



First United Church of Oak Park

Imago Dei (Made in the Image of God)

Mark 16: 1-8

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The three women headed through the streets of Jerusalem toward the tomb alone, early in the morning. The Passover Festival was finished. The city was emptying out, the thousands upon thousands who had crowded in now departing, leaving behind detritus blowing through strangely empty streets. Instead of the order and rigor of great crowds all moving as one, the city had that unwholesome kind of emptiness, the kind of emptiness that there must have been before God began creating the world. Nothingness and chaos.

Not a neutral kind of tranquil expanse, but a kind of empty, hollow void that was the absence of what is good. The kind of open expanse that feels like to enter into it would be to enter into danger, to be exposed amid the nothing to an unseen but hungry presence. An unwholesome kind of void, the chaotic kind of nothing that there must have been before God began creating the world.

The three women headed through the empty streets of Jerusalem toward the tomb alone, early in the morning. After Jesus' death, his burial had been so hurried, so much had been left out, left unsaid, left in silence. So the women were there to fill up that empty place, to lovingly anoint Jesus' dead body with spices, to say the final words. That is what they were there to do.

But when they arrived at the tomb, the stone that sealed the tomb was rolled away; the tomb stood wide open, in fact, the dawn sunlight streaming in. And before they could think, before they could imagine what had happened, their feet had swept them inside to see what this meant — and they did not find what they had thought to find, but it was a stranger speaking words to them: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised, he is not here." They had thought the place would be empty; instead there was someone there — a young person all in white. They thought the place would be silent; instead they were the first to hear spoken aloud the good news, and these women would be the ones to carry it out of that tomb and into the whole world. They thought they would find a place that was the active absence of what had been good; instead they stood on a site that was as holy as if all of creation had

taken place right there, as if the goodness of the new world was concentrated in one small stone room.

“You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised, he is not here.”

And they fled, for terror and amazement had seized them, and told no one. Now the very next breath of the gospel says that these women told the good news to the twelve, and thus began the spread of the sacred and imperishable truth of the gospel from East to West. But for a time they were too afraid and amazed to do anything. Their terror did not stop the good news, of course, nor was the amazement of the good news so fragile that a moment's hesitation and it was lost. But for a time, right after they heard the good news, for a time their reaction was fear and amazement and not wanting to tell anyone about it. I am so glad for the Gospel of Mark, for being alone among the Gospels to talk about this time of fear and amazement before the good news spread from east to west. I am so glad for the Gospel of Mark, because I don't feel so alone.

Because this is where I am, right now, even today. In between here and there. This Easter morning finds me like these three women in the tomb — with so much good news swirling around that it has left me filled with terror and amazement.

A year ago, the world was just beginning to tighten itself down to protect itself from the force of this dread virus. Its workings, its spread, still being figured out. Humankind was just beginning the crucial project of bringing to bear the vast power of human scientific ingenuity. Every scientific stream of research even loosely connected to this problem immediately halted whatever they were working on and turned themselves over to studying this one virus. This unified and focused effort with a single goal is without precedent in modern times, and perhaps without precedent in all of human history. And the result? Something never before achieved with this speed and scale — synthetic messenger RNA vaccines. These did not exist before, and we have created them. There had been nothing, an emptiness, a vacuum. Not a neutral peaceful expanse but the active absence of what was needed — a void of chaos. There had been nothing, and now there is something and it is good, indeed very good. This is the power of creation. To know what is needed and then to create it because it did not yet exist: This is part of what it means to be made in the image of God, to be capable of creating what had not been before. This vaccine, the fruit of human labor and ingenuity: This flows from the very center of the power of the divine — to create. To create something where there had been nothing. To create hope where there

had been hopelessness. This is the heart of the power of God, this is the root of the power of resurrection

There is, of course, more to be done. This is not fully completed yet, I know. The good news of this new creation — it has not yet spread from east to west, and it needs to. I feel like those three women standing in a tomb in Jerusalem — terror and AMAZEMENT. It seems somehow unnatural, improbable, improper, immodest, to feel an unadulterated hope for a new world sweep through me. I don't know that I can feel that way right now. I have so closely guarded my heart in the past year, allowed hope in only very carefully titrated drop by drop. There is so much good news and it is SO GOOD — terror and AMAZEMENT.

I love this story because terror and amazement in the face of good news does not STOP the good news from being true. Good news does not await our agreement before being good, nor is it so fragile that with a moment's hesitation it is lost. We are in a moment just like those three women in that tomb in Jerusalem. They had heard the good news, but the sacred and imperishable truth had not yet spread from east to west. It needs to, and it will. We are like those women, the first evangelists. The good news has come to pass — it is real! And it is also not yet complete — there is further yet for it to spread.

But merely because it has not finished, does not mean that its beginning is any less holy. The victory has been won, the victory songs are ringing. Hallelujah!