

Hallelujah. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Hallelujah! Please be seated.

Last week on Palm Sunday, I preached a sermon about stones, and a stone features prominently in today's gospel. In fact, I've noticed that stones feature prominently throughout the Easter narrative. I've found myself thinking a lot about stones this week. This hasn't always been the case. When I was a college student, I studied theology. And whenever somebody asked me what it was I majored in, I'd say theology, and they'd say, "Oh, geology, that must be interesting, looking at all those rocks and stones."

This happened so frequently that eventually I devised a plan. When anyone said, what do you study, I would say, I'd preempt them, I'd say, "Theology, not geology. I'm interested in the rock of ages, not the ages of rock," and it worked. But anyway, this week I've been thinking about stones, as were the women walking on that first Easter morning to the tomb of Jesus. They got up early so that they could go and anoint Jesus' body with spices. And on the way to the tomb, we're told, they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

That was a great question to ask. In fact, one might wonder why they hadn't asked that question before they headed out on the way to the tomb. If they had, they might have taken a crowbar with them as well as spices. But when they got to the tomb, they discovered that the large stone had been rolled away. They didn't need a crowbar. In fact, they didn't need the spices either because there was nobody there to anoint.

What's interesting about St. Mark's account, which is the earliest account we have of the resurrection, is that the tomb is empty, but the risen Jesus doesn't appear. There's no account in Mark of the resurrection appearance of Jesus himself. A young man, presumably an angel, tells the woman, "You're looking for Jesus, but he's not here." But on hearing this, the women don't cry out with joy. They respond, Mark says, with alarm, terror, and amazement. The angel's announcement of good

news neither inspires belief nor transformation. We witness no Easter proclamation, no narrative from helplessness to certitude. Instead, we witness fear, flight, and silence.

The Gospel ends with the phrase, "For they were afraid." It's a strangely downbeat, almost anticlimactic end to Mark's Gospel, and there are scholars who think, well, St. Mark can't possibly intend to have ended his Gospel in this way. And they even come up with a theory that the earliest manuscript was ripped in two and the ending was lost. And they point out that the Gospel actually ends in Greek with the word "for". And as you know, you're not supposed to end a sentence with a preposition, let alone a Gospel.

My wife discovered very early in our relationship that I'm a stickler for grammar. In fact, the first conversation we ever had was on this very subject. I was walking down the courtyard in the seminary where we were both students, and I heard an American voice behind me saying, "Excuse me, do you know where the library's at?" I turned around and said, "I'm terribly sorry, madam. But in England, we try not to end a sentence with a preposition." She said, "Excuse me, do you know where the library's at, you moron?"

In case you see my wife after the service, please note that that story is slightly embellished to the point of fabrication. But getting back to Mark's Gospel, he really does end his Gospel with a preposition, which is why some versions of the Bible you'll see tack on 11 verses. And what later scribes have done is cobble together a few verses from other Gospels, put them all together and added them to Mark's Gospel to wrap it up and bring it to a nice, clean conclusion.

But I'm glad we don't read them on Easter, that we finish where Mark intended to finish, because I don't think those additions are original to Mark. Mark knew what he was doing when he ended the gospel in the way he did. Mark was very aware that he was writing about a great mystery that defied a neat summing up. The resurrection happened in the dark. Jesus was raised from the dead in the pre-dawn hours when there was nobody there to

witness it. The resurrection exceeds all our attempts to pin it down because it's a mystery known only to God.

No narrative can contain it. All we know is that somehow in the dark that first Easter morning, God worked in secret to bring life out of death. Somehow from the heart of loss and misery, God enacted salvation. And this wasn't something that the women at the tomb could grasp immediately. It was too big, too amazing, too wondrous for them, so deep and significant, it took time for that wonderful message to sink in. Mark honors the mystery of the resurrection, and the story also acknowledges the fact that this Easter story doesn't end with the resurrection of Jesus.

Mark deliberately leaves his gospel incomplete and open-ended because he knows the story continues. To know the end of the story, we need to go back to another reference in the New Testament to stones, where Peter writes in his epistle, he invites us to come to Jesus as living stones to be built into a spiritual house with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. That's a remarkable image that we're to be living stones, because stones are so obviously lifeless. Yet the resurrection of Jesus gives us hope that our lifeless bodies will be raised to new resurrection life.

The end of the Easter story is that we can share Christ's risen life. We share in his victory over death. We can be living stones. That which is dead and lifeless can be given new life because of what happened that first Easter morn. As St. Paul says, "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. See? Everything has become new."

As we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus today, we celebrate the hope and the possibility of renewal and new life. The stone was rolled away. Jesus has been raised from the dead. Our hope is restored that we too can share in his new resurrection life. Hallelujah! Christ is risen. He has risen indeed. Hallelujah!