

Tracy Daub
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Mark 16:1-8

STANDING ON THE PROMISES

I don't know about you but it doesn't much feel like Easter. Even though the daffodils are blooming, even though the buds on the trees are beginning to open, even though the birds are building their nests and signs of spring are bursting out all over, even with all this, it doesn't feel much like Easter. There is so much heaviness right now, so much death and grief, so much loss and anxiety and uncertainty, that it doesn't much feel like the Resurrection has happened. In fact, it feels as if we are all still standing in the tomb.

The Gospel of Mark's version of the Easter story is a good match for our emotions this year. Each of the four gospels--Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John--has its own version of the Easter story. But Mark's version is especially interesting. If you open your Bible you will see that after verse 8, where I concluded today's reading, there are indeed more verses. But most scholars believe that all the verses after verse 8 were added by other writers at a later date. Most scholars believe that Mark's original ending to his Gospel comes at verse 8 of chapter 16--where I ended today. And that means that Mark's Easter story is rather unusual because in his account of Easter, the Resurrected Jesus makes no appearance. We have Easter but no Jesus. Mark's version of the Easter story has the women showing up, finding the stone rolled away, discovering a strange young man in the tomb who *tells* them that Jesus has been raised and is going ahead of them to Galilee. And then the women run away in great fear. In Mark's Easter account we are only *told* that Jesus has been raised but we do not actually *see* the Resurrected Jesus.

That is why I find Mark's account of Easter a good match for where we find ourselves this year. Like those first women at the tomb, this Easter finds most of us filled with fear and

anxiety. Like those first witnesses at the tomb, *we* are given the message that he is raised but it may feel like a message that is hard to believe. Where is this Resurrected Christ? And in our time of hardship and fear, we are left standing in the tomb with only a *promise* of Resurrection.

The reliability of any promise depends on the trustworthiness of the one making the promise. Is the person trustworthy? Have they previously demonstrated that their word is good? So the question we may ask ourselves this Easter is, "how reliable is Jesus' promise of Resurrection?" He told the disciples that after his death he would be raised up and would go ahead of them to Galilee. But on Easter morning the women are given only the *reminder* of his promise by the strange young man. Is this promise enough to restore their hope? Is this promise enough to foster trust and dispel their fears? And what about us? Can we trust this promise at a time when the tomb looms so large in our lives and in our hearts and in our world?

There is an interesting detail found in Mark's Easter story. The strange young man sitting in the tomb, who was quite likely an angel, this angel tells the women that Jesus "has been raised; he is not here." And he uses a certain Greek phrase here to mean "raised up." But this is not the first time Mark has used this same Greek phrase when talking about Jesus.

In the very first chapter of Mark, Jesus entered Simon Peter's house and is told that Peter's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever. This was probably not just a bad head cold but likely something fairly serious, an illness that could possibly mean her death. Her illness would have also rendered her "unclean" and cut her off from her larger community. Contact with someone "unclean" was believed to lead to one's own defilement. But instead of keeping his distance, Jesus touched her and, we are told, he "lifted her up." This phrase, "lifted her up," is the exact same word used at the tomb when the angel tells the women that Jesus "has been raised up; he is not here." In other words, this healing of Peter's mother in law is a resurrection. The

mother-in-law was not only healed from her potentially fatal illness, she was restored to her community, no longer a person to be shunned. Her life was restored to her. It is a story of the tomb followed by a resurrection.

But there's more!

In chapter 2, people bring a paralyzed man to Jesus for healing. As a disabled person, he too would have been shunned as "unclean." Jesus says to this man, "Stand up, take your mat and go to your home," again using that same Greek word meaning "raised up." Another tomb followed by another resurrection.

One more chapter later, chapter 3, Jesus encounters a man with a withered hand. It's the Sabbath day when no work is supposed to take place, so the religious leaders are watching Jesus to see if he will violate the rules. Jesus does not disappoint them. Jesus calls the man to him, saying "Come forward," again using the same Greek word meaning "to rise up." And he heals the man. We are shown another tomb followed by a resurrection.

In Chapter 5 a little girl falls terribly ill and her father begs Jesus to heal her. But by the time Jesus gets to the home, the family announces that she has already perished. Nevertheless, Jesus goes into her room, takes her by the hand and says, "Little girl, get up!" Want to guess what Greek word Jesus uses? The same one! Another tomb followed by another resurrection.

Chapter 9 now. This time it's a boy who suffers from epilepsy. When the boy's father seeks healing for his child, the boy has a seizure right in front of Jesus. Jesus takes him by the hand and he "lifted him up." Our favorite Greek word appears again. "To raise up." The boy is healed. He is given new life. The tomb becomes the resurrection.

It turns out that resurrections are everywhere in the Gospel of Mark! We thought resurrection was something that happened *to* Jesus at the end of the gospel. But as it turns out,

Jesus' life is a ministry of resurrection. Long before Jesus faced his own crucifixion and experienced his own resurrection, he was entering the tombs of people's lives, their moments of death, their hardships and struggles, and he was raising them to new life.

Jesus delivers on his promise of resurrection! He demonstrates that his promises are reliable and trustworthy. Jesus comes to us in our darkest moments, our suffering, our pain, our brokenness and brings about life. The Easter message is that our God is on the side of life.

So even as we find ourselves in the tomb right now, even at this dark time when resurrections may be hard to see or feel, we can trust the promise of the God of life. These promises are reliable. So we can trust our loved ones and ourselves when we face the literal tomb, when physical death claims us, because the God of life is victorious over the tomb. We are promised a resurrected life beyond this world. And we can trust the promise that the God of life is with us during our days on this earth, when we are surrounded by trials and tribulation. The Resurrection power of God is with us, raising us from the tombs of our lives, healing us, forgiving us, strengthening us for what we face, and inviting us to join in the life-giving work of resurrection. So even now, even now in this heavy time when some of us may not be able to see or feel the presence of the Resurrected Christ, we can trust the promises, and the words of the angel at the tomb, that the Resurrected Jesus goes ahead of you to Galilee, and to Buffalo, and to Amherst, and to Williamsville, and to Tonawanda, and beyond just as he told us he would.