

A new day

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, '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. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.'

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

MESSAGE

The summer of 2019/20 has been called **Black Summer** as bushfires raged all around the east and south of Australia. Vast amounts of forest were burned. The fires turned the sky red and then black, leaving death and destruction behind.



On our recent holiday, Liz and I travelled up past Bairnsdale to some of the badly burned forests around Tambo Crossing and Ensay and on towards the slopes of the high country.

Twelve months on, most of the forest is still black and burned and lifeless. Many trees will never recover ...

But there are signs of new life emerging from the ashes.



As we heard on Good Friday, there is hope for a tree to grow green again.

... but what about humans?

If we die and go down to the grave, is there any hope for us?



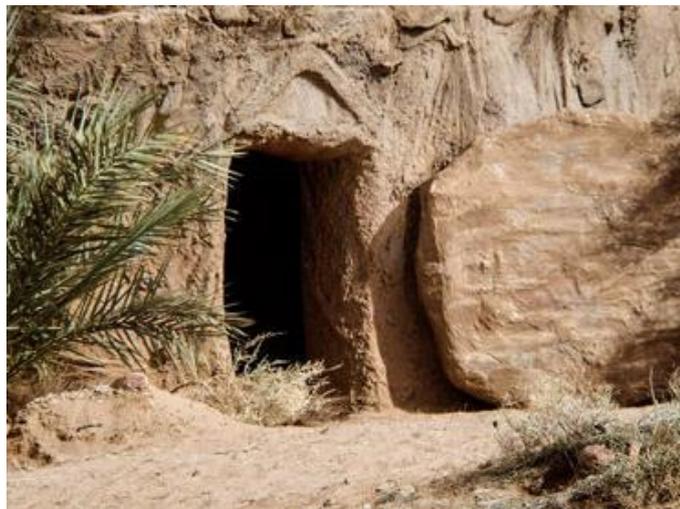
On Easter Sunday, the male disciples of Jesus were still deep in shock and trying to come to grips with their sense of shame. They had abandoned their inspirational leader out of fear for their own safety and now he was dead and buried. They might not have been able to put it into words just yet, but they were probably also sensing that their emerging movement was now **defunct**.

No more following Jesus and being amazed by what each new day would bring.

No more dreams of becoming leaders of a new movement, with Messiah Jesus leading the way. All gone. Dead and buried, just like Jesus.

It was time to pack up and go home ... back to Galilee and their old life.

Another group of disciples – the **women** – were probably just as numb as the men but wanted to do something practical. So they turned to what they knew **how to do** – anoint a dead body for burial. This task should have been done on the Friday when Jesus died, but there was no time before the Sabbath began. They probably thought ‘better late than never’. At least they’d seen where Jesus’ body was laid when it was taken down from the cross.



So three of the women set out, early in the morning – perhaps symbolically – as the sun was just rising on a new day. We’re told they’re feeling anxious about how to move the massive stone away from the tomb. But when they get there, the stone’s already been moved! Summoning courage, they dare to go inside the cramped dark place of death where they see a young man dressed in white, who we imagine may be an angel.

He has a rather cryptic and strange message for them:

You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.

The women probably nod, speechless with fright.

He’s been **raised**. He’s **not here**.

Really? Raised? What? ... What have you done with his body?!

Go tell Peter and the other disciples that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee.

You’ll see him there, just like he told you.

It’s all too much for the women – who now fully freak out and flee, trembling and terrified. They don’t talk to anyone because they are afraid, according to the final words of Mark’s Gospel.



And so this Gospel of Mark comes to an abrupt and disturbing finish.

There is no appearance of the risen Jesus

There is no apparent presence of God with the disciples

There is no resolution – but rather intense negative emotion ranging from confusion and anxiety to terror and fear

Later Christians were clearly dissatisfied with Mark's ending and tried adding various extensions from the other three Gospels to make for a more uplifting end to the story. But the earliest and most reliable manuscripts all have this rather abrupt ending.

As Mark was the first Gospel written ... perhaps this ending is actually the most realistic of all the Gospels ... including the major role of the women and the overwhelming emotions of shock and fear and trembling.

I want to hit the pause button for a moment and share a little bit on **narrative theory** ... the specialty that looks at how stories work.

The narrative theory of story arcs ...

Romance: girl meets boy ...

Drama: problem to resolution ...

Tragedy: flawed hero dies ...

Most stories follow some sort of **arc**. In a classic **romance**, for instance, the story arc is usually a variation of 'girl meets boy, girl loses boy, girl gets boy'.

In many **dramas**, the story arc is 'situation... problem... resolution'.

The Gospel of Mark mostly follows a **Greek tragedy arc** ... 'we are introduced to our hero, there is hope and promise of great things before a turning point that leads inevitably to rejection and death'. Most modern depictions of the gospel story follow this **tragedy arc** ... whether JC Superstar, Godspell, Life of Brian or books like *The Existential Jesus* by John Carroll, a study of Mark's Gospel written by a professor of sociology at La Trobe uni.

But Mark's story does not **quite** follow this tragedy arc. Three times Jesus predicts his death ... but adds the tantalising riddle that he will **rise again three days later**. At the Last Supper when he is predicting the betrayal of Judas and the scattering of the other disciples, Jesus also says, '**after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee**', a comment

that seems to go unheard as Peter rushes on to pledge his undying loyalty to Jesus.

And then we have this rather odd ending with the women at the tomb. It seems that death is not the final word. There is a **spark**, a **seed** of something **new** and **fresh**. The disciples are urged to **return to Galilee**, where the story started, where they will meet Jesus once more. So their journey of discipleship will continue where it started from.

Romance: girl meets boy ...

Drama: problem to resolution ...

Tragedy: flawed hero dies ...

Mark's circular story ...

Mark has written in fact a **circular story**, one without a clear cut ending.

As readers of this story **we're also invited to go back to the start** – with the new information that Jesus has been raised from death – and to once again confront the major themes of the story – who is this Jesus? and what will it mean to follow him?

Mark invites us to seek Jesus for ourselves, by returning to the place where we first met and knew Jesus, our equivalent to Galilee, the home of our faith as it were – whether here in this place or elsewhere. Mark invites us to spend time with Jesus, which is the first calling for all disciples, to continue to travel with him and become part of his **ongoing story, which has no ending**. Mark notes that Jesus goes ahead of us – just as he promised – and will meet with us.

However we 'hear' the ending to Mark's story, history would suggest that something dramatic and life-changing **did** happen on that first Easter morning. The men may have been stewing over their failures and fear, and the women may have been overcome by alarm and trembling – which makes all of them rather more like us than we might imagine. Following Jesus is not easy and we all slip up at various points, but the good news is that Jesus invites us to **meet with him again** and to **continue on our journey** with him.

History also suggests that Jesus **did** appear in some form to the wider circle of disciples, **alive again**. Otherwise it's very difficult to explain the change in the disciples from being frightened and discouraged to fearless and bold witnesses who are accused of turning the whole world upside down. **Something** changed them, most probably encountering the risen Jesus.



Yet there remains something deeply **mysterious** about this story – something **so unexpected** that the disciples struggled to comprehend even though they'd been told the outcome ahead of time.

There is also something **liberating**. No matter how hard the religious people of Jesus' day – or those in power – tried to suppress and silence Jesus – and ultimately kill him – Jesus will **not** be confined to the tomb or to death. There are now **new possibilities**. In the words of the Sydney Carter hymn we sang earlier, it's as if Jesus continues to shout:

*I am the life that'll never, never die;
I'll live in you as you live in me:
I am the dance and I still go on.*

There is a warning here but also a liberating hope – that our religious behaviour, our traditions and our best theologies can't box Jesus in. He is risen and on the loose, out in the world. In the words of C. S. Lewis, 'Aslan is no tame lion'. Rather, Jesus continues to offer us the same invitation as the one given to the women – **to come and meet with him and to journey with him wherever he leads us**.

What a **challenging** thought! ... but also what a **liberating** thought!

Desmond Tutu, Archbishop of Capetown in South Africa, wrote these words

*Goodness is stronger than evil;
love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness;
life is stronger than death.*

We see all this and more in the resurrection of Jesus as the key but usually hidden actor in

the story – **God** – raises Jesus from death. God’s goodness and love and light is stronger than our worst fears and struggles.

Perhaps we could add in a couple more lines ...

Faith is stronger than fear ...

and hope is stronger than disappointment.

The danger for us is that we have heard the Easter story too many times and it has lost its astonishing edge, its seed of amazing hope, its invitation to a new way of living where faith overcomes our fears and hope lives on even in the face of disappointment or failure.

You see ... God is doing something **new**, something **unexpected**, something **wonderful** and yet **mysterious** – like a caterpillar turning into a butterfly.

God invites us to be part of this new and transforming life – here in our Galilee – in our home place. So that whatever difficulties or tragedies life throws at us, the promise of Easter is that God has set Jesus free from death and we can expect to meet up with Jesus for ourselves in ways that will transform our lives.

