
Do we need anything more?
Martin Grove United Church
April 16, 2017
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Based on Mark 16:1-8 and 9-20

Easter. Traditionally a time of celebration - at least for Christians, and anyone who likes chocolate. Traditionally a time for an egg hunt. Traditionally a time for a good meal with family and friends. Traditionally, a time for the minister to preach a boring, inoffensive, sermon in case we have visitors in church today. Some traditions have to change of course - and I'm not giving up chocolate!

Easter! A time to grapple with stories of resurrection and life that we may struggle to understand. A time of surprises. And of course, surprises don't only come in those chocolate eggs. In our story today, one of the big surprises is the importance of women in the story.

After Jesus's arrest, the disciples seemed to scatter. And the men in particular just took off. In contrast, the women amongst the disciples seemed to hang in longer. In today's story it is only women who risk going to Jesus's tomb in order to prepare Jesus's body for burial.

Some scholars tell us that it would have been dangerous for the men to go to Jesus's tomb. That the authorities would have been more suspicious of the men if they had gone. That the men did not go because they had very legitimate fears of being arrested themselves - or worse - if they had gone. That's possible of course, but notice there is no discussion in the gospels about the men even wanting to go! The women just went. The women among Jesus's disciples would have been good UCW members - they saw something that needed to be done - and they just did it.

But then, when the women spoke with the angel, and returned to find the disciples, it seems that the disciples did not believe them. Or I could say the men did not believe the women until they had more proof - which means that they did not believe the women.

The women were the first on the scene. And they were also the first to be

removed from the story. When the apostle Paul described this same event in 1 Cor 15, he said, “remember that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

According to Paul then, the women were not at the tomb at all. And even the reference to “more than five hundred brothers and sisters” does not actually refer to women - sorry to have to tell you that. Most biblical translators insert the phrase “brothers and sisters” whenever Paul uses the Greek word for “brothers”. The role of the women simply disappeared from the story.

So it appears that the men did not believe the testimony of the women. Is anyone here really surprised? Don't forget that in those days, and in that culture, women were not eligible to give testimony in Jewish court. It's not hard to believe that when the women tried to share a story about a risen Jesus, they would not be believed - even if they were understood. But the women are still front and centre at the end of the gospel of Mark.

We just read the entire last chapter of the gospel of Mark, which describes what happened to Jesus and the disciples, after Jesus's crucifixion. For Mark, it is the end of the gospel. The end of the story. And I wonder if you noticed, but it contains in fact 2 separate endings. The first reading was the first story with the first ending, and the second reading - the part I read myself - was the second ending.

The first story is very brief. The women come to find Jesus's body at the tomb, they meet an angel who tells them that Jesus has risen, and the women run away in fear to find the rest of the disciples.

The second ending continues from there, but focuses on the fact that the disciple didn't believe the women and other witnesses who saw the risen Jesus. The second ending also includes what is sometimes called “The Great Commission” where Jesus tells the disciples to spread the Good News throughout the world and to baptize people

everywhere - it is in fact, a call to form and grow the church.

The first ending, which stops with the women running away in fear, is accepted by virtually all biblical scholars to be the ending that Mark actually wrote. The second ending - which includes the great commission - was written, not by Mark, but by the early church. The second ending is completely absent from the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. And - as always - that is an invitation for us. An invitation - not to throw the later story away, but to consider: what did the early church see as the limitations of the original shorter ending? “What’s wrong with it?” Or, perhaps more graciously, “what more did the early church think needed to be said?”

And if we think about what more needed to be said, we will need to consider what the word “resurrection” means. Those of us here who are high on chocolate eggs might immediately say that resurrection means Jesus's body returning to life. Well, of course that is one sense of the word. But the word resurrection has other meanings too.

People often speak about resurrecting things. If you go to google and search for “I resurrected my old” you will find an impressive list of old things that people say they have resurrected from old computer systems to old washing machines. From bicycles to web sites. From old cameras to ... well, you get the idea.

Please understand, I am not imposing the word “resurrection” on to these items, people are using the word “resurrection” to describe their own experience. But in all those cases, resurrecting an old camera - for example - merely means that someone had a camera, which they used and loved. Then over time the camera was no longer used. Then the person rediscovered the camera and brought it back into use. That type of “resurrection” simply means that something old is used again. And it is used just the way it was used before. It is not “better”. It is not “improved”. It is simply used again.

That type of resurrection is really just looking backwards. It is simply realizing that an old item - like a camera - or an idea, is not really obsolete. That type of resurrection might be interesting, or perhaps comforting, but it is backward looking.

In the same way, if the body of the crucified Jesus had simply come back to life, and things had simply returned to “normal” for Jesus and the disciples, that would have been backward looking. Whatever we think happened on that day of resurrection, the

strong reaction of the disciples suggests that something very dramatic happened that day. Perhaps something even more amazing than a physical body coming back to life.

Because there is another way to think of resurrection - and that is looking forward. I could bring in lots of stories here. From movies. From our own history. But I suspect we all have our own stories about resurrection. Stories where something tragic happened to us, and that - later in life - when the dust settled and the smoke cleared, we in fact could see a more meaningful and hopeful path forward. We could see a new resurrection as an invitation - not an invitation back to our old life - but an invitation forward into new life.

And all this leads me to wonder - what's wrong with the original ending to the gospel of Mark? Why did the early church feel compelled to "improve" it by creating a longer ending? Wasn't the presence of the risen Christ enough? Did they really want more than that? And what would be the bigger miracle in any case - the resuscitation of a physical body for a few weeks, or the continuation of the spirit of Jesus in some form - in any form? Which would have the most impact on us 2,000 years later? Which would be the bigger miracle?

My own reading of the first ending tells me - it is enough. The women meet an angel who tells them that Jesus lives. But the angel does more than that. The angel gives the women an order - "Go!". The command is - in spite of fear - to go. To continue. To keep working for the transformation of the world. To keep working to build the kingdom of God on earth.

And really, do we need more than that ourselves? It is enough. And when this worship service is over, I invite all of us to Go! Go and keep working for the transformation of the world.

Amen.