

March 31, 2024
Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Look, Go, and Tell”

“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.”

I have many wonderful memories of the times my family gathered at Pleasant View Farms, the Laustsen family farm in New Market, New Jersey. The farm had been in the family since they moved east from Minnesota in 1924; it was here that my grandparents raised their eight children and worked this small, but profitable, piece of land for many years. When my grandparents decided to retire, they built a small house on the property and turned the farm over to my Uncle Mel. Together, my grandparents and uncle would host the family for many gatherings: family picnics, birthday celebrations, Confirmation parties, and gatherings for no reason other than getting the family together to enjoy one another’s company.

The trip to Pleasant View Farms was often as memorable as our times on the property. The drive took us past a steel mill, a large cemetery, fields of flowers, and several farms of my family’s neighbours. The trip also took us across a railroad crossing that had no gate or warning lights; all that was present was a sign warning motorists to “stop, look, and listen.” I remember my parents slowing our car to a stop, rolling down the windows, looking carefully in both directions, and then proceeding carefully over the train tracks. Failure to heed this warning could be disastrous (and indeed, there were more than a few fatal accidents at this crossing). It was vital for travelers to pay attention to these instructions if they were going to be able to successfully navigate this crossing and enjoy what was awaiting them at their destination.

While this railroad crossing was an expected part of our journey to Pleasant View Farms, the women who come to the tomb where Jesus had been buried on Good Friday did not know what would be ahead for them. Mark tells us that “*when the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.*” (Mark 16:1). Although Jesus had been anointed in Bethany by a woman who had brought “*an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head*” (14:3), Joseph of Arimathea did not anoint the body prior to burying it; he merely “*wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of*

the rock” (15:46). Mark’s account of Jesus’ burial ends with his report that “*Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid*” (15:47). Because preparation of a body for burial was not possible on the sabbath, the earliest the women would return to the tomb to complete these burial rituals would be early on Sunday morning; and so “*very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb*” (16:2). By bringing spices to anoint Jesus’ dead body, these women seek to perform one last service to him; “*for their part, the women are expecting to care for his decomposing body with the spices they carry to the tomb.*” (Audrey West). Since they had witnessed Joseph sealing the tomb with a large stone, they wondered “*who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?*” (16:3). But to their surprise, when they arrive, they discover that “*the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back*” (16:4). It is at this point that the story of that morning takes an even more unusual turn: When the women entered the tomb, “*they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.*” (16:5). While the figure in the tomb is only identified as a “young man,” both his appearance and the reaction of the women indicate that this is an angelic figure. In the Transfiguration of Jesus, shining white garments designate a heavenly being (“... *his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them*” – 9:3), and the appearance of angels is often met with alarm or terror by those who experience their presence (“*Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*” – Luke 2:9). The angelic being acknowledges this reaction when he encourages the women to “*not be alarmed,*” a typical statement of reassurance for those who are suddenly confronted with an *angelophany*, the appearance of a heavenly being. The angel makes a concrete identification of the person being sought (“*you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified*”), which lets the reader know that the women who had witnessed Jesus’ burial had returned to the correct tomb. The angel then proclaims the message which is at the heart of the Easter Gospel: “*He has been raised; he is not here.*” (16:6). The passion predictions of Jesus and his promise to go before his disciples to Galilee have led the reader of Mark’s Gospel to assume that the story cannot end with the death and burial of Jesus. The passion predictions include the notice that Jesus will rise from the dead three days after his death, which would be precisely this morning when the women find themselves in the presence of an angelic being in an empty tomb:

- “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” – 8:31.
- “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee” – 14:28.

The angel's message that *"he has been raised; he is not here"* brings a dramatic reversal to a tragic narrative which had seemed to end in the abandonment and death of the Son of God. But now that seeming tragedy is stood on its head; the angel's first instruction to the women is to *"look, here is the place where they laid him."* While the emptiness of the tomb would not initially lead to the conclusion that Jesus had been raised, for the women who had witnessed his burial in this place it was a sign of what would be a part of the proclamation of the early church that *"he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures"* (1 Corinthians 15:4). The women who had expected to find Jesus in the place where he had been buried now realize that they are looking in the wrong place, for *"to see Jesus the women and the disciples must look ahead"* (Lamar Williamson, Jr.).

Once they have seen and confirmed that the body of Jesus is not present in the tomb, they receive further instructions from the angel: *"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"* (16:7). The falling away of the disciples and the denial of Peter are not the end of God's plan for them. In the angel's command lies *"a promise of forgiveness and restitution, of a renewed call and a fresh start for disciples chastened by failure and empowered by the resurrection"* (Williamson). The reference to Peter contains a note of promise for this apostle who had denied knowing Jesus: despite his failure to stand with Jesus in his hour, he will be reunited with his Lord. According to Paul, Peter was the first disciple to see the risen Lord: *"he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve"* (1 Corinthians 15:5) and would go on to play a major role in the proclamation of the Gospel and the growth of the Christian faith. The women are also told to remind the disciples of his promise that he would go before them to Galilee after his resurrection. *"There you will see him"* suggests a resurrection appearance in which the disciples are commissioned to undertake the mission for which Jesus had prepared them. By following Jesus back to Galilee, the disciples will begin their mission where Jesus had begun his (*"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'"* (1:14-15).

- "When the women go to the tomb, they expect to encounter death. Instead, the angel's message sends them to the other disciples and back to Galilee, the place where they experienced fullness of life within Jesus' ministry ... The place they will see Jesus is in the fulfillment of his promises, and in the paradox and mysteries of his Galilean ministry." – West.

Mark's account of the empty tomb and the angelic proclamation ends on a strange note: "*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.*" (16:8). What might be expected in this account is the "terror and amazement" that had seized the women, reminding us that they had experienced a divine revelation (*[Peter] did not know what to say, for they were terrified.*" – 9:6). What is not expected is the abrupt ending of this account (in the original language, the last sentence ends on the words that is translated "for"). This has led many to speculate that the rest of the story may have been lost, especially since the risen Lord Jesus never appears to the women as he does in other accounts of the Resurrection (*"Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.*" – Matthew 28:9). Most Bibles include other endings for Mark, including one that reports that "*after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons.*" (16:9). But most biblical scholars believe that these were later additions to this Gospel and that Mark's original ending is indeed at 16:8; even though Jesus may be absent from this story, he has not abandoned his followers – "*he is 'ahead of them' and ahead of us.*" (West).

- "Mark's ending reminds Christians that resurrection is exaltation to God's glory, not another event in a sequence of events that we catalogue as history. The women's response also brings readers face to face with the mystery of faith. There are no heroes among Jesus' followers. The hostility that put Jesus on the cross has reduced them all to flight and fearful silence. Nevertheless, God brings faith out of just such weakness and failure. Jesus did not need to come once again and choose a new team in some grand lottery for better disciples. Despite all the appearances, Jesus did accomplish the will of God through suffering on the cross. However imperfect our faith and however many times we remain silent when we should testify to the gospel, we can always return to the Lord. None of us can get so far away from Jesus that we cannot be touched by God's healing presence." – PHEME PERKINS.

The fact that the risen Lord is not present in this account of the Easter Gospel does not mean that Mark's version is incomplete and should therefore be ignored in favour of other accounts where our Lord is present after his resurrection. We know that even though the women were filled with "terror and amazement" that they still got the message to the disciples, who would have met Jesus in Galilee as our Lord had promised. Even though there are no stories about our risen Lord's teachings to his disciples and his commissioning them to "*be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*" (Acts 1:8), we know that their apostolic witness did take place because the message of Christ's resurrection went far beyond

the empty tomb to all of the corners of the earth as the Church that would bear witness to Christ's death and resurrection shared the good news at the heart of our faith that *"in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."* (1 Corinthians 15:20). We know that our faith is rooted in the good news of Christ's death and resurrection, that *"if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his"* (Romans 6:5). We gather on this Easter Sunday – and on every Sunday – to lift our voices in the good news that *"Jesus Christ is risen today ... our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!"* We are like those women who leave the tomb without seeing the risen Lord Jesus, and yet we believe that he is risen from the dead; as Jesus said to Thomas, we are among those who are blessed because *"we have not seen and yet have come to believe"* (John 20:29). We believe because of the witness of the apostles and the Church that continues its mission as the *"one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church"* in continuing to proclaim the message first spoken by the apostle Peter that *"although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls"* (1 Peter 1:8-9).

- "Jesus has been raised. And as the angelic messenger tells the women this, he explicitly mentions the crucifixion. Jesus 'who was crucified' by the authorities 'has been raised' by God. The meaning is that God has said 'yes' to Jesus and 'no' to the powers who killed him. God has vindicated Jesus, [and] his followers are promised: 'You will see him.'" – Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan.

In Mark, things always occur "as he told you." This includes the finding of the colt and the upper room in his account of Palm Sunday (11:1-11), the betrayal of Judas (14:18), the denial of Peter (14:30), and the flight of all the disciples (14:27). In proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus, the angel announces to the women that his disciples and Peter will see him in Galilee, *"just as he told you"* (16:7).

- "He is going before you ... there you will see him.' This possibility and this promise makes of Mark the Gospel of expectations still unfulfilled and of a future beyond our control. It inspired in the women trembling, awe, and ecstatic dread. It still has the same impact on whoever has ears to hear." – Williamson.

The message of the angel and his command to the women are still the message and command for all who hear the Easter gospel and believe the good news that *"Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!"* It is the command that calls us first to "look" at the empty tomb where the body of Jesus had been laid as the evidence that by his death Jesus destroyed the power of death, that as the tomb was not the

end of Jesus' story neither is death the end of the story for all who are baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. As Christ rose from the dead on his Easter Day, we too shall walk in newness of life as our Lord gathers us into our heavenly home where *"death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away"* (Revelation 21:4). We are then called to "go," to share this message with others as the women would share this news with the disciples who as apostles would be "sent forth" to proclaim this glorious message to all people in fulfillment of the third command to "tell" the message of our faith in our crucified and risen Lord:

- "He is not here; he is risen as he said; he goes before you; spread the good news' do not be afraid. You have nothing to fear.' That is the first, and that is the only message of Easter: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and is not to be found where the dead are. He told us this, and it is so. He is out there ahead of us, and our job is to spread the good news that he lives; and, by the way, relax, stop worrying, stop thinking that it all depends on you. It has been accomplished. It has been done." – Peter Gomes.

Whenever we traveled to the Laustsen family farm in New Market for another wonderful family gathering, it was important for us to heed the warning at the railroad crossing to "stop, look, and listen," so that we might safely navigate that dangerous crossing to the place where we were welcomed and loved. As we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ on his Easter Day, may we heed the command of the angel to "look, go, and tell," so that all may come safely through whatever dangers and ordeals they might encounter so that they might come into the presence of the one who died and rose again so that we might come into the presence of the one who has gone before us, and will one day gather us together into the place we will be welcomed and loved by the one who died and rose again so that nothing can or will separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus, our crucified and risen Lord.

Amen.