

Easter 1B 2021 Mark 16:1-8

I had a doctor's appointment in Hershey last Monday so I spent a couple hours driving back and forth on the turnpike, where it has become popular for certain Christian groups to proselytize by billboard. Most of them try to motivate by fear, threats, and coercion, so I'm pretty sure they do more to drive people away from Christianity than draw people into a relationship with the God whose love was made manifest in Christ, but I still read them for the same reason it's hard to look away from a train wreck. The advertisement that particularly caught my eye this time claimed that the Bible provided "undeniable proof" . . . proof of what, it didn't say. But I've been chewing on the thick irony of "undeniable proof" during this Holy Week. I can't think of any worse way to describe the story of the resurrection than claiming that "undeniable proof" of it exists. Today is about the very opposite of undeniable proof.

When we tell the story of Jesus' passion there's frequently some mention of how all of Jesus' friends and disciples betrayed, denied, and abandoned him, but that's only true if we ignore the women, which, of course, history often has. The women stayed with Jesus; they watched his crucifixion and saw exactly where his body was laid; the "undeniable proof" that they witnessed was that Jesus was dead and buried. Then those same women—identified here again as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome—return to the tomb after the sabbath with the intention of performing a last act of love, anointing Jesus' body. They anticipate a problem: they have seen the stone that sealed the tomb and will need someone to roll it away for them. But when they arrive, they see the stone has already been rolled back. In the tomb they do not find Jesus but a messenger who tells them that Jesus has been raised and is not there. The man in white instructs them to tell Peter and the other disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. The women flee, amazed and terrified, and they say nothing to anyone.

That first Easter morning was not about "undeniable proof" of Jesus' resurrection but about what happens when "undeniable proof" is confounded. The women saw Jesus die; they saw his body buried in the tomb. That was the proof they saw with their own eyes. That Jesus' body is missing isn't proof that he's alive; common sense would suggest that someone had simply moved the body. The stranger's claim that Jesus was raised and was on his way to Galilee isn't proof—it's an unbelievable story. After 2000 years, we say, "Well, of course Jesus was raised from the dead on Easter" the same way that we say "the sky is blue" or "dark chocolate bunnies are better than milk chocolate eggs" . . . and we forget that the claim of Jesus'

resurrection goes against everything we know about the way the world works—it violates the “undeniable proof” of life and death.

The women who heard this claim for the very first time respond in the only way that makes sense: they run away in terror and say nothing to anyone. After all, the women had just watched the religious authorities and the government collude to execute an innocent man; would you want to be the one to start telling people that he wasn't really dead? Jesus warned his followers that they, too, would have to take up their own crosses and follow him. These days we tend to read that metaphorically, but many of Jesus' first disciples were crucified or otherwise martyred for their faith. The women may have been amazed at the messenger's good news, but the implications for sharing it were terrifying—probably even more so because they were women who would have been even less likely to be believed if they made this outrageous claim. So Mark ends his gospel by saying, “they were afraid.”

That's not a very satisfying ending. If you read this passage not in this morning's bulletin but in your actual bible, you'll see a few alternate endings, but according to the oldest manuscripts of Mark's gospel, this is where the original text stopped. It's human nature to want to know more, to have a neat and tidy ending, “undeniable proof” as it were. So a few enterprising scribes tried their hand at creating more palatable endings. But Mark wanted us to wrestle with this ambiguous cliffhanger: a missing body, a message of resurrection, and the most loyal of Jesus' followers being asked to deny what they had seen, what they knew to be true, the “undeniable proof” that Jesus was dead.

Easter faith is not about finding undeniable proof of the resurrection. No faith is about proof; faith is what happens when there *isn't* any proof. Faith is living out our trust in what we *can't* see. When we have no reason to hope; when all the evidence points to death, defeat, and destruction; when the “undeniable proof” tells us that whatever it is can't be helped, rescued, or restored...and yet...we still wait and watch and pray for renewal, rebirth, and new life...that is what an Easter faith looks like. This broken world we live in and the human institutions to which we belong will always prove, undeniably, that sin and death win the day; the resurrection invites us to live in hope and love anyway, in spite of all evidence to the contrary. And that should both amaze and terrify us; it's wonderful when we can find hope even in the deepest despair, but it's scary when it seems too good to be true. Without proof, we're left to leap in faith. But if we can face chaos, evil, and undeniable death, yet still trust God to bring about new life, that's not the end, but only the beginning, of what we might trust God to do with us.