

Terrified

Mark 16:8

April 1, 2018

They went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

It would have been easier if they had found what they were looking for. It would have been easier if they had found the lifeless body of Jesus right where it had been laid just two days before.

It certainly would have been easier for the Roman occupiers. They would be well rid of this minor irritant, this man, well-meaning or not, whose words and actions had sowed seeds of discontent among the rich and powerful and stirred up hope among the poor and powerless of the land.

With him gone, peace could be maintained, the kind of peace Rome liked: everybody knowing their place, paying their taxes, deferring to the authorities, minding their own business, doing their own thing, which was fine with Rome as long as it didn't get in the way of Roman hegemony and commerce.

It would have been easier for the Jewish leadership: priests and rabbis and Pharisees. They would be rid of this thorn in their side, embarrassing them, challenging their authority, undermining their reputation and status among the people, upsetting the traditions by which they survived, by which they preserved whatever history, whatever dignity, whatever distinctive identity as a people they still had left.

Their lot was pitiable. They were vassals to Rome and they knew it. But at least Rome, for the most part, let them be, let them pass their lives, practice their religion, be who and how they wanted to be, calling on the God who kept them happy and posed no threat, no threat at all, to the status quo.

And it would have been easier for these three women, for these women and for all the other followers of Jesus who remained. Yes, their loss was terrible and traumatic. And yes, their grief was great.

But we know how to do grief. It is our lot, always has been, always will be: to lose and to grieve. We would not choose it if we had a choice. We do not relish it, but we know how to do it. There is a kind of comfort in our sorrow. There is a kind of satisfaction in our mourning, holding on to what we loved in memory -- remembering, treasuring, holding, celebrating -- and then we go on. We go on with our lives as they are.

Just as the Roman occupiers did. Just as the Jewish leaders did. There was a time when he was here, but now he is not, so it is back to life as it is, as it will be. Back to normal.

But he wasn't there.

Some stranger, some strange young man wearing white, was there, saying: "He has been raised!" Raised? Raised from death? Raised to life? But, what? How? What does that mean? How can that be?

For the women who saw it and heard it, it was terribly distressing. Terrifying. Grief we can do, but this? This is a thing we know nothing about. This world, a world in which such a thing can be, is not the world we know.

Seeing this, hearing this, knowing this, we cannot go back. We can never go back to our lives as they have been. Our world has been changed forever in ways we do not understand. Our lives have been changed forever in ways we do not understand.

But we do understand that something will be required of us, because we know. He will require something of us, because we know.

He is alive and on the move, calling us to be on the move with him, calling us to be his witnesses, to be his followers still, to be his body, his living presence, in the world. And that is daunting, terrifying.

It is easier for us, too, to memorialize Jesus, to remember him, repeat his words, retell the stories of healing and preaching and forgiving and welcoming and provoking and upsetting ... just so we don't have to do the healing and preaching and forgiving and welcoming and provoking and upsetting!

We remember him -- as a hero, a role model, an ideal, the human ideal. We remember him and point to him and praise him and say: "Look! There is the model of faithfulness! That is how we are meant to live."

And then we go home. We leave church -- we leave him in church -- and we go home and live ... as we have always lived. It is not hard, it does not demand much of us, it is not at all terrifying, to memorialize Jesus.

But if he lives! If he lives ...

If Jesus lives, we cannot go back. We can never go back and live as we have always lived. Our lives -- your life, my life -- are no longer our own. We have been ransomed, our freedom bought and paid for, by his blood. He has a claim on us.

He has won us our freedom, but with that freedom comes tremendous responsibility. To live. To live with him. To live for him.

To live with him and for him by being his witnesses, testifying by our words, but more so by our actions, that he is alive, that the kingdom of God, the reign of love, the day of justice and truth and peace, of which he speaks, is not a distant and wishful dream, but a sure and certain reality already coming into being.

To live with him and for him by being his followers, not merely remembering what he did, but being a part of what he is doing here and now, leaving our safe havens and going with him to places of despair and desperation, to places of hurt and loneliness, to places empty of love and empty of hope.

To live with him and for him by being his body, his living presence, in the world. If Jesus is alive, he will be seen, he will be heard, he will be known in us. We are not just people who go to church. We are Christ's body! That is an awesome responsibility. Terrifying.

Jesus is alive. He goes ahead of us on the path that leads to life. It is a daunting prospect to follow, but he is with us, he will be with us, always. Shall we go?