

When the sabbath was over (after 6:00 pm Saturday when commerce resumed) Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices. These three women, about whom we know very little, are the only witnesses to Jesus' crucifixion, and to his burial (absent Salome), and to the empty tomb. They are the only ones who can connect the dots between Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection.

Very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, the women went to the tomb. Had the early Christians invented the story of the empty tomb, they would not have portrayed women as discoverers of the missing body. Celsus, a second century Greek philosopher, ridiculed his Christian opponents for relying on the testimony of "a half-frantic woman."

In Jewish law, women's testimony was not accepted in court "because of the levity and temerity of their sex" (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*). Even in Luke we read, *These words (the women's testimony) seemed to the disciples an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*

All four gospels consistently affirm that the tomb was found empty by women. It is certainly ironic that ancient prejudice against women provides the most convincing validation of the historical reliability of the accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb.

On the way the women wonder *Who will roll away the extremely large stone.* This stone, in John Updike's words, is *the vast rock of materiality that in the slow grinding of time will eclipse for each of us the wide light of day.* It is not as if men, presumably stronger than women, could move the stone. The vast rock of materiality can only be moved by a power stronger than death.

As the women entered the tomb, *they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side.* The only other mention of a "young man" in Mark is in the story of Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. All the disciples abandon Jesus. A certain young man, wearing a linen garment over his bare flesh, followed along with the arresting party until he was forcibly seized. He dropped the garment and fled away naked.

There is no reason to suppose the two youths are identical. Rather, each character mirrors the other. The naked youth fled, panic overtaking shame. The youth dressed in white—the only other character in Mark said to wear white is Jesus in the story of the Transfiguration—is seated at the right, which in antiquity is the favored place. From this place of authority he bears witness to the resurrection.

Don't be alarmed. Why would the women be alarmed? Many Jews believed in resurrection, a general resurrection at the end of history. No Jew, nor anyone else, expected that a single individual, however extraordinary, would be raised from the dead in the midst of history. This is shocking.

Finding the tomb empty does not generate faith in the resurrection. Resurrection faith is not an inference from data. Rather, it is a response to the divine word: *Jesus the Nazarene, the one*

crucified, has been raised. In the reading from Acts, Peter says the risen Jesus *commanded us to **preach** to the people* so that they might believe.

In the reading from 1 Corinthians, Paul says *the good news that I **proclaimed** to you . . . through which you are being saved.* As Paul says elsewhere *Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word of Christ* (Romans 10:17).

It is important that we pause and ponder the phrase *has been **raised**.* In Peter's sermon we hear *but God **raised** him on the third day.* Paul writes *Christ died . . . was buried, and was **raised** on the third day.* The early Christian writers are unanimous that the resurrection of Jesus was an act of God. God **raised** Jesus; Jesus didn't raise himself.

The portrayal of God as the one who raised Jesus from the dead defines God's being in relation to humanity. In a similar way in which God's bringing Hebrew slaves out of Egypt created the emergence of Israel, so God's raising Jesus creates the emergence of the Christian community. By raising Jesus God's being has been revealed as God's being for us.

The women are entrusted with a message, with a word to proclaim: *Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee . . .* Mark begins the story of Jesus with *A voice crying in the wilderness: Prepare the Lord's way, make straight his paths.* From the opening words of the narrative, Jesus has been constantly under way. This Jesus does not now rest in peace, but is still under way, going ahead of the fearful disciples to Galilee.

The women *fled from the tomb, for trembling and bewilderment had taken hold of them, and they said nothing to anyone; for they were afraid.* The story ends, not with a bang but with a whimper, trailing off in mid-sentence.

The Greek text of Mark's gospel ends with a conjunction. In Greek, *they were afraid* is one word followed by *for*. This is something like concluding an English text with "and" followed by dots (and . . .). Mark brings no closure to his narrative, not even an "Amen" or benediction.

Eugene Boring describes how Mark has permitted the reader to be a nonparticipant observer. The reader heard the voice of God declaring Jesus to be his Son, when no one else heard; the reader was present with Jesus in the wilderness, tested by Satan, when no one else was there.

When the inner circle went to sleep in Gethsemane, the reader stayed awake and heard Jesus' anguished prayer. When the disciples fled and were absent at the cross, the reader was present. When Jesus cried out to God in abandonment, the reader was there.

Now, the reader stands at the brink of the incomplete narrative in which all have failed, and, with terrible restraint, the narrator breaks off the story and leaves the reader, who may have thought the story was about somebody else, with a decision to make . . .