

Speak Up

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, in Fremont, on Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scripture: [Mark 16:1-8](#)

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It is tempting to think of the Last Supper, that scene in the Upper Room that we remember on Maundy Thursday, as a dreamy, candle-lit fellowship meal, rather than, as Ched Myers has called it, “the conflict-ridden final hours of a fugitive community in hiding.”

Likewise, it’s easy to imagine Jesus praying at Gethsemane in a calm, resolute manner, at peace in his submission to a pre-ordained plan, rather than the deep, sweaty struggle of a man coming to terms with the consequences of his revolutionary vision and calling.¹

It is easy to hear the story of the so-called trials of Jesus before the Sanhedrin and Pilate and blame all the Jews. The gospels seem to do a pretty good job of this, making it seem as if everyone in Jerusalem was standing outside Pilate’s palace shouting, “Crucify him!” when, in fact, whatever mob might have existed were more likely the sycophantic toadies of the religious elites and collaborators with the Roman occupation.

It is easy to forget that crucifixion was the Roman form of execution, so Jesus was executed by the Roman government, by the Empire, not by the occupied Jews. He was perceived as a threat to the established imperial order, perceived as a threat by the 1% of his day who concluded: Have done with him. Get rid of him. End this threat. So Jesus was executed by a detachment of Roman soldiers on orders from their government.

One chilling part of the story is how Jesus faced this execution alone. One of his disciples betrayed him. Peter followed at a distance, but when pressured to admit his association with Jesus, he denied knowing him. The rest of the male disciples ran off. Only the women and Joseph of Arimathea (who we meet for the first time just a chapter ago in Mark’s gospel) knew where Jesus was buried. There is nothing pretty about the last days of Jesus’ life. Nothing romantic or dreamy or calm. Jesus was cruelly tortured and killed by the Roman government and the powers that be. And one would think that this was the end of the story.

But it’s not the end of the story. The ending of the story, at least as Mark tells it, is *much* stranger.

Early on Sunday morning, some women went to the tomb where Jesus’ body was buried, but the corpse was not there. “As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.”² Freaked out might be more to the point, though Mark doesn’t say who this “young man, dressed in a white robe” is. He becomes an angel (or two angels) in later gospels (whose writers almost

¹ Debra Dean Murphy, “Palms and passion,” *The Christian Century Blog*, <http://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2012-03/palms-and-passion> (7 April 2012), including the quote from Ched Myers.

² Mark 16:5.

certainly had a copy of Mark's gospel when they were writing). All Mark tells us about the young man is what he says: "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."³

This could be the beginning of a great ending. The women go to the disciples, tell them what they experienced, and then all kinds of wonderful things happen. And that's not how Mark ends his gospel. Mark ends it with the sentence: "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."⁴

The End. "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

New Testament scholar, Dr. Mary Ann Tolbert, says, "To end the gospel on such a resounding note of failure is very upsetting from a modern perspective."⁵ She points out that throughout Mark's gospel, Jesus has continually struggled to get his disciples to understand his teachings. Jesus predicted his passion three different times and they never really understood what he was talking about. The disciples hear his parables, sometimes even get them explained to them, and they still don't understand what he's talking about. They witness him healing people, but they can't see beyond that happens to that was revealed in the healing. The people (almost always unnamed) who are healed – they get it, and time after time, even when they're told not to reveal who Jesus is, they go and tell people. But not the disciples.

"Again and again, the disciples disappoint, and so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that these women who, let's remember, had the courage to stay with Jesus to the end and then ventured to his tomb to tend him, nevertheless fail like the other disciples."⁶

There's a demon in Mark's gospel who recognizes Jesus, asking, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" (Mark 5:7). And there's the Roman centurion, who immediately after watching Jesus die states, "Truly, this man was God's son" (Mark 15:39). But the disciples? They miss it.

Here we get to the end of the story, when it would be so nice to hear that the disciples finally got it and finally started talking about it. And they don't. Even the women who have been the most faithful of all, the woman who stayed with Jesus through his crucifixion and burial, "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Dr. Tolbert convinced me that "The expectations raised and then crushed by the end of the Gospel are intended to move the hearers of the Gospel to action. If the women do not carry the message, is there anyone else who can? Is there anyone else who has heard Jesus'

³ Mark 16:6-7.

⁴ Mark 16:8.

⁵ Mary Ann Tolbert, "Mark," *The Women's Bible Commentary*, quoted in "Mark 16," *Dwelling in the Word*, <https://dwellingintheword.wordpress.com/2022/02/21/3351-mark-16/> (accessed 30 March 2024).

⁶ David Lose, "Just the Beginning," WorkingPreacher.org, http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=574 (accessed 7 April 2012).

preaching, seen his healings, watched his crucifixion and burial, and listened to the wondrous announcement of the resurrection?

“Well, yes! The audience of the Gospel has heard all of this. At the end and indeed *by means of* the end itself, the audience of the Gospel of Mark ... are challenged to become themselves faithful disciples, carrying the message to the world...”⁷

In other words, the central message of Mark’s gospel is, “Speak Up.” And that message is addressed to you and me. Mark is asking us to speak up.

This ending even makes the beginning of the Gospel make more sense. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). What Mark tells us is that his whole Gospel is just the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ. The story keeps going – if we keep telling it.

And that’s great. Except for one little thing. Speaking up isn’t always easy. The reason why the whole “if I tell him I love him, will it scare him off?” RomCom trope works is because speaking up about something as real as love is scary. Speaking a truth requires of us a level of emotional vulnerability, and who wants to be that exposed?

And what about when the truth you have to share isn’t positive? I think back to the beginning of my ministry when I worked as a chaplain in a juvenile hall. Kids would reveal to me various types of abuse they’d suffered, revelations they had never made before. Sharing that kind of truth required a special kind of vulnerability.

And the truth can, at times, be dangerous to speak. This is especially true for women and people of color. So, while Mark’s gospel calls us to speak up, I don’t think Mark’s gospel calls us to take unnecessary risks in sharing how Jesus is alive today. That said, I asked a group of colleagues⁸ if they would share stories with me of times they’d spoken up and it had life-giving results. Here are two of their stories:

Mandy shared a story of being at the beach and noticing that her brother-in-law had a number of, what seemed to her to be, new moles on his back. “We were all in graduate school, and none of us could afford healthcare. I remembered the story of a family that I had babysat for, where the wife pointed out something on her husband’s back and a life-threatening cancer was discovered by their doctor. I told the story to my brother-in-law, and said that I thought he should go to the doctor, now! A month and half later, his wife called me and said, with a quavery voice, ‘You saved his life.’ It’s been 30 years, and with skin surgery, and careful monitoring, he’s still alive and doing well.”

Chris shared, “When *Obergefell v Hodges* was released [that’s the 2015 Supreme Court case that legalized same-gender marriages], I contacted the paper and solicited an interview because I was happy to do same sex marriages. I also did a video interview with a local news service. This was in an extremely conservative town where no other pastors openly offered this welcome. My own ... church folks kind of freaked out at the attention, one member instantly quit, and I got a lot of hate on social media, particularly from a different former member. But, at the same time, scores of people who weren’t themselves

⁷ Tolbert, *op. cit.*

⁸ This question was posed in a closed Facebook group. I was given permission to share their stories.

churched or Christian spoke up in gratitude to hear a Christian pastor standing with LGBTQIA+ folks. Maybe in that town they hadn't heard that before."

Yes, speaking up takes courage. And I believe we can find that courage in the promise of the resurrection. As Bishop Steven Charleston has said, "We are not afraid, even if we have every reason to be. Yes, our eyes are open. Yes, we are aware of the realities around us, the hard realities, but even if the daily news tries to press the hope out of us, still we are not afraid. Why? Because we know every living thing is under the watchful eye of love. Every prayer, ever said, by anyone, is heard and received. Every life, ever lived, is redeemed by a power far greater than even imagination can contain. So, no, we are not afraid."⁹

Be not afraid. Speak up. Amen.

⁹ Bishop Steven Charleston, daily Facebook post, <https://www.facebook.com/bishopstevencharleston/posts/pfbid06669xRMmwrCd9jzZ55CAAtM3tXg7vMYjZDRBDc2xjMdJsQEohWBbD2BJFv5T2bZpl> (posted and accessed 27 March 2024).