sometimes we do theological gymnastics to make it seem as if the crucifixion was all part of God's plan. Even the writers of the Gospels seemed compelled from time to time to lean in that direction. But most of the time they are more clear-headed than that. Most of the time the Gospels know that the execution of Jesus was the shedding of innocent blood. So Easter morning, things weren't fine. Jesus had been executed by a society that preferred burying its head in the sand to hearing the truth. Jesus wasn't supposed to die, in the sense that it was all part of some plan. But Jesus knew he would die, for death was the price for integrity. He knew that, and he was willing to accept it. But in a better

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world the crucifixion would never have happened. In a better world Jesus' message, Jesus' saving word could have changed us before it was too late. Things were not just fine on Easter morning.

And they weren't fine from the perspective of those who loved Jesus either. They are such a complicated lot, not so different from you and me in this respect, I think. Who knows what was actually in each of their minds that morning – so much could have been. Sorrow and grief may have been, certainly was, for those not too numb to feel it. At one point or another they had all been so drawn to the man that they had left nets and plows and family to join his movement. And now he was gone, just like that. For some the grief must have been overwhelming. It seems it was for the three women who came to the tomb that morning.

For others there was likely fear and trembling. The swift justice of Rome followed by the sentence of a slow agonizing death on a cross had proven to be a powerful deterrent to insurrection. Rome brooked little from trouble-makers, and now they were all marked men and women. Already Peter had been asked three times if he weren't with him. Surely for some, Easter morning was anything but alright because their spirits had been broken by Rome's brutality, and they feared for their own skins. In some accounts we find them cowering behind locked doors. Easter morning marked nothing but their third day on the lam.

For some, like Judas, there was guilt. His betrayal of Jesus was direct and his shame inescapable. Peter's betrayal was more a sin of omission than of commission – "No, I don't know the man." For the others, it may have been simply slipping into the shadows rather than stepping forward. But for each of them Easter morning wasn't alright. They bore the heavy weight of remorse for events and actions that could not be undone.

For still others on Easter morning there was disappointment, bitterness, and even anger. While the story relates how they had betrayed Jesus, some, no doubt felt as if he had betrayed them. They had put their faith in him. They had such high expectations of him. Hadn't Peter told him he believed Jesus was the Messiah? But no Messiah makes so pitiful a showing. No Messiah goes like a lamb to the slaughter. No Messiah leaves his followers so disappointed. My God, there was not even one show of power, not even one real thing accomplished by this man they had for so much from. For the bitter ones, Easter morning was not alright. It was but the third day of coming to grips with what a letdown was this man whom they had followed and been foolish enough to believe in.

The way the story has been given to us, the way the Bible tells it, there was not one person on the planet on Easter morning who got it. There was no one, not even one person, who believed that anything good was going to happen. In fact, even after the news got out, there was still not one person in all the earth who understood. In the tomb there is a young man with a white robe. He tells the

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women not to be alarmed, that Jesus has been raised, that they should go tell the disciples. And Mark tells us that, instead, they fled the tomb in terror and amazement and told no one.

If Good Friday was a tragedy, it seems that Easter morning was something of a failure, too. And everyone is left frightened, bewildered and heartsick.

\*\*\* In that last meal they shared together, Jesus predicted most of their failures. They hardly heard him when he told them, hardly heard him except to protest their loyalty and their innocence. They were in no state of mind, then, to hear the rest of what he said. Do you remember what it was? At the last supper Jesus says to them, "It is written, 'I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

On Easter morning the young man in the empty tomb tells the three women, "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."

Of course, the women don't do it. They don't tell anyone. But in a sense they didn't need to. They didn't need to believe or understand what they saw Easter morning. They didn't need to tell the disciples or anyone else. For the real story of Easter occurs in Galilee not in Jerusalem. The real story of Easter happens in the real and unsuspecting lives of Jesus' followers when the whole craziness of Holy Week is behind them.

They went home to Galilee. Galilee was where they were born. Galilee was where they lived their lives. Galilee was where they had spent much of their time with Jesus and his ministry. Galilee was where they returned, heartbroken, fearful, guilty, angry and still just about as thick about Jesus as they had ever been. Galilee was where they returned to try to pick up the million pieces of their shattered Humpty-Dumpty lives. It was here, in Galilee, in the gut-wrenching reality of their disbelief, grief, numbness, misunderstanding and doubt that quite to their surprise they experienced the presence of the risen Christ, the real felt presence of Jesus with them in their lives.

What an extraordinary story this is! Out of the jaws of utter defeat and desolation comes something quite else. Not when they finally had gotten their faith just right, but when they had gotten it so terribly wrong that they had given up altogether, not until their worst moment, dejected, back home in the Galilee, did even one person in the whole world understand or experience Jesus and his resurrection. Maybe the message is this: overcoming death is extraordinary, but it is nothing compared to overcoming the getting it wrong, the obtuseness, of the human heart. It seems that the message of the resurrection is not primarily that it is a reward for the good and faithful. The message of the resurrection, rather, is that it has the capacity to transform and bring us to life even when we are most dead and confused and hardheaded.

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What good news this is, indeed. In the story of Jesus, it would have been better that he not be crucified. It would have been better, too, had his followers understood his message from the beginning. So, too, it is with us. It is better for a million reasons if we get our lives and our faith correct from the beginning. We would be happier, and the world would be far better for it. But the good news is this, even when we make the wrong turns, when we abandon the truth and the light, when we go home to our various Galilees defeated, when we end up somewhere between belligerent and broken, even then, maybe especially then, the risen Christ joins us. When he does, it is only the beginning of the story. The transformation and the ride the presence of the risen Christ puts us on is apt to be wild and extraordinary. But that's a sermon for another day.

For this day, the most remarkable thing is that when we are at our lowest, when nothing seems to have gone right, when we come to Galilee more defeated than anything else, the risen Christ will be at our sides. A sea of impossibility is now reversed. Like a mighty tide change, life flows in a direction a moment ago seen as unthinkable. Just when we have him completely dead and buried, we know, we see. How amazing it is! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Amen.

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