

1 April 2018

Outwards from the Heart of Being (Mark 16: 1-8)

Easter Sunday

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The reading we just heard constitutes the end of Mark's gospel – at least according to the oldest manuscripts. The story that was introduced so confidently as the 'good news', the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, concludes abruptly with a tale of confused and frightened women refusing to speak because 'they were afraid, you see ...' – in Greek the words are '*ephobounto gar ...*'. No other work of literature in Greek ends with that little word 'gar', which suggests that Mark wants to leave us somehow in mid-air, not quite sure what the end of the story is, not quite clear that we know what happened or what it means. Not unlike the way it was, apparently, for the women themselves ... But it's a strange way, you might think, to go about getting a new religious vision off the ground. Or is it?

We've been noticing for a while now a theme in Mark's gospel – the theme of 'the Messianic secret'. The secret concerns the identity of Jesus and his reluctance during his ministry to say who he was. On Good Friday, I suggested this was because Jesus hadn't wanted to be seen primarily as a miracle worker, hadn't wanted the power of God in him to be conceived as controlling, wand-waving, magically interventionist. And that's why it's only at his trial, only when he's stripped of all power, all success, that he finally breaks his silence and tells unambiguously who he is. The high priest asks in the midst of his nightmarish interrogation, 'Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed? (14: 61), and Jesus replies: 'I am'. But of course they do not believe him – they cannot imagine that this bruised and bloodied man has anything to do with God. And the irony doesn't end there.

This morning the women have come to anoint the body. They've been met by a young man, who tells them that Jesus who was crucified is not here – he has been

raised. And they're instructed to go, to share this news with Peter and the other disciples. Yet here's the joke. All through the gospel, Jesus has been commanding people not to tell of him – those who have been healed, the demons who've been cast out – all are commanded 'to say nothing to anyone' but they do (Mark 1: 44). Now at last, the women are commanded to tell what they've seen and they don't – 'they say nothing to anyone, for they were afraid'.

'We are surely meant', says Rowan Williams, 'to pick up the paradox here. At last, the message is clear: here, in the crucified Jesus, is the event in which God has changed the world ... and no one wants to talk about it. It's too much of a shock, it's too difficult ... Once it was a matter of how easy it would have been to tell the story of Jesus the great healer and wonderworker; all the words were there, ready-made ... Now something has been made clear that has no ready-made words: God has acted in the pain and failure of Jesus and in his torture and execution. Just how are we to talk about that?'.¹

Indeed, how are we to talk about this? Because it strikes me that, at this point, we're in a conundrum.

Over the past three days, we've confronted the gospel's witness that the face of God is revealed most fully in the crucified victim of human violence, and that the power of God is not the kind of power that steps down from heaven to solve our problems. God is the crucified God, who shares our suffering and who chooses to be and to be manifest at the 'lowest, weakest point of human experience' (61). But if that's true the question naturally arises, how does this God help? What difference does this God make?

This morning, we're told that Jesus has been raised. It turns out that he is not just another victim, another dead body in one of history's unmarked graves. But while that news might go some way to answering how he might help, it seems to falsify the claim that the power of God is not what we thought – surely raising

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London: SPCK, 2014), pp.48-49.

someone from the dead is precisely the kind of thing you'd expect a wand-waving divinity to get up to?

It's like we can't have it both ways. Either God is crucified, suffering, identified with our weakness – and so not much use to us. Or God is powerful, corpse raising and interventionist – and so not much with us, not really one of us in our failures and dereliction and death.

But what if there is another vision of this after all? What if this whole gospel story, this whole journey of the Passion, is showing us something we hadn't known before about the radically transforming power of God's love. It's love that wills to undergo, to share, to bear the beloved's pain; and it's love – as it turns out – that can break through the chains of suffering and even of death to create the possibility of real wholeness, forgiveness, all things integrated, all people reconciled. The story of Jesus is the story of how love – the indestructible love of the Godhead – works to liberate and heal 'outwards from the heart of being'.² Which means it's the story of a power that acts not to rescue but transform, that does not save us from the time of trial but accompanies us in and through it to create new life. And if that's what those women glimpsed that day, then no wonder something like 'terror and amazement seized them', no wonder their sense of reality wavered and the veil between worlds seemed to thin.

I said at the beginning that Mark's narrative seems to leave us in mid-air, not quite sure what the end of the story is, not quite clear that we know what happened or what it means. Well – it's a commonplace of preaching on Mark to say that the end of the story is up to us ... We're being given news of a radical new possibility for being – of life no longer menaced by the fear of death, rejection and pain. We're being offered a glimpse of freedom and of peace that passes all understanding. How do we access this new possibility? We become joined with the love of God, as Jesus was and discover from the inside the truth of love's transforming energy and power. 'This Gospel', writes Williams, 'is a book about faith, and more specifically about that

² Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.50.

fundamental aspect of faith which is the trustful letting go into a love that is completely surprising and works completely by its own rules, not yours'.³ It is kind of unbelievable and kind of frightening – dare we really trust that giving ourselves like this will be enough, will carry us through? Or do we fear it's just a naïve and silly dream? Resurrection life ... new life ... life on totally different terms ... Today it's on offer. You choose.

³ Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, p.70.