

## Going Ahead of Us

<sup>NRS</sup> **Mark 16:1** 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. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup> They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup> When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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." <sup>8</sup> 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.

Life is fragile, isn't it? Life is fragile. If there is one thing this community knows on *this* Easter day- it is that life is fragile. One minute you can be going along just fine, things are great- and then the next thing you know, the ground can just fall out beneath you.

One of my favorite professors in seminary, a person I still keep in touch with, knows what this was like. Bob was working on his Ph.D. at Princeton, and he had had enough of living in student housing. Melis and I didn't blame him- our student housing had pepto bismal pink sinks, toilets, and bathtubs...it's just not the kind of thing you want to see first thing in the morning. So he and another student were renting rooms from a wealthy and generous woman in town who loved to share her beautiful home with students. They loved her beautiful home and the cheap rent. She loved hearing about everything they were studying and just fed off of the life that young people bring into the house.

Now, she never talked about it, but it was clear to them the woman came from means. She didn't try to impress with flash or with ostentation- no, her life, her home,

they were tastefully, artfully decorated, but the few things she did display- well they were elegant. And none was more elegant than her prized possession, a crystal vase made by Steuben.

Well Bob had encountered Steuben before. When he worked downtown in Manhattan he would pass by the Steuben store every day- inside more museum than store. And the prices- well they were more in line with home prices than home furnishings.

And the vase- well it towered over nearly anything he could remember even at Steuben itself. The vase soared upward and flowed outward in elegant lines. The woman normally filled the vase with tulips whose outrageous heads would spill over the edges- an explosion of crystal and color.

Well, you might guess what happens next. Part of why the rent was so low is that the students agreed to clean part time. And one afternoon they were in the kitchen, just taking out the tulips and pouring out the water, it took two of them to do it, just like they had a dozen times before when it happened- when the vase just slipped out of both of their hands.

It just slipped. Just like that. In an instant. In a horrible instant they watched it fall into the sink. At first they were relieved to only see a small chip where it flared out. But then when Bob held it up and looked more carefully, he felt sick- they could both see that underneath the chip a crack ran down the length of the entire piece. They didn't say a word. They just sat there holding it, cradling it- knowing there was nothing to be done. They just sat there feeling the fragility of life- how things can be fine one moment, and then turn awful the next.

ξ ξ ξ

The women in our text knew what this felt like, too- the women who were walking to the tomb that morning, the sun barely rising in the cool of the day. It must have felt surreal for them- just a few days before, Jesus had entered Jerusalem and the crowds were shouting for him, cheering for him, waving their palm branches. The disciples were elated. All that passion and life was bursting out- just like our own David was describing for us so vividly last week. But then just as quickly as they cheered for him, they turned on him, they turned on him on Good Friday- growling for his death like a pack of jackals.

And it all happened so quickly. He was with them one moment- and he was gone the next. And it wasn't just losing Jesus, either- but it was how the disciples reacted, too. It was how quickly they broke apart- shattering like glass, like crystal. Judas, one of his own, betrayed him. One of his own. And there were his friends who couldn't stay up with him that night he was upset, even when he begged them to- and then who deserted him as he hung on the cross. And even the best of them, even Peter- Peter failed him not once but three times, denying that he even knew him. It was just all too much for them bear. And they didn't know what else to do, but to walk up that rocky path that morning and see if they could at least care for his body.

Oh those women knew the fragility of life in their bones as they walked up there that morning.

ξ ξ ξ

Well, our friends in the kitchen holding that broken vase- to their credit they didn't try to hide it, they didn't try to cover it up. Not knowing what else to do they just left it there in the sink.

And the woman, when she came home and saw it, well, there's no other word for it, she was grieved. She cried over it, like you would a loved one, and when she was done she just left it there. She just left it in the sink for days. And the days turned into weeks. No one dared touch it. No dared even look at it. For all intents and purposes during that time that sink became a kind of tomb- if they wanted water, if they wanted to wash the dishes- they had to go to sink in the bathroom down the hall.

At first they understood, but after a while it became inconvenient- even annoying. And sometimes the woman would talk about maybe fixing it. And to Bob, realistic to the core and honest to a fault- this was frustrating. I mean he felt bad and all for what happened, and he knew she had a right to be upset- but fixing it? She was being so unrealistic. And finally he told her so. She was talking one day about maybe taking it somewhere, to a jeweler maybe, and that maybe something could be done? And Bob told her in a quiet but firm voice, the voice of reason, "It's crystal. It can't be fixed. There's nothing to be done." And they would do this every few days, they would have this conversation, this argument every few days- they were like an old married couple. She would get emotional and talk about getting it fixed. And he would tell her the same thing, "We're sorry for what happened, but it can't be fixed. There's nothing to be done." She was just being SO unrealistic. And it was frustrating!

ξ ξ ξ

And do you know this is how we feel at the end of this story here in Mark? We feel frustrated. Mark is the only Gospel out of the four who ends the Easter story like he does here- with the women running away and saying nothing to anyone and with nobody seeing the risen Christ. The oldest Greek manuscripts of Mark stop with this sentence- with the women fleeing the tomb saying nothing to anyone for they are afraid. In your Bibles you will see two more endings- but all of these endings come way later in the manuscript tradition, all nervous additions from later communities wanting an easier story, a happier story.

But not Mark. Mark leaves us with this sense that the disciples have failed, that even the women, the only ones to stand by him, have failed. It's like Mark is an ancient version of Bob saying, "I'm sorry for what has happened, but life is fragile. It's broken. There's nothing to be done."

ξ ξ ξ

Well, the drama between Bob and his landlady kept going on and on, until finally he just kind of snapped at her. Maybe he was tired of doing the dishes in the bathroom? Maybe he was just tired of seeing the reminder of his failure sitting there day after day, who knows? But one day when she was musing about it getting fixed, instead of trying to reason with her, he snapped at her. And he went and got the phone. And he took it to her and he said, "You think it can be fixed? Fine. Why don't you just call Steuben and

ask them? Why don't we just settle this?" And without a word the woman took the phone from him, looked up the number for Steuben and, her hand shaking a little, she dialed the number. A man's voice came on the other line. The woman explained who she was and explained what had happened. And she asked quietly if there was anyway for the vase to be fixed. And man quickly told her he was sorry for her loss, but that wasn't possible. And then after looking it up, he told her the piece was no longer in production, so it couldn't be replaced either. And inside his head Bob was saying to himself, what did I tell you? But then what the man said next shocked them all.

The man explained that she had purchased a Steuben, and her purchase was for life. And if she would bring the vase in, they would examine it, and craft a new one for her at their expense. Now the man explained that it wouldn't be the same, it would be different- but it would be similar; it would remind her of her special, special piece. And when she hung up the phone, and none of them quite what to say.

See, Bob had been right. He had been right- the vase was crystal, and once crystal is broken you can't fix it. You just can't. He was right about that. But he was absolutely wrong that there was nothing to be done. See he hadn't taken into account who had made the vase- and the generosity, the love this maker had not just for their wares, but for the people who purchased them. He didn't know that Steuben didn't look upon their clients as customers; they actually considered them family. And once you are family- no matter how long it's been, family you will always be.

ξ ξ ξ

I believe this is why Mark ends his Gospel the way he does. Because the only place to go from Mark's Gospel is where the young man inside the tomb tells us to go- and he tells us to go forward. And the only thing we have to go on are his words that Christ has gone ahead of us, and that if we put one foot in front of the other and repeat, we will find him there. And we go knowing he won't be exactly like he was, he will be different, life will be different- but we'll go knowing that we are family, and we will not be alone.

ξ ξ ξ

Dear, dear friends. I don't think there could have been a harder day for us than last Sunday. For David to preach so well; for the choir to sing like angels, for our children to be laughing and running after Easter eggs, to be sitting down together laughing over pancakes- and then to lose our friend and our sister Jaci like we did. And to see what Roger was going through. Everyone of us left Sunday knowing in a new way, a profound way, how fragile life is.

And I wish, I wish with every part of me there was a way to go back in time- a way to somehow know what was going on and bring Jaci back. But there isn't. There just isn't. There just isn't anything anyone could have done- it wasn't in our power.

But the hope of the Gospel- the hope of Easter is that Jesus, and now Jaci, they go ahead of us. And even though we don't understand it, even though we don't comprehend it, even though their presence with us will be different- we go forward looking for signs that they are with us, that they are part of the great communion of saints who surround us every step of the way.

ξ ξ ξ

And do you know what else? This good hope, this strong hope- it isn't just about them- but it's about us, too. If this text feels unfinished to you in English- it feels even more that way in Greek. Now in Greek word order is often very flexible, you can have nouns and verbs and adjectives all in different places- it's not like Latin or Hebrew where there is a certain order everything has to be in. Except for some words- words that stick out like a sore thumb. And here Mark ends the Gospel with one of these words- the word *gar*, a little word, a little particle that just means 'for' or 'that'. But the thing of it is- *gar* ALWAYS comes at the beginning of a sentence, almost always being the second word. It NEVER goes at the end of the sentence. Never. Except here in Mark.

And I don't think it's an accident. Mark ends with *gar*, because he knows the story isn't really finished. He knows that it isn't just about Jesus or the disciples- it isn't just about the saints who have gone before. It's about us, too- it's about us who hear this story and then have a decision to make when we leave this place. And our decision is will we go forward and bear this good news, or will we keep silent? Will we act out this resurrection madness or will we just go on like business as usual?

And do you know I've already seen some of us making this decision. I have. I saw countless people offer this week to do anything they could that would help- and I knew they meant it. I saw the bereavement committee, the deacons, and the men's group and a host of others volunteer to make the memorial go smoothly yesterday. And it was such a good day. I've seen this community rally around Roger lining up so many meals I think we're going to have to have a fundraiser and buy him a new freezer. I saw our pastor, our interim pastor, Dick Wiggers fly on the day before Easter, *the day before Easter* to offer us words of comfort and hope. Friends pastors don't fly on the day before Easter- only to get on a plane last night so that he could be with his congregation this morning. Oh I've already seen us being the resurrection, living the resurrection, and today, today I charge you to keep it up.

ξ ξ ξ

You know we can't change what has happened. We can't. We can only go forward. And in the name of the risen Christ I charge us to go forward together, knowing that he, and that all the communion of saints, they will be there to welcome us.

And if anyone asks you if you believe in the resurrection- you tell them you don't just believe in it- but you've seen it; that you're living it! **Amen.**