

Year B Easter 2024 Back to the Beginning Mark 16 vv1 to 8

Well, if Mark were here, he might have a sermon that goes something like, “Hallelujah, Christ is risen! And they all fled in fear, saying nothing to anyone.” This is actually where Mark ends his Gospel. Other people came along and thought, “This is no way to end things – leaving people hanging”, so they added more to make Mark’s Gospel more like the other Gospels. In each of the other Gospel stories, the disciples encounter the risen Jesus. They speak with him, see his wounds, share food with him. Not so in Mark’s Gospel. We are left with two frightened and confused women who run off after seeing an empty tomb and a mysterious stranger. But Mark knew what he was doing. His Gospel ending is brilliant and, of course, I’m going to share with you why I believe this to be true.

Jesus had many disciples who followed him although we think of him as having just twelve men as his disciples. Those twelve were very close to them, part of his inner circle, and Jesus has told these closest disciples, more than once, that he would be killed and be raised to new life. This was, in their minds, really hard to believe. They had witnessed Jesus bringing others healing and even bringing at least one other person back to life. But how could he do this for himself? It was simply beyond their understanding. On that first Easter morning, those disciples are nowhere to be seen. Two women are headed to Jesus’ tomb [– at this time, on this day]. Mary Magdalene and another Mary, disciples of Jesus, too, are the ones we see bringing spiced oils to the place where Jesus’ dead body had been laid – spiced oils to help cover the bad odour of an already decaying corpse. These dedicated followers of Jesus, who had served him in life, wanted to serve him also in death. Except...they didn’t find what they had expected to find.

The heavy rock has already been rolled away from the mouth of the tomb and, when they enter, they find a young man – an angel – dressed in white and seated on the right side. The right side being the traditional place of honour beside a lord. They are alarmed, we are told. “Alarmed” doesn’t mean that they were scared – although they probably are frightened at least a little at this point. “Alarmed” means that they were overwhelmed by surprise and confusion. Don’t be alarmed...Don’t be surprised and confused, the young man says. Yah, right. What they were hearing...Jesus isn’t here, Jesus isn’t dead...and what they were seeing – and *not* seeing – in front of them was very surprising and very perplexing. It doesn’t make sense. The idea that a person could rise from the dead is just as surprising and unbelievable as a Messiah who gets crucified in the first place. It is no wonder that Mary Magdalene and Mary run off in terror and amazement.

Before they run off, the young man has a message for them. “But go,” he instructs them, “tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Just as he told you. It is a promise. Jesus told them he would go ahead of them and he will stick to that promise. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. In Mark’s Gospel, Galilee represents for us and the disciples, every day life with him and so, the angel assures the women, and tells them to pass along the important message, that Jesus is ahead of them. There is no place we can go without Jesus. He is there already. He leads and we follow. But where are we following him to?

This promise of Jesus’ that we hear at the end of the Gospel leads us back to Galilee where we hear the first promise of Jesus. The first words out of Jesus’ mouth in Mark’s Gospel are, “The kingdom of God is here. Repent and believe this

good news.” We follow Jesus into God’s kingdom. How is this possible? Mark helps us understand that as well.

In Jesus’ crucifixion, Mark leads us back to Jesus’ baptism. At the Jordan River, as Jesus emerged from the water, the heavens were torn apart and a voice proclaims, “You are my Son.” As Jesus breathes his last on the cross, the temple curtain is torn apart and the voice of the Roman centurion proclaims, “Truly, this was God’s Son.” Jesus’ baptism is completed through his death on the cross. Baptism is not a one-time event but rather, a sacrament – a “sacramentum”, solemn oath – sworn to God that we will live according to the ways of life of God’s kingdom. Baptism is not simply membership into a group of people we call a church but membership into Christ’s body, a body of people that form the living Church. In the mystery of baptism, we become a part of Christ’s body and so we, too, participate in his death and resurrection – the time when, after living a life according to God’s ways, Jesus – and therefore, we – enter fully into God’s kingdom in a resurrection body that will never die again. I say “fully enter” because we do live in God’s kingdom now but we’re not quite all in. “God’s kingdom is here” Jesus told us. Where God is, so too is God’s kingdom. Through baptism, given the gift of the Holy Spirit to be with us always, where we are, Jesus is, and where Jesus is, God’s kingdom is. As we live the life of God’s kingdom, more and more of that kingdom is revealed to the world. Sharing in the Holy Eucharist together is the repeatable part of our oath. We are not just remembering what Jesus did, we participate in it – we, the Body of Christ, taking and eating the Body of Christ, and bringing that body into the world.

In the movie, “The Sixth Sense”, Bruce Willis plays a child-psychologist named Malcolm. Returning home from receiving an award for his work, his wife is telling him that she feels second place in his life but this unhappy conversation is interrupted by an even unhappier former patient of Malcolm’s. This young man, Vincent, is angry and, believing that Malcolm failed him, he shoots Malcolm in the stomach and then takes his own life. The next scene shows us Malcolm finally ready to take on a new patient – a young boy, showing similarities to Vincent. Malcolm is determined not to fail this young boy and learns that this boy is tormented by the ability to see dead people who don’t know that they’re dead. Malcolm begins spending more and more time with this boy even as his marriage is falling apart. Malcolm confides his marriage troubles to the boy – his wife won’t even talk to him anymore. The boy suggests that Malcolm try talking to his wife while she is sleeping. And so, when Malcolm returns home late one night to find his wife asleep on the couch with their wedding video playing on the tv, not for the first time, Malcolm bends down to talk to her. As he does so, her hand falls open and his wedding ring tumbles to the floor. In shock, Malcolm looks at his hand and notices he is not wearing the ring. He realizes that he is dead. He died the night they’d argued, the night his former patient had shot him. He has been dead this whole time. The director of the movie has put the colour red into every scene in which there were dead people. And so, when you know this, in seeing the movie for a second time, with fresh eyes, knowing what to look for, you realize very early in the movie what is really happening.

Mark, our director, sends us back to the beginning of the movie with fresh eyes. Knowing what’s going on, we realize that we are seeing the risen Christ throughout Mark’s Gospel. Mark does not end his Gospel leaving us hanging,

without seeing Jesus risen from the dead. We see him throughout, showing us what life in God's kingdom is like: the healing of broken people, the generous abundance that is shared with others, the love shown to everyone, and the breaking down of the world's corrupt power structures that create injustice and inequality. With fresh eyes, we are sent to the beginning, back to Galilee, our daily lives, knowing that the kingdom is here, knowing that Jesus goes before us, knowing that we are a part of God's kingdom, a part of bringing that kingdom into fullness – on earth as in heaven. With fresh eyes we go from here with our Easter sermon: "Hallelujah! Christ is risen! The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ!"