

Mark 16:1-8 Easter Day 2018

Their planning had been significant.

He had been laid in the tomb before the beginning of the Sabbath, before sundown on Good Friday.

There he lay, un-anointed, until the Sabbath was over.

For nothing could be done for him. How frustrating, for these faithful women of action.

In the Hebrew understanding, that work, that they so wanted to do, could not be done on the Sabbath day.

But if the Sabbath stilled their hands, it could not still their minds.

They were planning during those quiet and frightful Sabbath hours.

And as soon as the Sabbath was over, they bought spices.

I guess the market for such things reopened when the sun went down on Saturday.

So they bought what they needed, did whatever grinding and blending might have been needed Saturday night.

A pinch of myrrh, a tablespoon of olive oil,

and went to bed, with a plan, their sandals by the door, a lantern ready to light.

These were earnest, committed people, willing to rise early.

As they walked, they considered the problem they could not solve in advance, the next problem, the great stone,

A flat, circular stone, one that rolled in a groove cut into surrounding rock.

I should have asked my brother to come, one said.

It would roll in that groove, like a primitive sliding glass door, but it might be hard to roll.

They might have to rock it back and forth, like a car stuck in snow, to build momentum, to get it moving.

Could they? Would they need a man to help?

They had knocked everything else off the list they made as they waited, but knew not how they would accomplish this final task.

But then they arrived to find a different world entirely.

A world not of human initiative but divine power.

A new creation, in which their activity would matter less and the work of God more.

They didn't need a strong young man.

Their checked-off list fell from their hands when they saw the stone rolled away.

What they had planned and executed,

what they could do for Jesus,

for his dead body, was suddenly superfluous.

And in response, they fled from the tomb,

seized by terror and amazement, and said nothing, for they were afraid.

It seems pretty clear that their fear was what any of us would experience when a dead person proved no longer to be dead.

That is not a thing that happens.
Zombies and other frightful things come to mind.
Being addressed by an angel was also unsettling.
They had every right to be afraid, and the text tells us why.
But I wonder if another, subconscious reason for their fear in this text is
that terrible reality of our superfluity,
of the way that the grace of God upends many of our ways of
understanding ourselves and the human project.
Grace, if you think about it, is a threat.

We are people who get stuff done!
We prepare the night before for what must be accomplished, lay out our clothes, put our book
bag by the door.
We set reminders on our phones, are guided by calendars, make lists so we don't forget.
And we are told, in so many ways, that the future depends on us.
On how hard we study, the grades we make, our accomplishments at the office.
And we hold on desperately to our competence,
fighting our adult children for our keys,
our right to live on at home,
the control of the checkbook.
And that is all quite natural.
We do what these women did, making the most of our capacity, which is great.
We sense problems and we do what we can to fix them, to respond.

The Easter message is that God had already acted, graciously, gracefully, with mighty power.
God's supernatural power has relegated our natural efforts to a decidedly secondary role.
Imagine an accountant who arrives at the office early this time of year and finds all the returns
already filed.
Or a cook, planning a morning of peeling, chopping, and prepping,
before an afternoon standing over the stove,
turning the light on in the kitchen to find a feast already simmering.
Or any exhausted person,
sure that he is only as beloved as he is useful,
discovering that he is loved simply because he is.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the final reminder,
God's insistent underlining of his grace,
a final proclamation that life and death, which means all things,
are in the hands of God, the God who is love,
who will not let death have us,
not the death of the grave,
and not the death of our exhausting self-focus,

our bizarre imagining that our effort is all that counts.

If I could leave you with something today, it would be this,
a real sense that you and your life are measurably different,
because of the Resurrection.

Like an exclamation point at the end of the Bible,
the Resurrection should get your attention and leave you
with a different sense of all that has been and will be.

You are a beloved bit player in a divine drama that God has written and is directing.

A force utterly beyond your control,

beyond your lists, plans, and work,

and vastly more powerful than any of them, is guiding all things to a good end.

That force is the love of God and that end is life, the resurrected life of Christ, who is the Lord.