

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Great Easter Vigil
April 3, 2021

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In the three-year cycle of lectionary readings we are in Year B. The Sunday Mass gospels are taken primarily from Saint Mark. And we have just heard St Mark's account of Easter. *Or did we?* The *last* verse in Mark's account has been omitted by the lectionary:

“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.” (*Mk 16:8*)

(In your *Revised Standard Version* of the Bible there is a passage added in the 2nd Century. This is claimed as Mark's real ending. So there are *two* endings to this Gospel and those two endings have been called the greatest of all literary mysteries.)

Perhaps the reason for the second ending is in a question. How could the Gospel have ended in such a way with the women fearing, telling no one, and not seeing Jesus? That is a non-starter if there ever was one! But that may be *our* problem and not St Mark's. Mark did not know future generations might have different ideas about how a Gospel ought to end!

So since this is Year B, consider St Mark's Gospel on its own terms. You've heard me say his Gospel seems written on the run and intended to be read in a hurry. It's the *shortest* Gospel, and it wastes no words. The tissue connecting various episodes is the recurrent phrase “*and immediately.*” Mark's Gospel *begins* abruptly, and if chapter 16 verse 8 is the true ending, it *ends* abruptly. Francis Bacon said, “In divinity, many things must be left abrupt.”

All the evidence is that the early Church preserved the tradition of the life and teaching of Our Lord Jesus with scrupulous care. In so many New Testament incidents we notice the supernatural element is actually understated. At the wedding in Cana, only the wine steward knows what really happened. If the four evangelists had difficulty writing an account of our Lord's life, that was due to their need to use ordinary language to describe extra-ordinary events. But how could they describe the Resurrection, when the disciples were confronted by the strangeness of a new, unique, and ineffable experience of God in Christ? Vocabulary was never adequate to this purpose. Saint Mark and the others left

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much unsaid, because the language needed to say it does not exist. Perhaps that is why St Mark's Gospel ends abruptly. It is as if he is telling us *silent wonder* in the presence of the Resurrected Christ expresses it best. After 2000 years, the element of mystery, strangeness, and otherness remains.

This explains the fear and trembling in Mary Magdalene and the others. These women weren't cowards. Attending an execution on Golgotha was not very ladylike! They had been taunted and mocked by the Roman soldiers and the powers-that-be. And at the empty tomb these women had not discovered an unusual moss growing on the side of some rocks! They were the first of our race to look on the order of reality as never seen before. The Resurrection of Christ was a break with the previously known view of how things happen. And because spiritual truth is revealed by spiritual breakthrough, the *angel* is there. These not easily-frightened women had the experience of a numinous dread, which could be felt, whether or not it could be seen.

The angel told the women it is all good news, such as the frightened shepherds had been told at Bethlehem. The spiritual presence of the angel radiates love rather than fear. The women believe. But the strangeness comes across in all the gospel accounts. Resurrections don't happen, and when one did, no one was prepared for it. There was an empty tomb, collapsed grave clothes, and a palpable mystery in the air. They believe, and yet they fear. Any matter-of-fact account of the Resurrection would utterly fail to do justice to the awe-filled discovery the women so unexpectedly made. What ever happened to the burial spices? Did they take them to the returns counter for a refund? No. The women fled!

It is at this point Mark's rough narrative comes to its abrupt end. The world is forever a different place and we know the One Who has risen from the dead. But Mark chose to leave us with a picture of these devoted women, overwhelmed by a strange dread, and fleeing back to a familiar place where they feel secure. The peace and confidence that come from the Risen Lord Jesus would come later, and from Jesus Himself. But thanks to St Mark and the others, something of the actual moment when the empty tomb was discovered, is preserved. It is part of the good news of Easter. Alleluia!