

Sunday May 1st - Worship Service – 10 – 11
“The Gift of Difference: Jesus Followers in our 21st century
Multi Cultural, Multi Religious world”

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome brought 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.

“Terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

That’s the original ending. For the ancient textual tradition that comes to us as the Gospel According to Mark, the earliest of the writings that we have collected into the gospel genre in the sacred texts of our Christian tradition – it ends without the ending we have come to expect. With the literary form of a ‘dangling for’ (for they were afraid) the original ending of the earliest gospel trails off after the discovery at the tomb and the encounter directing proclamation: “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.” That’s it. That’s the ending.

But, the earliest Christians were a lot like us, I presume, and we don’t like to be afraid and we do like to have an ending. Even in the text itself there is forecast that there must be something more...we’re anticipating a better ending in Galilee. Something more like what scholars have named the ‘shorter ending’ (added somewhere after the 4th century) where Jesus himself sends out through them the “imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.” (Mark 16:8) Or we’re expecting the longer ending, that was put to the Gospel somewhere in the late 2nd

century, where signs and wonders accompany those who will make such a proclamation AND, the text reads QUOTE: “the one who does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:14) And of course, beyond Mark, the other texts in the gospel genre not only give us fuller versions of an ‘ending’ but they forecast the importance of that ending with longer and longer beginnings: Mark’s Gospel that ends with this dangling for (they were afraid) begins with John announcing the coming of Jesus’s ministry; Luke, which scholars believe to be written with Mark as a template, adds to the story with an episode that tells of the birth of John and Jesus and ends with Jesus himself appearing to the disciples (it retains an element of them being terrified since they thought they were seeing a ghost, but it is more of an ending with Jesus’ appearance); also working from Mark’s template, Matthew adds a prequel that pushes the beginning back into the genealogy of Jesus tracing back to Abraham and ends with Jesus commanding a larger group of the disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations” and finally John (somewhere toward the turn to the 2nd century) pushing back into the beginning of time itself when the Word was with God and ends with Jesus appearing again, and again, to different disciples, performing signs and wonders and affirming the testimony as true, but even John leaves us with all that has not been captured in the stories about Jesus: “But there are many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”.

But the Gospel According to Mark, in its original form, the earliest of the gospel genre, begins with Jesus’ ministry, and ends that that dangling ‘for’ – for they were afraid. There’s something about this shortest ending, the one where the followers of Jesus are on their guard because they are afraid, that speaks to me, even as the women refuse to speak. I like it not only because scholars propose that it is the earliest chronologically, but also because it’s very form

reminds us that we inherit an unfinished Gospel, and it lets us know that there will be varied endings to the story as Christians continue to tell it. Furthermore, the dangling ending is one where we're not too sure whether this is a happy ending or not.

I appreciate both the fear and the uncertainty of this ending because as a student of the way Christian proclamation has landed on people throughout history, I have seen the imperishable proclamation of the blood of the Lamb has spilled the blood of people, and the condemnation rendered in *our* sacred text too often condemns those who are 'Other'. While we celebrate this Easter season with its end in resurrection and the triumph of our story over death, we cannot fail to recognize the way *our* story has been death-dealing for people of other faiths. Eternal salvation in a life beyond this one has justified the horrors of humans in the history of this nation: the decimation of the Original peoples of this land, the enslavement of African Others, crimes of hate that continue to this day and the global triumph of White supremacy, all have been ways that Christians have put an ending to the story. Knowing what I know about Christian history, I see myself in the story alongside the Jesus-followers, the Marys and Salome, and I too am standing at the empty tomb, looking forward into the whole of Christian history to this day, and I, too, am seized by terror and amazement not sure whether to speak about *my* encounter with the One I have come to name Christ; and yes, sometimes I do not speak to identify myself with the Christians I have come to know.

The horrors of our nation's history in promoting a White Christian dominance continue to be our American Christian story as sociologists describe the rise and political influence of Christian nationalism in our day: when Christians mobilize to maintain a privileged place for Christianity in our public sphere, and this lands on people of diverse faiths with exclusion, diminishment and death. Christian nationalists today draw out the exclusionary strands of our

common scripture and finish the story with God's design for America as a Christian nation. They wield the biblical text with certainties and divine justifications for Christian privilege and power, to the detriment not only of people of other faiths, but our lesbian, gay, queer and trans sisters and brothers; Christian nationalists promote as Christian values a love that not only overlooks historical harms but produces more harms in protecting White Christian power, and of course this lands on Black and Brown Americans in countless harmful ways. This wave of Christian nationalism determined to 'take back our nation' suggests to us that there are Christians even today who select out those elements of scripture that write forward a story of hate and exclusion. Is this the story we want as the witness to our Christian faith in the 21st century? Or do we want to boldly proclaim another good news?

What we have missed

In taking seriously the damage created by Christian confessions of supremacy, Christians have betrayed what the Gospels name as Jesus's most fundamental, two-fold commandment: love God and love your neighbor. While violence and hatred toward Others is an evident transgression against love of neighbor, it is, theologically, also a transgression against love for the God who transcends us. The God who shows up in the ancient tale of Job and who reminds us of our smallness in relation to the wonders of creation. This God searches our human ways and asks – what do you really know? Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth? And why are you darkening counsel by words without knowledge?

The claims of Christian supremacy, finality and knowledge not only end the Gospel story in a particular way, they too often put an end to our seeking for God. In the distance and disdain Christians have shown to Jews across the centuries, we have silenced sacred arguing and seeking with the sword; in the refusal to hear and consider the words of the Prophet Muhammad, we've

cut short the theological investigation of our deeply held beliefs about Jesus; in refusing entry into Hindu Temples we have refused the opportunity to witness to a God who overwhelms the senses; and in drowning out the silence of the Buddha we've refused to consider, a God who may not be available, not present, not there. In the aggressive Christianization of the First peoples of this land, we have failed to recognize the ways the Creator had already been speak and continues to speak in different tongues today. The other side of these paths not taken remains true: in the sacred arguing about God and the challenges our neighbors of other faiths offer to our Christian certainties, we are opened up again to the God beyond all telling. The two-fold commitment to love of God and love of neighbor invites us *not* into Christian certainties and supremacies, but to ever deepening intimacy with the mystery of God through the mystery of neighbor.

Our landscape that has seen a rise in Christian nationalism and the vocal expressions of Christian supremacy that run through our public and political sphere place me in the Gospel text in the place of those women who with terror and amazement say nothing because we are afraid. I hold back my Christian confession and my Christian identification because of the way 'Christian' has come to represent a narrow worldview accompanied a story of supremacy. I am afraid. But, I am also afraid because of the forms of supremacy woven into my faith tradition that make it an easy-leap to mobilize Christian supremacy in the world. The commitment that there is no other name by which humans are saved, and the confession that Christians are in possession of the Only-Begotten Son of God, have turned a justice-seeking Jew who lead people against an oppressive Roman Empire into a defender of Christians, however unjust their actions might be. I am afraid of the ways my words in worship might fuel that kind of Christian supremacy in minds and hearts which make Christians unable to encounter the God who is mystery through the mystery of our neighbor who are not Christian.

But the *genre* of the story that we hear in our lesson today, the story of the women and their reluctance, resists any singular and final ending. This is because, as biblical scholar Matthew Larsen describes, what we name as the Gospel According to Mark is not actually a finished text. Larsen proposes that rather than a usual narrative with a beginning, middle and end and a thru-line conveying its meaning, we might consider the textual tradition of the Gospel According to Mark in the genre of a hypomnemata,¹ a kind of catalogue or chronicle in its raw form that circulated in the 1st century. Physicians in the ancient world used such a genre to keep as notes for their teaching, and orators would have them hand as the raw material from which to craft a speech. Like a private journal you might keep that includes different episodes and perhaps vastly differing accounts of your own experiences, historians in the ancient world similarly wrote drafts that were simply a catalogue of events which was a genre of documentation that predated their stringing a given history together as a demonstration of what ‘happened’. In Larsen’s analysis such a catalogue (of hypomenata in the ancient world) did not have the smooth narrative of all the pieces logically aligned, but could contain inconsistencies as diverse episodes and different perspectives would be included within the raw material from which an orator or historian would craft their presentation. And as has become the scholarly consensus on the earliest gospel traditions, the stories of Jesus were passed along widely not in writing but as spoken word and theatrical performance. So, when the textual tradition of the Gospel According to Mark was passed around in the ancient world, it *required* that the user of this pneumatic memory-aid *create the logic of the stories’ meaning with their own voice*. And this is precisely what we see in the later emphases that emerge in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John.

¹ Eusebius, even describes the Gospel According to Mark with the word *hypomnemata* (Larsen, 87) and other ancient Christians speak of the Gospel according to Mark as “unfinished, unpolished textual raw material.” (98)

In patterning ourselves on the earliest witnesses to Jesus as the Christ, we too must step into the role of drawing out meaning from the raw material of the text. We too must make choices about the portrait of Jesus we will select from the hypomenata we receive and tell his story for our day. And we do so with fear and anticipation. We want to be faithful to the witnesses that came before us, but with an overriding commitment to love of God and love of neighbor.

What might a non-supremacist confession of faith look like? For me it arrives in a Trinitarian frame with the Creator God, an awesome and mysterious power that exceeds us (like the one we encounter in the book of Job); it is wrapped in the creedal belief that this God has spoken through the prophets and calls humans to justice and righteousness; and it is drawn forward by a Jesus energized by the possibility of who we might be in this world: peacemakers, seekers of justice, builders of a new Kingdom. It is my hope that my Christian faith could be good news not only for Christians but also for my neighbors of the great range of faiths who might build such a new Kingdom alongside us. For now, I stand surrounded by the Marys and accompanied by Salome seized with terror at what my ancestors and co-religionists in the Christian tradition have done to my neighbors of other faiths; but I stand also with amazement, and resurrection hope, that Jesus-followers today might expand the centuries-old commitment to love of God and love of neighbor toward our moment's *new* heaven and tomorrow's *new* earth.

Job 38: 1-18

38 Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind:

² “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?

³ Gird up your loins like a man,

I will question you, and you shall declare to me.

⁴ “Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?

Tell me, if you have understanding.

⁵ Who determined its measurements—surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

⁶ On what were its bases sunk,

or who laid its cornerstone

⁷ when the morning stars sang together

and all the heavenly beings^[a] shouted for joy?

⁸ “Or who shut in the sea with doors
when it burst out from the womb?—

⁹ when I made the clouds its garment,
and thick darkness its swaddling band,

¹⁰ and prescribed bounds for it,
and set bars and doors,

¹¹ and said, ‘Thus far shall you come, and no farther,
and here shall your proud waves be stopped’?

¹² “Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
and caused the dawn to know its place,

¹³ so that it might take hold of the skirts of the earth,
and the wicked be shaken out of it?

¹⁴ It is changed like clay under the seal,
and it is dyed^[b] like a garment.

¹⁵ Light is withheld from the wicked,
and their uplifted arm is broken.

¹⁶ “Have you entered into the springs of the sea,
or walked in the recesses of the deep?

¹⁷ Have the gates of death been revealed to you,
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?

¹⁸ Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?
Declare, if you know all this.