

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Easter Sunday, 4/4/2021, Mark 16:1-8 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

Before they got to the tomb, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome asked each other “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. They were caught up in their concern about the stone which turned out to be an irrelevant question because Jesus was already up and out of there.

I love paintings and drawings that show Jesus' tomb from the inside with the stone rolled away. Have you ever seen any of those? Usually the tomb is dark and gray, sometimes with wrappings lying around, and then what we can see of the world coming through the entrance to the tomb is full of light. Sometimes artists show signs of spring like flowering trees.

I'm sure you all know that saying “A picture is worth a thousand words.” As a writer I detest that cliché, but in the case of the resurrection, I confess that I remember more visuals of the view from the empty tomb than I can recall sermons about the resurrection.

Mark's gospel, the gospel we are focusing on this year, is much shorter than the other gospels. Mark ends his story of the resurrection with fear: “terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” I wonder if Mark's words paint a more accurate picture of the resurrection for us than the other, more wordy gospels, or even than a picture could do, because Mark ends with uncertainty.

Words and pictures are insufficient when it comes to this central tenet of our Christian faith. When I was an associate rector, the rector always got to preach on Easter Sunday, and I jealously longed to preach about this core event of Christianity. But as soon as I was the rector, I realized that attempting to preach on the resurrection is absurd. What can any preacher possibly add?

Later versions of Mark's gospel, apparently dissatisfied with the uncertain ending, added to the story. Ending the entire book where we did today—“and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid”—must not have seemed inspiring, so later editions included mentions of various appearances, as well as Jesus saying that those who believe can handle snakes and other tricks; and then Jesus is lifted into heaven and seated on the right hand of God. I'm not into the snake-handling part but reciting the part about Jesus being seated at the right hand of the father in the Nicene Creed has cemented it into my consciousness.

Still, there's something about today's shorter ending of Mark, just like there's something about those paintings of the inside of the tomb looking out into the dazzling light. I've noticed that I love paintings and photographs that have some sort of obstruction—that is, that don't show the whole picture. Andrew Wyeth, for example, painting many scenes through windows. And of course, instead of a painting of a beautiful spring day, I love the paintings that show the inside of Jesus' tomb show mostly stone walls, not a gorgeous morning landscape. The view of the lovely lit landscape is obstructed by the walls of the tomb. We can't see the whole thing.

Our understanding of the resurrection is obstructed by our limited understandings. None of the Gospels offers a full picture. Each Gospel gives us a different glimpse. Same with sermons. This

is my eleventh Easter at St. David's and I can't remember anything specific that I have preached about Easter in all those years, because my feeble words can't add a thing.

Easter can also be obstructed for us personally by what is going on in our lives at the time. One year my father was dying on Easter Sunday, which made it hard for me to focus on the glory of the resurrection. Still, something of the joyful mystery crept in, even though I was almost fighting against it. I remember singing the Gloria at the Great Vigil of Easter that year, seconds after I said the first alleluia since February. The Gloria brought tears to my eyes that year, even though I was trying to keep my emotions in check while leading services. Now I haven't experienced a congregational singing of the Gloria in more than a year. I can't imagine what it will be like when we are able to do that again in this space. Even so, it's only a small, tiny piece of the glory.

When the women walked to the tomb that first Easter morning, they didn't know that it was Easter. They were going to finish up a duty that had been interrupted by the sabbath. They had a bunch of spices that they were taking to anoint Jesus. They intended to unwrap his body, rub it with oil and spices, and wrap it back up. They were going to weep and talk as they did this. They would remember his teachings and tell funny stories. It was going to be a hard day, and before it started, they were asking each other who was going to roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb so they could get started.

Then that obstruction wasn't there. They had been asking the wrong question. The body they had planned to anoint wasn't there. A miracle to surpass all miracles had taken place, and they fled in terror and amazement.

Are you asking any of the wrong questions this Easter? What is obstructing your view of the resurrection?