

“The third day he rose again from the dead”

Easter 2009 Ser.doc Mark 16:1-8 1

Corinthians 15:1-11

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The reading we heard from the Gospel According to Mark ends in a puzzling way.

"The women went out from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; they said nothing to anyone, they were afraid for..." 16:8 That's how the ending of Mark's gospel reads when translated literally from the Greek into English, ending the sentence and the Gospel with the Greek preposition *gar* or in English 'for'.

Many of our English translations solve that problem by moving the preposition: "They said nothing to anyone, *for* they were afraid." That solves the problem with the grammar but not the Gospel, for though earlier in the account there is an announcement by a white-robed figure in the tomb that Jesus has been raised, there is no actual appearance of the risen Christ.

There are other manuscripts of Mark's Gospel that appear to solve this problem.

Some add a shorter ending; others add a longer ending, both of which have the risen Jesus appearing to his followers.

Depending on which translation you are reading the added endings may follow on as part of the main text, or after a paragraph break, or appear as footnotes.

But the style of writing in these endings is so different that most New Testament scholars claim that the alternative endings were written by someone else.

I think you can tell, even in English, that these were added by another hand, by someone who perhaps wanted to make Mark's Gospel sound like the other Gospels; someone who wanted a *proper* ending. But why would Mark's Gospel end in the middle of a sentence?

Mark may have been interrupted and was not able to finish his Gospel as he had intended.

Or, the end of the original papyrus scroll physically broke off at this point and was lost.

If Mark is the earliest of the four Gospels, what might it mean that the earliest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel have no record of an appearance of the risen Christ?

Does this cast doubt upon the central claim of the Christian faith: that Jesus Christ was resurrected from death to new life?

I don't believe it should necessarily cause us to doubt, but what I think Mark's account does is challenges us to believe and trust in the most radical of ways.

The unfinished ending of Mark's gospel issues a challenge not only to the women and the disciples, but also to you and to me.

The risen Christ was not at the tomb but was already going ahead of his followers.

And that's where I sense he is still today: out ahead of us.

That's why I like the cross on the pulpit fall in this chapel, because it appears as if it's flying, the upward angle of the crossbeam is suggestive of wings.

It suggests that the risen Jesus is going ahead of us.

In one important sense the risen Jesus *is* ahead of us; so far ahead that we can scarcely understand his resurrected existence.

The risen Jesus is an appearance of the new creation in the midst of the old creation.

The risen Jesus is a glimpse of what human life looks like when it has been completely renewed by God.

But in order to glimpse this renewed humanity we need to look at what other writers say about their experience of the risen Jesus: such as Paul.

As we heard in our second reading, Paul hands on to the church at Corinth what was handed on to him, the tradition that Christ died for our sins, was buried, and raised to life on the third day.

This is very similar to the tradition that the Apostles' Creed affirms of Christ: that on "the third day he rose again from the dead."

Paul, when he was Saul, was arch-persecutor of the Church.

Saul, a fervent Pharisaic Jew, wanted to eradicate the heretical Jewish sect that followed the teaching of Jesus.

But the risen Jesus was ahead of Saul.

Famously, on the road to Damascus, Saul saw a dazzling light, fell from his horse, and heard a voice say 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

This was the risen Jesus' first appearance to Saul: and for Saul this overwhelming experience, and what followed, was, as he describes it, 'like a sudden, abnormal birth.'

As he later writes: "By God's grace, I am what I am, and his grace to me has not proved vain."

As well as being incredibly gracious, God must have a sense of humour and irony, because no one would seem less suitable to be a Christian than Saul!

But the risen Jesus goes way ahead of him: Saul the persecutor of the Church becomes Paul the apostle of the Church.

And it is Paul, who writes his letters before Mark writes his Gospel, who helps us to understand the risen Jesus.

When all Paul writes about the meaning of Jesus' resurrection is considered together, it sounds something like this:

...the God who created all things has, through his Holy Spirit, raised Jesus Christ, the Messiah, from the dead; the risen Jesus Christ is the same person as the one who was crucified, but now transformed with what Paul calls a "spiritual body", alive with a new kind of life.

(David Ford, *Exploring & Proclaiming the Apostles' Creed*, p. 155)

And this new kind of life that the risen Jesus has is our first glimpse of the new creation; it is a brief instance of what human life will look like when God brings it to its intended fulfilment.

And that is why the risen Jesus is way ahead of us.

He is so far ahead that we don't have the concepts and the language fully to express what his risen existence is like.

What we read in the Gospels and in the New Testament letters is the writers straining and stretching the Greek language in order to try and express what cannot be fully expressed.

So Mark says of the women: "They said nothing to anything, for they were afraid".

In other accounts Mary does not recognise Jesus and thinks he is the gardener until he speaks her name; Jesus appears and disappears

seemingly at will; locked doors cannot keep him out; yet he also eats and drinks; and he invites doubting Thomas to touch him.

Is he a ghost; or a figment of the disciples' imagination; or a resuscitated corpse?

No, I don't think he is any of these, because the risen Jesus is way ahead of our human categories.

When CS Lewis tries to express what Jesus is like he uses the language of Darwin.

Lewis says that Jesus is a massive *evolutionary leap*, but one that God has brought about.

But this massive evolutionary leap that Jesus' resurrection represents has implications not only the human animal but for the whole creation.

With Jesus' resurrection a transformation of the whole creation is promised, when creation will "be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

Romans 8:21

However, Paul follows this wonderful statement of hope with an acknowledgment that this is some way ahead of us, and that now "the whole creation groans as if in the pangs of childbirth."

The challenge for we who claim to be followers of Christ is how we can live something of his new life in the midst of an old world.

In other words, how can something of Christ's new life be put into us? We derive our biological life from our parents, of whom we are their offspring, and we give biological life to our offspring.

But the New Testament calls this biological life mere existence.

What Jesus calls 'the kingdom of God' and John calls 'eternal life' and Paul calls being 'in Christ' is a radically different manner of living.

It is living by sharing in the Christ-life.

It is a leap towards the risen Christ who is always going ahead of us.

Because we are not wholly spiritual beings but both spiritual and material, and because we must live in a world with gravity and biology, God has provided ways in which we can share in Christ's risen new life.

They are ways that are at one and the same time ordinary and extraordinary.

There are three main ways: Baptism, trust, and Holy Communion.

The first way is baptism.

In baptism ordinary water is used upon us to make an extraordinary claim: we are baptized into Christ's death and buried with him order that 'just as Christ was raised from the dead by God the Father, so we might set out on a new life.' (Romans 6:4)

The second way is trust.

We are called to trust in the risen Jesus.

This trust is much more than simply believing that such and such is the case: that is merely assent.

To trust in the risen Jesus is to invest in the relationship.

It is like the trust we place in a spouse or close friend or career.

To trust in Jesus is as involving as a relationship with someone we care deeply about.

The difference is that we cannot see or touch Jesus—he is ahead of us—yet when we trust in him he comes to dwell in us by this Spirit.

The third way is Holy Communion.

When we share bread and wine we acknowledge that we are members of Christ's one body, the Church, and Christ is our Head.

In this way, the Christ who is ahead of us is acknowledged as *the Head* of us.

And if Christ is our Head he is much more than memory that we attempt to bring to mind, he is much more than a moral example that we attempt to emulate: he is risen Lord who shares his new life with us.

Hallelujah. Christ is risen!