

4/8/2012

“THREE WOMEN IN A CEMETERY”

Mark 16:1-8
(mk16v1aa)

- I. “SO THEY WENT OUT FROM THE TOMB, FOR TERROR AND AMAZEMENT HAD SEIZED THEM; AND THEY SAID NOTHING TO ANYONE, FOR THEY WERE AFRAID.”
 - A. ***This is how the Gospel of Mark ends in some of the oldest manuscripts.***
 1. Methodist pastor Dr. William Willimon says, “I have become quite fond of Mark’s way of treating the resurrection.”
 - a. The three women are told to go and tell; the women stand there in fear, then run away!
 - B. ***The threesome walk into a cemetery early in the morning, long before anyone else in their right mind would think to get out of bed.***
 1. It is a good guess that these ladies agreed to meet on a city street sometime between 4 and 6 AM and walk quietly to the grave site.
 2. It is a longer journey than they had figured. They arrive shortly after the first rays of the sun break through the morning darkness and gave them a bit of warmth.
 3. A trio who have followed Jesus all the way since his early ministry along the seacoast in Galilee,
 - a. Each one of the 3 is wrapped up in her own thoughts, her own anxieties, her own world.
 - b. As they trudge down the quiet pathway, their heads are lowered, staring at the ground in front of them,
 - c. which is indicative of where their faith and their hopes are. [pause]
 4. Mary Magdalene is the most prominent of the Galilean women.
 - a. She has assumed an assertive role.
 - b. A woman of unrestricted financial resources, she has come from the important agricultural, fishing and shipbuilding town of Magdala.
 - c. No other woman has kept up with Jesus like this Mary Magdalene.
 - d. She has contributed generously of her money to support Jesus.
 5. With her are the mothers of several of the disciples: Mary, the mother of James the younger and Joses.
 - a. We know nothing about her, or how these women met.
 6. And thirdly, Salome, whom Matthew identified as the mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee.
 - a. It was Salome who boldly had presumed upon Jesus to ask that her two sons be given the positions of honor in his kingdom.
 7. Now they are just 3 grieving females who were bringing aromatic oils and spices to the cemetery.
 - a. What are they looking for?
 - b. What do they expect to do?
 - c. How do these 3 expect to get past the immense stone blocking the entrance to the cave which isolates their Savior’s lifeless body?
 - C. ***In the words of Dr. CS Mann, in his Anchor Bible commentary, the community for which John Mark wrote his Gospel, on his return to Palestine from Rome after traveling with the apostle Paul, is a church family which is “terror-stricken and tempted to flee.”***
 1. Perhaps some of the Jerusalem Christians have already taken flight and escaped the persecution of the Romans and the Jews.
 2. There is a silence in that post-Easter Jerusalem church like the silence of the women at the grave,
 3. For Mark this silence is unacceptable, even in a time of peril, for John Mark the

- Gospel writer, his Lord and Savior is very much alive!
4. Mark makes no effort to explain this resurrection;
 - a. There is no eyewitness to the miracle of Easter in this short Gospel.
 5. There is simply a young man inside the life-sized grave, who when the ladies enter, says but three words,
 - a. “Stop being afraid.” [pause]

II. FEAR IS A COMMON INGREDIENT THAT SURROUNDS THAT FIRST EASTER.

- A. ***Some of it is a very legitimate emotion which spills over from the horrifying events of the arrest, the agonizing, inhumane crucifixion and the earthquake.***
 1. Then the deeper realization set in with a kind of finality that the one they loved is gone, dead. This is like a knife in the soul!
 2. A line from Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta “Mikado” defines the tragedy of that day: “when love is alive and hope is dead...”
 - a. *Sorry her lot who loves too well,
Heavy the heart that hopes but vainly,
Heavy the sorrow that bows the head
When love is alive and hope is dead.”*

- B. ***There is an agonizing, a heartache, a dread of facing the future alone, any plans and hopes ripped away cruelly & sadistically.***
 1. The 2 Mary’s and Salome probably do not think any further than their Sunday morning visit to the grave.
 - a. They are in a mind-set which wants to survive the day, each day.
 2. A CBS evening news from Los Angeles one Easter season told the sad story of a young man, a native of Southeast Asia who had murdered a California highway patrol officer and the murderer had just been sentenced. There follows an interview with the lovely woman who was the officer’s widow: “In her tears she described how this had happened 4 years ago, right after the couple learned they were pregnant. She said, “He never got to see his son...they talk about closure, but there is never closure with something like this.”
 3. How many years ago was it that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt stood before Congress and said, “In the future days...we look forward to a world founded upon...the freedom from fear...”?
 - a. That was 51 years ago, Jan. 1941, in the predawn to the Second World War! [PAUSE]

- C. ***There is a third kind of apprehension which is a holy fear and trembling.***
 1. How much more reason there is to be afraid when mankind realizes God has stepped down to earth in person, God” has now stepped in and “reversed the whole march of time and history”!
 2. One kind of holy or unholy fear is the fear of all those who wanted and tried to keep Jesus dead and could not. He was a man they could not control.
 - a. But there is also a holy fear which is of the Holy Spirit: a speechless reverence, an overwhelming comprehension that something or someone wonderful and unbelievable has broken through into your world, like an “encounter of the third kind!”
 3. Do you approach Easter in fear and trembling? ... (page 2)
 - a. Maybe you should, if you realize the full impact that the Risen Lord makes upon your life.
 4. Each time someone in a Gospel other than Mark encounters the Christ of Easter in all his dazzling glory and other-worldliness, their reaction is one of terror.
 - a. Jesus says the same thing as the young man inside the grave,

- b. “*Stop being afraid.*” The tense of the verb implies the need to cease immediately.
- c. Along with that Jesus says, “*Peace be with you.*”
- (1) Neither a wish nor a command, but a statement of fact, a pronouncement, the blessing of Easter.
5. Back in 1972. I took a plane flight from Frankfurt, West Germany into Beograd, Yugoslavia. The first thing I saw in the airport was the large red hammer and sickle symbol on the wall! The police strolled around with machine guns. I said to myself, What have I done!?! I wanted to turn around, get back on the German airplane and go back. As I went check point with my suitcase, which also contained some new sharp Chicago knives as gifts for my German friends, the menacing-looking uniformed customs agent just waved me through with a smile: “Welcome to Yugoslavia!”
6. “*Fear knocked on my door;
faith answered; no one was there.
I turned about, hope and peace stood upon my
threshold.*”
6. The Old Testament would have us believe that “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*”
7. For each of the Gospels, on Easter, fear is the necessary precursor for recognizing the gift of salvation, for being eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus.
8. A man named George was accustomed to driving his wife Rosie to church every Sunday. George and Rosie had been married for 40 years and they loved ea other deeply. They did everything together. They were inseparable in practically every area of life—except one. When George drove his wife to church Rosie went in, George stayed in the car reading his newspaper. One day Rosie died, and for many Sundays thereafter George’s car no longer was seen in the church parking lot. Churches members would look longingly at the spot where George was accustomed to park, but his familiar car no longer appeared. ...until one Easter morning, when George unexpectedly showed up and entered the church. The preacher delivered a stirring resurrection sermon and then as was his custom, invited the members of the congregation to respond. At which point George stood up and with deep emotion said firmly, “Rosie lives!” Then he began to sing, “*My wild Irish Rose, the sweetest flower that grows...*” One person joined in, then another and another. Finally everyone was joyfully singing what someone later described as “The most beautiful Easter hymn ever sung in our church.” (4/87 P etc)
9. Willi Marx in his old book on “The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth” (1970) claimed that the Gospel “makes resurrection a great outburst of faith.”
- a. It has to intrude, astonish, we can only come to Easter dawn with a breathless cry, a fearful look, and only then do we receive a command, to “Go, tell!”
10. William Willimon interprets one Richard Lischer’s contemporary book on preaching (“A Theology of Preaching: the Dynamics of the Gospel”):
- a. “I take Lischer’s statement to mean that to be faithful to cross-resurrection, something in our preaching must die, must become silent (Good Friday), must confess despair and give up, and then announce, proclaim something that has come upon us, unexpected, undeserved and even undesired. He is risen! Easter is God’s great rewriting of all human history.”
- b. Resurrection come upon us as “a great outburst of faith.”
- c. Consider the painting by Salvador Dali on the front of your bulletin. It is his conception of Easter, not traditional but shockingly new!

He is focused on the resurrection to express both in his faith and his interest in modern science—the discovery of DNA by Francis Crick and James Watson in 1953. “Life, death and rebirth are represented by the spiral-shaped, life-bearing DNA molecule on the left, the cubic structure consisting of figures with guns in their hands on the right, and the arm of God reaching down to lift the dead Christ up to heaven in the middle, watched by Dali’s wife Gala standing the foreground.”

III. “LIKE THE 3 WOMEN , AND DALI’S PAINTING, WE CAN NEVER GO BACK THE SAME WAY WE HAVE COME” (WILLIMON).

A. **Mark describes the women’s arrival at the cemetery: “when they looked up, they saw that the stone...had been rolled away.”**

1. “When they looked up...”
 - a. Samuel Howard, 1762, wrote his hymn,
“Give to the wind thy fears:
Hope and be undismayed:
God hears thy sights,
God
counts thy tears,
shall lift up thy head.”
 - b. An awareness that we have come onto holy ground, that we are about to be encountered by the presence of a living God.
2. How many of us are on the way to the cemetery?
 - a. We are not expecting much, we have few hopes, we are caught up in the failure of our efforts and our dreams?
 - b. but when we get to the cemetery, something happens to us! the Resurrection!
 - c. and we can never go back the way we came.
 - d. My wife Peggy will go to the graveyard to lay flowers at the tombstones of her parents, Jack and Helen, and her first-born daughter Debbie who left two young children. Peggy will pull up some of the weeds.
3. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James; and Salome—they are told to go and tell, tell that a living Jesus has gone on ahead of them. They stand there as if paralyzed, then run away and seemingly tell no one.
4. Easter is not our human reaction to the problem of facing death, but rather it is God’s activity in response to our faithlessness, to our very human trepidation, and our human excuses.
5. In an interview Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite authors said, “The worst isn’t the last thing about the world. It’s the next to last.”
 - a. But once we have traveled down the pre-dawn pathway to the cemetery and seen the empty grave we cannot go home the same way—with heads down, with numbed thoughts.
6. Jesus has come back. He says to us from beyond the grave,
 - a. *“Stop being afraid; for I am leaving my peace with you...
“Blessed are those of you who have not seen & yet have believed.”*

Now may all of God’s Easter family respond by saying, “Amen!”
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