

The Never-Ending Story

Mark 16-1-8

Recently someone put Henri Nouwen's very last book in my hands. He had finished writing it not long before he died, or at least, he thought he had. His editor thought otherwise; he thought it was incomplete, lacking something, so a colleague was found to finish it for him. Make it a better book than it had been in Nouwen's hands.

There is very strong evidence that the same thing was done to Mark. In the earliest and best manuscripts we have, the gospel ends at the end of verse eight: "They fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." There is no nice, tidy summary. Mark doesn't tell us that Jesus rose, appeared to the disciples who believed and joyfully went out to tell the rest of the world while Jesus himself ascended into heaven. All that's in there, now, but it was added later. So what happened? Had he suddenly been interrupted in his work, and someone had to finish it for him?

Or maybe this is the story as he intended to tell it, but some embarrassed soul came along later and felt the need to give it a more satisfactory ending?

My vote would be cast for that last one. I have a feeling he would tell us they should have left it alone, that's a fine ending, told exactly the way he wanted it. Jesus never appears to any of the disciples or Mary, because the angel proclamation is assumed to be 'proof' enough. A response from the disciples wasn't needed because the 'go and tell' part is assumed to be enough. And if the women didn't tell because they were afraid, then it is up to us to tell it. He begins the gospel by saying, "the beginning of the gospel," but he deliberately never says, "the end" because it isn't the end. As long as there are disciples to 'go and tell,' it will be a story that never ends.

And instead of seeing the women's fear as an embarrassment, something that would make an editor send the manuscript back for retooling, maybe their fear is just one more element to the gospel, this good news that we are to go and tell.

This isn't the first angel to greet a human with those words: Don't be afraid. Frankly it seems pretty sensible to me to be terrified in the presence of a heavenly being. I would think it would put your entire life in perspective and make you see yourself clearly for the first time ever. And it should. I can't think of a single human being who can stand, head held high, before a heavenly visitor. And yet those are the first words out of his mouth: don't be afraid.

And I don't think they are words meant for that moment only: don't be afraid of me because, yes, I am an angel, but I'm not going to hurt you. I think that the angel is the very first to proclaim the message of the gospel: Don't be afraid. That does sum it up in a nutshell, doesn't it? Don't be afraid. Of anything. In life. At the end of life. Of what comes after life.

Why? Because God is our friend, and not our enemy. And if you think about it that's really saying something. We killed God, not just a great teacher, or a miracle-working peasant, or an insurrectionist. We killed God. Dorothy Sayers, best known as a mystery writer, once wrote about the irony that humanity has tended to think that God has treated us shabbily and tyrannically, when the truth is that we were the ones who 'played the tyrant' over God. We utterly rejected his overtures, tortured him, humiliated him, spat on him, and executed him. We did the very worst that we know how to do, the most horrific thing we are capable of. If anyone deserves to have made an enemy, it is us. If anyone has done anything unforgivable, it is us.

And yet, here is the angel saying, 'don't be afraid.' Words not just addressed to the women, but to all of us. Don't be afraid. God means us no harm. We have nothing to fear from God. God is not the tyrant we have shown ourselves to be. God is not a grudge-holder. God does not exact revenge. We have done our best to make God our enemy, but God is relentlessly, persistently, our friend. I love the words of Psalm 56: "This I know, that God is for me."

And if God is for me, if God is on my side, if God is my friend, and I am God's beloved, then nothing can hurt me. Now, things may go wrong. In fact, things will still go wrong. Easter doesn't mean all the bad stuff in life goes away. It doesn't take suffering out of the world. It doesn't even give meaning to suffering. What Easter does is make you realize that you will survive the suffering, the hardship. God is on my side, what can mere flesh do to me? What harm, ultimately, can the world do to me?

Can you think of a more important message for us to hear right now? This past week 200 Eastman employees in the area lost their jobs. The Exide plant in Bristol is closing down, leaving hundreds more jobless. By my count we had nearly 20 calls this week from people needing help with the very basics of life; housing, food, medicine. Two Presbyterian churches in Kingsport have been left reeling after a murder-suicide took the lives of their choir director and their clerk of session. We have sick children on our prayer lists; parent's with Alzheimer's; worries that we may outlive our life-savings; battered and broken relationships. We're facing all kinds of problems and hardships and uncertain futures.

And then we rise on Easter morning to hear the words "do not be afraid." Do not be afraid. The sting of death has been broken. The power of evil has been conquered. Nothing that earth can deal out can destroy you anymore, because God is for you. God is with you. I think that is why we have all been so moved by the letters the missionary Les Morgan sent out throughout the illness and death of his son, Everett. Les was facing every parent's worst nightmare, and he not only chronicled their journey with such raw emotional honesty, he also bore witness to his confidence that God was with them, for them, near them in the midst of it all. Now, was he spared the pain of it? No. His pain and anguish were heartbreaking. He suffered mightily. But was he afraid? No.