

APRIL FOOLS EASTER

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday 2018

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they could embalm him. Very early on Sunday morning, as the sun rose, they went to the tomb. They worried out loud to each other, "Who will roll back the stone from the tomb for us?"

Then they looked up, saw that it had been rolled back—it was a huge stone—and walked right in. They saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed all in white. They were completely taken aback, astonished.

He said, "Don't be afraid. I know you're looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He's been raised up; he's here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now—on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You'll see him there, exactly as he said."

They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.

I was there when they crucified my Lord. Were you? Did you see him? Did you hear him praying to our God up on the cross? He was praying for us, he was praying for himself, and he was praying for them, the ones who did this to him. Yes, he was praying for us all.

I watched, and with the two Marys I wept for him. Two Marys-- one who had birthed him and given him to the world, and one who had followed him loyally, a disciple just as surely as if Mark were to have formally named her so.

Call me Salome. I am no one special, just a peasant girl from Jerusalem, one of the followers of Jesus. I am no one special, but he made me feel special, like I was one of a kind. His eyes, they claimed me as God's own beloved child. His smile, it healed me from all the oppression and injustice of my days. His hands, they outstretched to me as if to show me that I was one with him. His voice, it inspired me to be here today to finally tell you my story—his story—God's April Fools Easter Story.

Call me Salome. I have no second name, for I am not claimed by any family of importance. I am not the same Salome who was complicit in the beheading of John the Baptist—that was someone else. It makes me sad that I share the same Biblical name as that woman. My name means "peace" in Hebrew, but I have known little peace in my life save for the peace I have found in the knowing of the heart of Jesus.

I can finally tell you today the story that frightened me and paralyzed my voice on the day the three of us—the two Marys and I—went to do our duty to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. We went to the tomb two days after his crucifixion and burial, expecting to see what was left of the battered body of our Lord. No thank you was expected or needed; we just wanted to restore some dignity that had been so violently stripped from him.

Well, I should say we went to the tomb where he had been lain, hoping *against hope* to see our Lord. We really didn't expect to get

into his tomb, for we had no way to roll away the very large and heavy stone the Pharisee Joseph of Arimathea had used to block the entrance against poachers. We were all grieving the death of Jesus and we were still in shock over the ferocity of the violence poured out onto him. We had not yet even considered what life would be like without him; he had had no time to miss him yet, so shaken were we by his death and so terrified were we for our own lives.

Still, we gathered up our rags and our oils and spices used for anointing a dead body and we trudged out to the site of the tomb, daydreaming that it had all been just a nasty nightmare, not our horrific reality.

No one of us spoke much. We had our heads covered and our eyes to the ground, not wanting to attract any attention from the Pharisees and scribes, nor from the Romans. What we were doing was not totally safe for us; all the followers of Jesus were needing to lay low, for both the Jews and the Romans were hunting for us.

I was so scared. I had given up my home with my family to follow Jesus. Living with Mary his mother and Mary of Magdala, we spent our days with Jesus and the other disciples, listening to him preach, watching him heal the sick, the lame and the demon-afflicted. We hung back in fear and worry as we observed his confrontations with the authorities, most of which ended with the Pharisees and scribes threatening us and or running us out of town. We traveled around a lot;

Jesus was like a man possessed himself, always on the move, always putting himself in harm's way for the sake of those without voice or power. As time went on, my discipleship literally became my life's work.

Now here we were on the Sunday following the crucifixion, alone without our Rabbi, our leader, our Lord. The men were as frightened as I was; they had scattered all over the city and surrounding countryside so as not to be arrested themselves. The women with Jesus had more freedom of movement than the men; we were not taken seriously by the Romans or the Pharisees, so they were not actively looking for us. As long as we didn't catch their eye or raise their suspicion, we were free to go about the business of attending to the body in the tomb.

In our culture, the burial process had two stages. When a person had died, it was our immediate task to clean the body and treat it with spices to keep away the predators and the smell of decomposition. After the body had been in a temporary tomb for one year, the bones of the dead would be washed and then moved to a common storage room, an ossuary.

We had been taught from an early age to do our duty, to do our duty and save grieving for later. But this was no ordinary death; Jesus was no ordinary man, not to us, and not to the authorities. That's why they were protecting the body—not because they wanted to honor the

dead, but because they were afraid that the living remnant of Jesus would steal the body and make a fantastic claim that Jesus had risen from the dead.

And so, we went there. We went there as we were taught to do, not really expecting to be able to do *anything* with his body that our culture requires. We went there to see for ourselves the unbelievable that had taken place just two days before. It was our April Fools Easter.

You've just heard what Mark said happened. He was told the story by others who probably heard it from still others, but he basically got it right! When we got to the tomb, the stone had been rolled away. This was a sign of trouble—this should not be!

Looking at each other in wonderment, we hesitantly looked inside the tomb to see what other damage had been done to our Lord. But to our surprise, he was not there.

I think we were the first witnesses to this amazing event. An angel greeted us there. (We know it was an angel because he was dressed in white just as all angels are and he said, "Be not afraid" as angels are wont to say.) The angel told us that Jesus was not there, that he is risen. But that's impossible! We saw with our own eyes how he had been lifted up on the cross. We watched Joseph of Arimathea and the Pharisee Nicodemus place his body in this very tomb! We saw

the pallor of his skin and his lifeless eyes. We saw all this for ourselves!

I am Salome and I am a simple girl. I am neither schooled nor educated in the ways of religion or science. I did what I thought Jesus would want me to do, for he said it on numerous occasions all through his ministry. He told us over and over to keep a secret, not to tell anyone about who he was, and so the day, too, we hurried away, telling no one what the angel told us. We were unsure exactly what it meant that "he is risen," but we didn't stick around to ask questions.

I wish I could say I was brave. I wish I could say I was a champion of the faith that day, that I took it upon myself to live into the angel's commission to us to tell the disciples, and especially Peter, what we saw and heard. I wish that I had summoned the courage to run into the town squares, one after another, shouting the Good News that Jesus had beaten death. I wish I would have been willing to be arrested myself, to give up my life for Jesus. But alas, I was not.

I wish I could have told Peter what the angel had said, for Peter was thinking that he had forfeited his right to be a disciple after denying Jesus those three times while Jesus was under arrest. He felt horrible—the worst kind of horrible, but I was paralyzed with fear and could not go to him with my witness. Could you have done what I could not?

My brothers in faith hid out for what seemed a very long time. I lost contact with them, because we all went underground. I heard that some of them returned to their lives quietly and were never written about again. Others, like Peter, eventually were courageous enough—some say inspired enough— to come out of hiding and continue the work of Jesus. All the disciples either met their end at the hands of the Romans or faded away like me from the pages of the Bible. But what we shared, for those brief three years, I am sure just like me, they never forgot.

Now I appear in scripture readings only every four years or so, and my name barely gets mentioned. That's about all. But I was one of the first witnesses to what you might now take for granted—that death is not the final answer; death is not the end. You live today with this confidence. You sing today your joyous songs of Easter promise. I trembled with fear on that Sunday at the tomb and was overwhelmed by my encounter with God's angel. I grieve my failing. I think I let God down. Is my witness too late for this world?

Mark's first readers, persons of First Century faith in the Roman Empire, were better able to connect with my story, for they lived with fear and trembling every day of their lives. Perhaps this is hard for you to forgive. But the three of us were left standing by the empty tomb that day, and now all Christians stand facing the empty tomb and

we all have to figure out for ourselves what that means. Mark doesn't tell us, and neither did Jesus.

Later Christians were uncomfortable with how Mark left things, and so they wrote an alternate ending to his Gospel seeking to tie up all his loose ends. I don't know how I feel about that! But it is Mark's way to convince us, as Michael Card writes in his book, *Mark: The Gospel of Passion*, that "there is a luminous moment when belief and trust are given before the light of proof shines. Indeed, proof matters and will sometimes come, but Jesus demands that we believe before the proof."

This is what I must say to you, today's disciples of the Risen Christ. This is my witness for your age, what I could not say then, what I have the courage and experience to pass over to you now:

We stand together this day at the empty tomb—you, me, and all the persons two thousand years in between, puzzling over its meaning and promise, but Jesus lives on forever as long as you carry him in your hearts and minds, as long as you will tell the stories of him to your young ones, as long as you will live what he taught, aspire to a world of justice and compassion of which he could only dream, and remember always, as his angel tried to tell us, the first witnesses, "Be Not Afraid."

That you are here today celebrating the empty tomb of Easter is a testament to your belief, though you have yet to see the proof. Perhaps the proof is in the spreading of the Good

News. Perhaps faith is the expression of the thing at once believed and proved only in the prayerful conversation we are engaged in with the Holy Spirit of our God. The empty tomb is not finite; it is, rather, a faithful beginning, a call to action.

Happy Easter, faithful children of God. May It All Come to Pass in Our Days.