

EASTER VIGIL

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.

Mark 16:8

This is the true ending of the Gospel of Mark. Oh, it got added on to. Someone did not think this was a very satisfactory ending to *The Gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God*, that is, the Good News. *They were afraid*, understandably, did not seem uplifting or hopeful.

But *they were afraid* is the original, authentic ending of Mark, the oldest Gospel, the narratives Matthew and Luke derive from. No post-resurrection appearances: no Jesus mistaken for a gardener, no women rushing to drag the frightened men back to the scene. No road to Emmaus, no appearance in an upper room. No eating of fish, or walking through doors, or inviting Thomas to touch his wounds. No second departure, no final blessing. Just, *they were afraid*.

But before this strange, stark Gospel tonight, what have we seen and heard? We have participated in the most primitive of human rituals, the lighting of a new fire. We have heard the Exsultet, the chant of the most holy night. We have heard *the record of God's saving deeds in history, how God saved all people in ages past*.

Well, we've heard some of the record. If we'd heard all eleven lessons designated for tonight we would have heard more. We would have listened not only to the Creation story, but also Noah and the Flood. We would have reenacted the agony of Abraham's nearly sacrificing Isaac before remembering the triumph of the Parting of the Red Sea Waters. Isaiah would have assured us that God's ways are higher than our ways, and Baruch would have reported appearance on earth of Wisdom. In addition to the news that we are being granted a new heart and a new spirit, Ezekiel would have reported how dry bones are brought to life. Then, we have heard from Zephaniah that the fortunes of Zion have been restored, and from Paul that we have been baptized into newness of life, and that death no longer has dominion.

But, but, but... *they were afraid*. They were human, these women. Human, and traumatized, and based in reality as they understood it. Jesus was dead, executed as a political terrorist. His movement was dead. His associates were in mortal peril. These women were sensible to be afraid

And we, are we afraid? We have just heard the great story of salvation history, the story of God's mighty acts, the story of God's promises fulfilled. Are we still afraid?

Of course, the story of God's saving acts in history can seem a bit over the top. And a great deal to absorb in one evening's liturgy, however lengthy. Do we believe this stuff? These outrageous promises? Was the earth really made in seven days? Can a sea really part to save a band of fleeing Israelite slaves? Can scattered bones be knit back together? Did Jesus rise from the dead? Does death truly have no dominion?

Well, let's think for just a moment about our own lives. Have you ever had a prayer answered by God? In your lifetime, have you witnessed anything that might be a sign of one of God's promises fulfilled? Have you ever seen a wrong righted – a moment where justice triumphed in some large or small way? Have you ever seen hope, irrational, unreasonable, wild hope prevail over fear? Have you ever felt freed from the clutches of some addiction or bad habit, from the bondage of an unhealthy relationship? Could any of these moments, or so many others, be evidence of God's loving, saving action in the world?

Maybe. And let's think for a moment more. If every person caught up in the story of God's creation and salvation – if everyone from Adam and Eve through Moses and Abraham and Isaiah and Ezekiel and Zephaniah, everyone through Mary and Joseph and the Baptizer and Paul, everyone through Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela – and not only these famous messengers of God's hope for the world – but every single person, however obscure, has had one prayer answered, one promise fulfilled, then – what? If every last person in the history of God's time has had one prayer answered, one promise fulfilled, then, can we believe what we've heard about God's promises fulfilled? Do all those answered prayers add up to something that transcends fear?

And if so, then perhaps we can believe, as the women came to believe, what the young man said to them. *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.*

Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen