

WILL WE DESERT HIM TOO?

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Now see if I have this right. Three women, Mary Magdeline, Mary the mother of James and Salome, buy spices Saturday night after the Sabbath is over and then head for the tomb at first light on Sunday. This would be a woman's job. Men would not normally touch a dead body, that was woman's work. The women seem to forget that there is a huge stone in front of the tomb that seals the entrance and only remember about on the way to the tomb. Well they probably are upset and not thinking clearly. When they get there the stone is rolled away from the tomb and they are faced with the dark entrance. As they enter the tomb and their eyes adjust to the light they see a young man dressed in a white robe on the right side of the tomb who announces after the usual angelic greeting of do not be afraid that Jesus is not here, that he is risen. He then tells them to go and tell Peter and the other disciples that he is going on ahead to Galilee where they will see him. The three flee the tomb in total terror and amazement. The story ends with "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Here ends the reading and in fact the Gospel of Mark as he probably wrote it. In your bibles you will find a short ending that adds one verse and in parenthesis a long ending which has a resurrection appearance and some prophecies. This ending concludes with Jesus' ascending to heaven. However, from everything I have read, Mark ended with, "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The oldest manuscripts read this way, only newer ones have the other endings. This strong double negative could be read to imply that they did not even tell the disciples for they said nothing to anyone. Now if this passage seems to make little sense, you may be right. Our seminary professors often would look at a passage like this and say, "well it is probably pretty accurate. Why else would something as disjointed and puzzling have been retained in scripture?" That then leaves us to puzzle out why this ending, which is radically different from the other Gospels, was written and retained in the most ancient manuscripts. More recent manuscripts have one of the other endings added which seem more consistent with the other gospels.

I must admit that this ending has always troubled me. An empty tomb and the words of an angel is all we are left with. Mark may have had some good theological reasons for this when he wrote it. Mark's gospel uses the Son of Man and the image of him seated at the right hand of God around 15 times. The symbolism of the angel seated on the right side of the tomb should give us a small hint towards that idea.

Mark is writing to a group who knew the story and is not really an evangelistic gospel. His community knows the story, some may even know it first hand. He simply tells the story of Jesus. There is an assumption by Mark that we know the story, that this is not the first time we have heard it. He assumes we have heard the letters of Paul read and understand about

the post resurrection appearances, they are not as important as Jesus ruling from God's right hand.

The most interesting and compelling speculation I read was that in fact he is making the point that even at the moment of his greatest victory, the victory over death, even the faithful women betray Christ. The men had all deserted him on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and now even faithful Mary Magdeline and her friends fail him, desert him.

There is a power in this image and a message for us. The women run away from the tomb and say nothing to anyone because they were afraid. This prompts the question of when you walk away from the empty tomb today will you tell no one anything. What are you afraid of that keeps you from proclaiming the good news of Christ?

The truth is that being a Christian in today's world is difficult. Of course we all know the two words one is never supposed to use in an Episcopal Church. Of course the first is spoken only occasionally and only during the stewardship campaign. That is of course the T word, tithe, but fear not, I will not go there this morning. The unspoken word for today is the E word, Evangelism. Evangelism is the proclaiming of the Good News. We desert Jesus at the tomb when we tell no one anything. We as a church are so bad about talking about our faith that the diocese of Massachusetts has published a little book called the Shy Person's Guide to Evangelism. Now while this sounds like something from a Garrison Keillor Prairie Home Companion skit, this is the most popular pamphlet put out by that diocese. The pamphlet is in its fifth printing and I am still waiting for our copies to use here in Virginia! Why do we find it so hard to talk about our faith? Why do we act like the women fleeing from the tomb in Mark rather than Mary running from the tomb in Matthew or Luke who can hardly contain herself because she is so excited?

We are in part to blame for this reticence to speak the Good News. Surely there are many conservatives who do not have this problem and that is in part our problem. I know many of us, myself included are embarrassed by the street preacher, the in your face evangelist and of course those Christians who proclaim God's love while discriminating against and condemning to hell any that they consider outside the circle of God's love as they define it. You can the fill in the blank with whatever group you want that they single out. These people give and have given Christianity a bad name among many Americans and we are embarrassed to be associated with them. I remember years ago as a member of an American Baptist church that I was always careful to say, but I'm not that kind of Baptist. Well, to be honest I really never was a Baptist. I was painfully aware that I did not want be associated with a group that had a theology that sent me running in the opposite direction.

Talking about our faith, our journey with Christ is difficult for many of us. So what can we do to make it easier to talk about our faith, What do you say to someone who asks what church do you attend or heaven forbid they ask you why you go to church it seems such a waste. My greatest challenge is faced with the person that says, well I'm very spiritual, but I'm not religious. I don't need to go to church, I can find God out in my kayak on the bay. Well I can find God in my kayak in one of the marshes, but there is more to church than a personal experience of the transcendent.

Bishop Harris of Massachusetts in her talks to parishes and in particular in her time with vestries had a great question to start the conversation about our faith. She asked each vestry member to say in four sentences or less where or how they found God at their church. Four sentences only, not a paragraph to describe where you find God. This is the answer to the question of why do you go to church! This is also the first step to becoming an evangelist. This is not a long lecture but a short statement that should be easily repeatable to anyone. I challenge all of you this morning to go home and do this homework assignment. Write out those four sentences, only one conjunction per sentence by the way. Then send it to me. I would like to put together a pamphlet of our own about why people attend our parish. I can think of no greater evangelism, oops there's that word again, tool. We have a parish that is one of the best kept secrets in Virginia Beach. Our diocesan leadership knows how important we are, how strong a parish we are. Yet many in our community do not know much about us.

To those who are visiting on this most holy of Sundays. If you like what you see and live in Virginia Beach, please, come back. Join us in the journey. Come back and ponder the mysteries of the tomb. The answers do not come in just one service. Worship is about a community of faith on a journey of faith. By coming today you have made yourself part of this community. Be daring enough to weave yourselves into the fabric of our community. I do not pretend that any of us have all the answers, but I can assure you that we will partner with you on your journey. Be daring enough to make us part of that journey.

So as you leave today I ask you, which gospel will you end with? Will you be the two Marys and Salome and run away in fear and not tell anyone anything or will you run out into the streets shouting Alleluia Christ is Risen.