

Dry Bones Rattling: Onward and Upward

September 26, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Mark 16:1-8

Well, friends, today we are wrapping up our “Dry Bones Rattling” sermon series, and I have to admit that I am a little bit sad about that. There is a little tiny piece of me that kinda wishes this series would go on longer. Because, to be perfectly honest, I have personally been needing to spend time in these stories of hope and resurrection.

It seems like for the last year and a half at least, and probably even longer, we have been so inundated with so much bad news. The pandemic has sort-of pounded the bad news into us so that that is what we have been living and breathing, but it’s not been just the pandemic. World events happening recently; the ever-increasing dividedness of our country; natural disasters; school shootings (the rash of school shootings really hit home for the first time for me a few weeks ago when I heard reports of a shooting back in Albuquerque where I used to live, at a high school where one of my close friends has a son attending. Evidently, a kid from the school and a kid from another high school got into a gun fight during their lunch period. By the grace of God, nobody was killed and the only person injured was one of these two boys – who was shot three times. But this was less than a month after a fatal shooting at a middle school in the same city.)

And so for the last several weeks we have been asking the question: When the news is not good; when the bad news seems overwhelming; when we find ourselves wishing we could go back to a day when things seemed simpler; when our path forward is unclear and perilous – then what? In the words of the Psalmist, “where does my help come from?”

And as we have been dipping our toes into story after story after story, we have seen a common theme emerging: We have a God who is all about restoration and hope in the face of darkness and uncertainty. That no matter what God’s people are facing – whether they are living in exile and grieving the loss of their homes and livelihoods – as in the story of Ezekiel; whether they are getting ready to take a long and dangerous journey as they were in the Psalms; whether they are trying to make sense of the rapidly-changing and seemingly nonsensical world around them as in the parable of the wineskins, or struggling with the loss of a loved one as in the story of the raising of Lazarus, in every single instance God meets the people where they are and gives them a path forward.

So today, we are concluding this series as we explore what is, at least in my opinion, the greatest “hope” story of all time – *the* story that makes us who we are as followers of Christ. The story that our entire faith hinges on. The story that all of our other stories up until now point to. And that is the story of the resurrection.

It's the story that we hear every Easter. And most years, we only hear this story on Easter Sunday. Although, it seems like this year God has been bringing us back to this story over, and over, and over, and over again. Because I'm pretty sure that this is the *fourth* time, *this year*, that I've preached on the resurrection. I promise you, that I do know there are other stories in the Bible. But it does seem to me that maybe God is trying to tell us something, in inviting us to revisit this story, yet again.

So, the story of the resurrection is a familiar one. Although, I am willing to bet that Mark's telling of the resurrection story is not the one most of us usually turn to. It's the shortest version of this story, and it is missing a lot of the details that the other gospel writers tell us about.

So, Jesus has been crucified, and he has been laid in the tomb, and the tomb has been sealed. A big stone has been rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb, to prevent people from going in, but mostly – as we saw last week in the story of Lazarus – the stone was there to keep the stench of death from wafting outward from the tomb. Ordinarily, when someone had died, the body would have been anointed with burial spices and oils before the tomb was sealed. But in Jesus's case, time was of the essence. They needed to get Jesus's body down off the cross before the Roman authorities did it for them, but the Sabbath was coming. And they weren't allowed to touch a dead body on the Sabbath. So they had time to get the body into the tomb, but they didn't have time to anoint the body for burial – so that would have to wait until after the Sabbath.

So once the Sabbath was over, Mark tells us that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome (another woman who some scholars think was maybe Jesus's aunt – Mary's sister) went to the tomb once the sun came up to anoint the body.

Other gospels tell us that the women got up early and went to the tomb while it was still dark. But in Mark's gospel we don't have the same kind of "urgency" here. The other gospels are just kind-of brimming with anticipation, but not Mark. In Mark's gospel, this day began pretty much like any other day. The women got up at their usual time, then made their way down to the tomb to do what needed to be done. And their conversation was...normal. Practical. Matter-of-fact. "Who's going to roll the stone away for us once we get there?" Basically, the first-century version of "can we call someone with the keys to let us in?"

But lo and behold, when they get to the tomb, it was already unlocked. There was no earthquake; no angels sitting on top of the stone; no guards stationed outside who shook violently at the appearance of angels...none of that. The only thing that seemed out of the ordinary was that the stone had already been rolled aside, as if somebody expected them to come. And when they went inside they discovered something odd. The body was not there. But a young man was. A young man, dressed in a white robe, who told them that Jesus had risen and had gone ahead of them to Galilee.

“Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him,” the man told the women.

So, this is interesting. A little detail that we don't get in any of the other gospels. “Go, tell his disciples *and Peter*. Huh?

- It's almost like Mark is saying that Peter is no longer one of the disciples.
- Peter, who had stood alongside James and John as one of the three closest friends who Jesus had – the innermost circle of the inner circle.
- Peter, who boldly declared when no one else would that Jesus was the Messiah.
- Peter, who had stood up on the Mount of Transfiguration and witnessed Jesus glowing dazzling white and talking with Moses and Elijah.
- Peter, who had pledged to follow Jesus to the grave.

Peter, who had just denied ever having known Jesus not once, not twice, but three times. Peter, who had let his fear get in the way of his commitment to follow. Peter, who is feeling so guilty that he no longer considers himself worthy of being a disciple. Peter, who has written himself off. Who can't bear to show his face among those who he once considered friends. Who would rather curl up into a little ball and never be seen again than face up to what he had said and done.

“Go, tell the disciples *and Peter*.”

In other words, this good news is not just for those who never fell away. It's not just for those who stay resolved in their commitment to Jesus. It's not just for those who consider themselves disciples. This good news is also for the deniers and the deserters. It is for those who live their lives mired down in guilt. It is for those who don't feel good enough. It is for all of us knuckleheads who royally screw things up. Who say things we don't mean, who do things we regret, who fumble the ball of life over and over and over again.

So then, this story takes another kind of weird and unexpected turn. In the other gospels, this is the point where the women kind-of become the heroes of the story. They become the very first evangelists; some might even say the very first preachers when they run off and proclaim the good news of Christ's resurrection to everyone who is willing to listen.

But not in Mark's gospel. In our reading today, we hear that even though the women have been told to “go and tell,” they instead “fled from the tomb and told no one,” because they were terrified.

And then, if you are following along in your Bible, this next part is maybe going to seem a little confusing. You might see a bunch of footnotes here after verse 8, and maybe some things about shorter and longer endings, and a bunch of brackets and italics and other weird things.

So we think that originally, this is where Mark's gospel ended. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts end here. Jesus has risen; God has proclaimed and demonstrated his powerful love and good news not just for those who are faithful but also for those who mess it all up, the man dressed in white (presumably an angel in disguise) sends the women ahead to announce this good news, and instead, they run away because they are afraid. The end.

It's not really a very satisfying ending, is it? It's like...what? Where's the rest of the story? It can't end here! This is the most powerful good news imaginable! The world is about to change...forever! And...they just drop the ball? Stick their heads in the sand? Because they are scared?

Well, it turns out that later writers and editors, who were responsible for copying the manuscripts and passing them down through the ages didn't like this abrupt ending either. And so somewhere along the line they added verses 9-20. And in these verses, Mary Magdalene does go and tell the disciples, who don't believe her. And then Jesus appears to the disciples and rebukes them for their lack of belief. He commissions them to go into the world and to proclaim the risen Christ, and then he ascends up into heaven where he sits at the right hand of God. The disciples go into all the world and proclaim the good news. The end.

A much happier ending, there. But let's go back and assume that maybe, this story was *intended* to end after verse 8. If that's the case, then why? What in the world was Mark trying to say?

A couple of things, I think.

Mark has just finished talking about how the good news is not just for the disciples, but also for Peter. Christ has conquered death. Christ has overcome sin. Christ has battled all the forces of darkness in the world, and has won. Christ has died and risen, so that all those who believe and all those who have fallen away might experience the loving and redeeming work of God. God receives those who are faithful, and God forgives and receives those who have messed up.

But that's not all. Christ did not just die and rise again to put back together everything that had been *previously* broken. Jesus did not rise *only* to correct the mistakes of the *past*. Jesus also came to redeem everything that *had yet to* happen. God knew that Christ overcoming sin and death did not mean that nobody would ever sin again, and it did not mean that we would never again experience pain, or suffering, or fear, or brokenness, or darkness. It meant simply that God's redeeming work was big enough to cover it all. Past, present, future...*all of it*. Big enough for the Peters of this world who were mired down with regret, and big enough for the Marys and the Salomes who would witness the power of God on display and instead of following God's call they would flee in terror. Big enough to cover the pain of the past, and big enough to cover the brokenness that is yet to come. Big enough for the messy, complicated world of the

first century, and big enough for the messy, complicated world of the twenty-first century.

I love Mark's telling of the gospel story because it is so real. It doesn't just tie life up into a neat little bow for us that ends with Easter lilies and butterflies and alleluias. It acknowledges that we still sometimes find ourselves walking through a valley of dry bones. Still navigating a difficult path. Still wanting to turn back to the past to escape the reality of the present. Still hunkering down in our dark tombs because sometimes the light into which God calls us can be scary and the journey out of the tomb isn't always easy.

We still live in a world of disease and pandemic; of war and typhoons; of school shootings and online bullying and violence and fear. So much so that even the best of us may find ourselves wishing that we could join the women and flee in terror.

But even though that's where Mark's gospel ends, that is not where God's grace ends. That's not where God's story ends. And in fact, I think Mark left the gospel open-ended as a way to say that the story is never over. God will never stop pursuing us. God will always continue the work of bringing life to the dry bones; hope to the hopeless; strength to the weak; and light into our darkness.