



First United Church of Oak Park

Gentle as the Dawn

Mark 16

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They had to hurry to bury him, the women who were there at the last. They had to hurry to bury Jesus because everything was shutting down. The Passover and the Sabbath and the public execution had all come together in a perfect storm and now everything was shutting down and it would be unwise — not to mention illegal — to be out on the streets.

Mary Magdalene and Salome and Mary who named her son Joses had only partially completed the burial rite by the time the shutdown came. They hadn't even bought the burial spices — they didn't have time. So Jesus' body had not been anointed the way it should have been. They had to wait a day that would have felt like a week before they could make it to market to buy the spices. And then they would have to wait again through a dark night until the dawn before they could return to the tomb. Their lives and their grief were interrupted and ad-hoc, made up on the fly under the worst of circumstances.

And so they found themselves days after Jesus' death returning to the tomb to finally complete the burial. What they couldn't figure out, what they had worried about ever since they had left the tomb, was how they would roll the stone away. It was large and heavy, much easier to roll in front of a tomb than to roll it away to open it again. But when they reached the tomb, the stone was already rolled back. The question of how to roll the stone away — this problem they had worried over and made plans to solve —

was suddenly meaningless in the face of a much more daunting question. Why was the tomb open? Who had done this?

And inside, a place they had expected to be filled with death, instead there was some living person.

Some youth waiting, it seems, waiting for them. And this strange young person spoke to the women, words that could not be understood and could also never be forgotten. “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place you laid him. But go, tell the rest of the disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. Just as he told you.”

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.

And that is where the gospel ends — the oldest manuscripts of the oldest gospel ends with those words. With terror and amazement, the first people to hear the good news said nothing to anyone. Literally, the last word of the gospel is afraid.

What kind of ending is that? Who can understand this? They hear the good news of life triumphant, and their reaction is fear. Their action is to be silent and wait for a season. Clearly they told people eventually because we are reading the story. Clearly they told people eventually, but what is not clear is how long they waited. Hours? Days? Weeks? Months?

For a strange, long season, life had triumphed over death, and yet people were too afraid to believe it, too afraid to tell anyone, too afraid to go to Galilee, back to where all this had begun, too afraid to go back to anything like what life had been like before.

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. Who can understand this?

I understand it — I do. These women had just come face to face with the power of death, seen the power of death upend their world, been forced to sit in suspended time for days that stretched out like an infant's wail, and then suddenly like that — they are supposed to be able to celebrate? Go back to how things were?

I understand why they could not jump back into life. I understand why the light of the gospel came — not like a firecracker — but more like a sunrise.

The light of the gospel came slowly, painting the corners of the sky in gentle hues. Slower than a firecracker, but with light enough for the whole world. The light of the gospel came slowly because those who were so recently acquainted with the power of death needed time to let their eyes adjust, to let their spirits mend, to let the idea of good news sink in to minds that expect nothing but bad news. “And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” I understand it. I do.

When I hear news that cases have peaked in hard-hit parts of the world, or that the lockdown in Wuhan is finally able to be lifted, that is good news, the light of life returning. I should be happy about that. But deep in my gut, I feel terror and amazement. I have just begun to acclimate myself to this new and terrible reality; I have just begun to feel as if I know what to expect every day.

To think that everything might change again, that life might begin again? The bad news of the day is frightening. Good news fills me with terror and amazement. I understand why the women at the tomb stayed silent for a season.

I believe that the world shall move past this virus. I believe that we will return not to exactly what was before but maybe something a bit more merciful and just. I believe life will be triumphant. But I am not ready for that yet. I have to sit for this strange season not yet ready for life to be triumphant, having so recently seen what terrible power death has I have to sit in an in-between place, where the good news has begun to spread through the world, but I cannot yet celebrate it.

My eyes have grown accustomed to the dark. I am not ready for firecrackers. But I am ready for the dawn. I am ready to sit beside Mary Magdalene, and Salome, and Mary who named her son Jesus. I am ready to watch with these faithful women as the light of life paints the corners of the sky in gentle hues. I am ready to watch with you, this dawn of life. Slower than a firecracker, but with light enough for the whole world.