

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford at the Easter Vigil
April 7, 2012

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“And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.”

So ends Saint Mark’s account of Easter, *and* his gospel. (There are actually *two* endings to this Gospel. These two endings have been called the greatest of all literary mysteries. That’s your homework! What the fuss is about is how the Gospel could have ended in such a way with the women *fearing*, and telling no one, and not seeing Jesus! If there ever was a non-starter this is it! Surely St Mark had recorded (or *intended* to record), as the climax and conclusion of the Gospel, the triumphant appearance of Jesus to His disciples. Or *are* we so sure St Mark intended this? Does the Christian Gospel require to be *rounded off* in this way? Perhaps St Mark did not know that future generations would have different ideas about how a Gospel ought to end! The current Catholic Church lectionary has such different ideas. The lectionary ends St Mark’s Easter account ends with verse seven, and omits verse eight as if the Church is afraid of something.

Let’s consider St Mark’s Gospel on its own terms. You have heard me say his Gospel seems as if it were written in a hurry and meant to be read in a hurry. It’s the *shortest* Gospel. It wastes no words. Mark’s Gospel begins abruptly, and we’re finding out that it *ends* abruptly. Francis Bacon said, “In divinity, many things must be left *abrupt*.”

There is huge evidence that the early Church preserved the tradition of the life and teaching of Christ and did it with scrupulous care. It is also a fact that in so many cases in the New Testament the supernatural element is actually *understated*. At the wedding in Cana only the steward knows that Jesus has turned water into wine. And at the feeding of the multitude it is only observed that from small resources the crowd was fed, there were leftovers, and everyone was satisfied.

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ transcends all normal experience. Describing it, a writer faces a real problem of communication. How do you express what was experienced? How do you give an impression, accurate and adequate, to someone who has not shared the experience? If I want to tell you about a thunderstorm I can appeal to your own previous experience of thunder storms. For our use we have

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shared experiences and our common use of everyday language. But when St Mark wished to describe a scene that has God Incarnate as the central figure, language quickly becomes inadequate. A man was paralyzed. Moments after he was brought to Jesus that same man walked home carrying his mat. Already language is in trouble! If the four evangelists' efforts to describe Our Lord's daily life were fraught with such difficulties, think about their efforts to tell of the Resurrection! If they are to proclaim anything at all about Easter they must use ordinary language. But as they do, each word necessarily means less to us than it did to them. From the beginning of Divine revelation vocabulary was never equal to the task.

But the Gospel good news had to be proclaimed. Mark had no choice but to use that ordinary language, and it is only roughly appropriate to the extraordinary matter at hand. Yet *this very difficulty* reveals an element of mystery, strangeness, and otherness. Having said what he is able to say, Mark leaves much unsaid, and so do the other evangelists. That is because the language needed to describe the Resurrection and the Risen Lord does not exist. Perhaps this explains why Mark's Gospel ends so abruptly. It is as if he is saying that silent wonder in the presence of the Glory of God expresses it best.

The women were told that it is all good news. The frightened shepherds at Bethlehem had been told the same. And the presence of the angels radiated love rather than fear. The women, like those shepherds, believe. But it is all so strange and unexpected. That certainly comes across in the Resurrection gospels. There is an unexpectedly empty tomb, collapsed grave clothes, and a strange mystery in the air. They believe, and yet they fear. The experience was too much for them. Do we find the reaction surprising or disappointing? Is it really a non-starter? Wouldn't it be stranger to be told the women took their unused burial spices back to the customer service counter for a refund! Like Jacob long ago when he awoke from his dream, these women know "How dreadful is this place" (Genesis 28:17), and like Jacob, they are overcome with numinous fear.

Mark's rough narrative comes to its abrupt end. He chooses to leave us with a picture of these brave and devoted women, overwhelmed by a strange dread, and fleeing to a familiar place in which they feel secure. The peace and confidence that

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come from the Risen Lord Jesus Himself will be experienced later. But thanks to St Mark, something of the moment when the empty tomb was discovered is preserved as part of the good news of Easter.