

The Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day, 1 April 2018
Saint Ignatius of Antioch Episcopal Church in the City of New York

Almighty God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life: Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of the Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by thy life-giving Spirit; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

Isaiah 25:6-9

Colossians 16:1-8

Mark 16:1-8

The Gospel of Mark is an extraordinary document. It is chronologically the first of the four gospels, composed earlier than the others, and was a major source for the accounts of Matthew and Luke. It is the shortest of the four gospels and, in fact, can be read in just one sitting. You can even read it aloud to your friends or family. Indeed, I commend this to you if you have a couple of hours on a rainy Saturday. These qualities are, as Sherlock Holmes might say, very suggestive. They give us clues as to how this gospel was heard and received by those earliest followers of Jesus in the very first generation after that first Easter morning.

Many scholars believe that Mark's account developed as a oral narrative, a one man show of sorts, that a traveller might perform going around the country from town to town. The narrative moves quickly, drawing the audience in and connecting with them. The story is designed, in fact, to make the listener feel engaged by letting them in on details that they know, but that the characters inside the tale do not. Again and again the storyteller reminds us that the disciples did not really understand who Jesus was, what he was doing. Even when Jesus explicitly tells the disciples (no fewer than

three times, in fact), that “the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again,” the disciples won’t have it. And yet, we listening to the story, know this to be true. We know this is what will happen. We are in on it.

The Gospel of Mark was created for the Community of the Resurrection. It was created to tell the story of Jesus over and over again to the people who had known Jesus, who had been alive when the events narrated in the tale took place. Think about it. It would be like hearing a story today, in 2018, about events that took place in the 1980s. Yes, it is long enough ago for there to be a generation for whom it would be new. It is close enough, however, for many to have vivid memories of those days and for all to have lived through those intervening years in which the world had changed so much. In those years after Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection, that community would have also experienced the destruction of the temple and the upheavals of the First Jewish-Roman War.

Mark’s story is for the community that lived the Resurrection and the generation that immediately followed. It is written for people who knew and felt Jesus’ presence among them, who saw those events unfold and sought to make meaning of them in the light of God’s unfolding plan for inaugurating the Kingdom of Heaven. John the Baptist, quoting Isaiah and announcing the Lord’s coming, sets the stage for us and we are off to the races with Jesus’ baptism and the divine proclamation, “Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased.” Foregrounded in the tradition of the

prophets and signalling for the scripturally literate audience that this Son of Man will also suffer many things before his vindication, Mark helps those who already know Jesus to understand him.

In today's Gospel we have the final episode of what we believe is the original form of the Gospel. Later editors added stories of Jesus' resurrection appearances, similar to the ones in the other gospels, but the earliest form of the text ends here, with the empty tomb and the Marys fleeing in fear. To many modern readers (and I reckon to those later editors), this may seem like an unsatisfying ending. In a way, it's kind of a downer. We don't have a glowing Jesus standing before them (and us) in triumph announcing his return. Rather we have an empty tomb and two fearful women trembling and astonished. We have this young man (and yes we do get a radiant young man), perhaps an angel, whose word we just have to trust, who gives instructions to the women that the narrator tells us were ignored.

What are we supposed to do with that? Well, like I said, one choice is to write the sequel, or at least a more satisfying ending. But I think the answer is subtler, and much more compelling than that. What we are supposed to do is what we have already done. We have listened to the tale already knowing the whole story. We have already gasped at the disciples' thick headedness, their refusal to see what we saw, what was right before their eyes. We have all said to ourselves, "well, I would have believed him!" We witnessed the Transfiguration and already saw what Jesus would look like in the resurrection. We can feel ourselves more astute than Peter and James and John

who were right there and still did not get it.

What do we do, then, with the empty tomb? Well, it turns out that we already know what happens because we, like those who first heard the Gospel of Mark, have lived it. On that first Easter Day, Jesus transcended death, defeated death, showed that the worst that humans can do to other humans—the mocking, the violence, the murder—would not constrain the God who is identified as Love. Jesus' resurrection does not need the evidence of stories of his appearances because we live the consequences, the results of what followed.

Jesus was raised from the dead. He appeared to his disciples and others transfigured, and as a result a community formed that became the Church and that changed the course of the world. Those who first heard the Gospel of Mark were, in fact, the next chapter of the story, the “to be continued.” And so are we. We remain the community of the Resurrection, the community that gathers to share the meal that Jesus commanded us to make so that he may be specially present with us always, wherever we are, even on the other side of the world in a place those first disciples could not imagine. We are the community of the Resurrection that affirms that when we go from this place, full of the bread and wine of the Eucharist we make, that we, too, become the very Body of Christ, risen and abroad in creation. We are the community of the Resurrection that, as the Body of Christ, enacts the very love of God in the lives we lead, sharing and making available to others the love that Jesus showed us from the Cross, that was manifested in his breaking the bonds of death. We, too, are

the next chapter, we are continuing the story, the story of how God's love, incarnate, makes a definitive difference in the world and has the power to triumph over the forces of evil and death—forces that still surround us and press in upon us, much as it did those earliest followers of Jesus labouring under Roman occupation. Let us not loose heart. We are called to live out that “to be continued” in our lives.

It is hard to put it better than Isaiah,

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth.

On this day, the Lord is risen. On this day we have our own “feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined.” We have been assured that God is unfolding the Kingdom, that God will “wipe away tears from all faces,” and has defeated death so that Love may reign.

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