

**Wondering About the Resurrection
(According to the Gospel of Mark)**

Mark 16:1-8 *...he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.*

In Mark's story of the resurrection, women are the first witnesses. This is very radical, for in those days women did not have the status to serve as witnesses to anything. Yet, women were very close to Jesus and were among his first followers. Maybe not the inner circle of the twelve, but the wider circle of disciples. Mark knows that the closest disciples never fully grasped what Jesus was about, what he was trying to teach and show. At the end, all of them fled for their lives, abandoning him to his suffering and death. Only the women continued to follow, daring to watch the crucifixion from a distance (Lk. 23:49; Jn. 19:25 has them near the cross). Perhaps Mark is reminding us of Jesus' words, that the meaning of his teachings would be hidden from the "wise and prudent" but revealed to the least and lowliest (Matt. 11:25, for example). I wonder if it is not our intelligence, wisdom, or experience, but our open hearts and trusting spirits that enable us to touch the mystery of resurrection.

Out of their love for and devotion to Jesus, the women rise early in the morning to take spices to anoint Jesus' body. On the way they realize that they won't be able to push back the stone that seals the grave. Still they walk on. Why did they not turn back? Why did they keep walking when their journey might be for nothing? So many times I have slowed my pace on this journey of faith when I think of some stone up ahead that is too big for me to roll away! I anticipate some obstacle to the thing I want to do out of my love for Jesus, some difficulty looming ahead, blocking the way of my desire to be loving, or forgiving, or serving. It seems wiser to give it up and turn back. But sometimes I have gone ahead, carrying my load of dread, or fear, or sense of futility. Sometimes there is the stone, the thing I feared, big as life and unmoved as a mountain. But sometimes it is not there, rolled back, or smaller than I feared it would be. Maybe these women walking the road, clutching their spices to anoint their friend's body, having no idea how they will accomplish their deepest desire...maybe this is often what it is like to live this journey of faith we are on. We feel called to do something out of our love for God and desire to follow Jesus, and we just keep moving on, step by step, not knowing how it will be accomplished.

The women arrive to find the stone rolled away. They see inside the tomb a young man, robed in white. Mark probably knows this is an angel, a messenger from God. Yet he makes nothing of this supernatural element in the story. Mark is more interested in the message than the messenger. The women are "alarmed" at what they see – the stone rolled back, the empty grave, this odd young man. This is a very strong word in the Greek. It seems to mean a kind of profound amazement to the point of being overwhelmed and disoriented. It is more than merely being surprised; it is a feeling of deep disturbance because of something you did not expect, something that has about it a dimension of the sacred. The young man tells the women not to be alarmed. God throughout scripture is always saying that to us. Do not be afraid. Peace be with you. The opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. I wonder if fear is not the basis of most of our spiritual struggles? If we work with acknowledging our fears and understanding how they affect our living, and then open more and more to the peace God speaks to our hearts, we get closer and closer to faith as trustful living.

The young man tells them that Jesus is not there in the tomb. He has been raised up. He is going on to Galilee, as he had promised, to meet up with his followers. He instructs the women to go and tell Jesus' disciples all of this, especially Peter. Why especially Peter? Because Peter needed some special attention. Peter, the most precocious of the disciples, had flatly denied his association with Jesus when it threatened his own safety (14:66ff). Here is God's special concern for the one who seemed to have been the greatest failure, the greatest disappointment. God is not interested in blame or punishment, failure or accomplishment. God is interested in relationship and moving on. I don't think God wants us to sink into our sense of failure, of falling short. That always bothered me as I grew up in the church. It made no sense for us to sit around feeling bad

about our sins, the things we had done wrong. Those are real enough, and we need to acknowledge them. However, what I heard in the Christian story was God in Christ absolutely pouring forgiveness and love into us so that we could get up and follow, so that we, too, could rise up from our deadness and really live the way God made us to live. God is more interested in going on, starting the journey afresh with each new step. I wonder what it would mean to the way we live if we worked more with letting go of shame, guilt, our sense of failure or deficiency? I wonder what a difference it would make if we paid more attention to leaving those tombs of self-preoccupation and allowed ourselves to move on to where Jesus wants to meet us and continue the journey?

The story ends with the women fleeing the tomb in fear, too confused and troubled by it all to say anything to anyone. And this is where Mark's gospel itself ends. In our Bibles there are other endings beyond this. Most scholars agree that these were added later to smooth over what seemed to be too abrupt an ending, or to add something that would be more uplifting. I like where Mark ended his gospel story. He doesn't wrap everything up for us. He doesn't try to overwhelm us with glorious pictures of the risen Christ. Mark's ending leaves us kind of uncomfortable, even disturbed, like the women leaving the tomb. Mark leaves us to wonder. I think Mark knows that there is more to the life of faith than lofty endings that leave you warm and fuzzy. The women flee the tomb confused, troubled, and yet somehow deeply stirred by what they have seen and heard. They are lost in the mystery of it all. To me this seems to be where we are today as we live the life of Jesus' community, as we seek to make our lives a journey of following him.

He is not here. He goes before you, to meet you in Galilee. There is this always-going-on nature to the life of faith. It is not a once and for all thing, of finding "the answer" and then settling in for the rest of our lives. It is like the women walking the road, not knowing how they will be able to express their love for Jesus with a huge stone in their way. It is like finding that stone removed, but then stumbling onto the deep mystery of death becoming life, suffering turning into joy, endings unfolding as beginnings...the mystery of the sacred dimension of life. And our journey of faith is always moving on toward where Jesus will meet us, where we will find the living Christ. In the places where we feel he is calling us to be and to serve. In the persons to whom he is leading us, the ones we can help and the ones who can help us.

In the end, Mark's gospel does not give us the resurrection as a glorious, doubt-dispelling exclamation point! It gives us the resurrection as a question mark that calls us back to the journey of faith. It is the journey of going on to meet Jesus, the living Christ, in the challenges, the ministries, the relationships, the places within us and around us to which he calls us. In the end, I wonder if Mark's story of the resurrection isn't about living the resurrection, never knowing when or where we are going to find new life just when we expected there would be only death. I wonder if it is not about doing our best to live the life Jesus taught and lived, even when it seems to make no sense or seems hopeless, and finding from time to time, in our experience, that it truly is the way of life. I like the way the Kentucky poet and farmer Wendell Berry put it:

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it...
Practice resurrection.*

(Wendell Berry, "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front")