

Easter Sunday
April 1, 2018

You decide

St. Mark's account of the first Easter does not include any appearance of the Risen Lord Jesus. In Mark, the other details are very similar to Matthew, Luke and John's narratives: Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb where she had watched Jesus' burial a few days earlier; it is very early in the morning; the large stone sealing the tomb was rolled back, opening the entrance; there's an angel that shares an important message, "Jesus is risen ... do not be afraid..."

Mark tells us that the angel says to be sure to tell Peter, the disciple who betrayed Jesus 3 times. Mark writes his conclusion to Easter by telling us in verse 8 that Mary and the other women "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Since the 4th century, scholars have debated and tried to explain Mark's abrupt ending. Some say the original ending was lost, so the additional verses, 9-20, were added. These verses include several appearances of the Risen Jesus. Other scholars believe that Mark died, or was arrested, or became seriously ill before he could finish his Gospel. Still others believe Mark intended this shocking ending.

Mark gives us no record of Jesus' birth; his Gospel begins with the ministry of John the Baptist and the adult Jesus going to John to be baptized. Mark's Gospel was the first one written. It is the shortest. It is directed to those living in Rome. Romans were people of action, of decision. One of Mark's favorite words is "immediately."

Mark does not want to overexplain Jesus' ministry, his teaching, his Passion. Mark presents the basic details and, then, he seems to say to the reader, the listener, "You decide ... you decide who Jesus is ... you decide if he was God's Son ... you decide if you can believe in the Resurrection without any appearance stories."

Mark's invitation to us reminds me of Jesus' words to Thomas 8 days after the Resurrection as recorded by John. Remember Thomas was not present when Jesus appeared to the 10 other disciples on the night of the first Easter. When Thomas heard about this appearance, he said he would not believe, unless he saw Jesus, saw his wounds. So, Jesus appears again and Thomas is present. Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen yet believe." (John 20:29)

When we put the record of the other three Gospels together with St. Paul's letters, we can account for 10 different appearances of the Risen Jesus: 5 on Easter Day, 4 over the course of the next 5 weeks, the last appearance on the 40th day after Easter, when Jesus ascends into heaven.

The record from the scriptures is clear, many people saw Jesus after he had risen from death. They talked with him; they ate with him; he continued to teach them; he appeared in Galilee, more than 100 miles from Jerusalem where he was crucified. Jesus gives the disciples the "Great Commission" to go to all the world, make disciples, baptize and teach.

I like Mark's ending in verse 8. I can understand the shock, the fear, the amazement that silences Mary and the others. They were devastated by Jesus' crucifixion, yet they found courage to return to his tomb days later to finish the job of giving him a proper burial.

God comes to us in the moments of confusion, in times of grief and despair. As the sun rose to begin a new day, the women find the stone moved, the tomb open, and an angel with stunning news, "Jesus is risen." Many didn't realize at first the power of this message, a message that would change the world.

Easter is the greatest surprise the world has ever known. Many doubt the truth, the reality of the Resurrection. Many think this is just a kind of mythical, symbolic story about God's love. Mark's ending places the responsibility for faith with each one of us, "You decide."

While we are at it, let's decide about a couple of other realities, questions, debates ...

Did God create the world?

Did God call forth and save the Jewish people?

Did God send Jesus to teach the world about love?

Did God send his Holy Spirit to empower the disciples and change the world?

Has God changed us?

God gives us an amazing freedom. God uses Mark's Gospel to invite us to believe. God says to us, always, "You decide."