

“Center of the Story”
Mark 16:1-8
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Easter Sunday
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Things didn't go as they had planned that morning. And they must have realized it was too late to wish they had stayed at home. Until now, they had been on the edge of the story. Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome had been away from the action, away from the danger, away from the spotlights that honed in on Jesus.

No mention is made of them at Jesus' baptism.

No mention is made of them when he heals or teaches or prays.

They are not noted in the group that is sent out two by two to cure the sick or cast out demons.

They do not show up at the last supper.

When they do appear, it's late in the story, at the cross, looking on from a distance.

Only then do we discover that they had followed him and provided for him all through his ministry in Galilee.

Only then do we learn their names.

Only then do we find out that these women and many others had sustained his ministry from the beginning.

Only then do we learn that there were women who were disciples.

Until this moment, in Mark's gospel, they are always on the edge of the story. And it's not clear why.

Maybe they had convinced themselves that their gifts were decidedly behind the scenes. They were the supporting cast, happy to do their work away from the limelight. Maybe they were content to be the disciples who covered the important but unrecognized logistical work: making the travel arrangements, doing the laundry, keeping the calendar. Maybe they were happy to contribute in this supportive way.

Or maybe they were not allowed to be at the center of the story. Like so many movements before and since, perhaps the men claimed the public roles and pushed the women to the side, kept them on the edge, prevented them from bringing their gifts to the center of the ministry entrusted to them. Maybe they longed for their gifts to be recognized, honored, and utilized by the ministry that they believed in. Maybe those who wrote the gospels diminished their role.

Or maybe they didn't want to be at the center of the story. Maybe they were relieved to be standing on the edge of the story, letting someone else be responsible for the plans of the ministry, for the face of the group, for the politics of the organization. Maybe they were happy to stay out of the mess of Jesus politics, the discomfort of conflict, the dangers that increase the closer one gets to the prophet out of Galilee.

Whatever the reasons, on this morning they had come to anoint Jesus' body with spices. They came to pay their respects to their dead friend and complete his funeral. They had come

like many of us come on Easter Sunday – *hardly recognized, seldom named, all but unnoticed* by those who consider themselves closest to Jesus. If noted, only as those who come from *the margins* of his ministry, from *the edge* of his mission, from *the periphery* of his leadership.

Unrecognized, and barely named, the women who came on that first Easter morning must not have sought any special appreciation from the community of disciples who believed they were responsible for Jesus' ministry. The women must not have come because they admired the ones who fled from his compassion, denied his teachings, and betrayed his costly love. Surely they didn't come because they wanted to emulate the inner circle's periodic attachment to worldly success. Surely they didn't come because they agreed with the way more well-known disciples once turned away hungry crowds, hushed children, or disrespected common folk.

They came because they admired the one who gave them hope for a different kind of economy where the hungry are fed and the thirsty are given something to drink. They came because they loved the one who measured success by justice dealt to immigrants, and the elderly, and children. They came because they had stood with the one who fed hungry crowds, welcomed children, and respected people like themselves who knew what it felt to be disrespected because of gender, race, or clan.

They came from the edge of the authorized story to pay their respect to yet another prophet silenced by the powers, yet another peace activist cut down by the sword, yet another religious reformer silenced by religious leaders. They came to put a prophet to rest.

Things didn't go as they had planned that morning. They were planning to find a way to roll away the stone that sealed the tomb. They arrived and the stone had already been rolled back. They were planning to anoint Jesus' body, but they peered into the tomb and were startled by a young man instead. They were planning to go about their work in the same unrecognized, unnamed, unnoticed way. But things didn't go like they planned them that morning. And they were disturbed.

I don't think they were disturbed only because the body was missing. I don't think they were disturbed only because they were startled to find a young man dressed in a white robe sitting where their friend's body should have been. I think they were disturbed because *for the first time in their lives they found themselves named and noticed and recognized in the middle of the story*. They had not expected to be recognized at center of that story, not on this morning.

It's disturbing to find yourself in the middle of God's story when you never planned to be there. I've seen it happen. I've seen an unrecognized disciple spend a couple of years volunteering to tutor a child. She hadn't planned to be in the center of anyone's story. She had just signed up to teach somebody to read. And then she got involved in somebody's life – started bringing Christmas gifts, that turned into food, turned into clothes, turned into talking with the child's teacher, and suffering with the child's family, and pretty soon she's prophesying to power holders to treat children as the gifts from God that they are. She didn't intend to end up in the middle of God's story.

I've seen an unnamed disciple who once prayed for peace from a distance, from the edge. His prayers led him to a worship service, and then he started writing letters, and then he ended up in a demonstration, and then he ended up in the middle of a movement for peace. He didn't intend to be in the middle of God's story.

I've seen a disciple unnoticed by Jesus' self-proclaimed inner circle, who didn't even like the church, said she wasn't interested in organized religion, start asking questions about why there are so many homeless poor. And her questions led her to soup kitchens and mental health clinics, and rehab programs, and that led her into public policy and politics, and when she discovered all the politicians who give up, all of the well intentioned smart people who burn out, she ended up in seminary, searching for a spirituality that sustains justice work. She didn't intend to be in the middle of God's story.

None of these disciples had been recognized as standing close to the center of Jesus' ministry and they must have learned to accept the advantages of living there. When you are viewed as living on the edge of Jesus' ministry, you don't have to worry about being asked to risk your reputation or your life. You don't have to worry about being asked to say anything, do anything, or be anything that you are not prepared to do or say or be. But when God calls you to the center of that ministry, the safety of anonymity, the safety of distance is gone.

It's enough to convince any admirer of Jesus, any lover of Jesus, anyone who esteems the prophet from Galilee, to keep her distance. When you get close to Jesus nothing goes as planned. You find yourself proclaiming good news to the poor, disturbing the peace of the status quo, giving up established ways of earning, established ways of hoarding, established ways of living to say things you never planned to say, to share things you never planned to share, to be someone you never planned to be. You find yourself in the middle of a dangerous, disturbing, thrilling story that you once safely admired from afar.

Standing at the empty tomb that morning, these three marginalized disciples found themselves far from the margins caught up *in the middle of God's story*, disturbed by their public, indispensable witness. Disturbed because they knew that the unrecognized witness they had come to accept had been put to rest.

And who knows where God's story would lead them from here? Who knows to what places of healing, to what places of prophecy, to what places of dangerous discipleship God's story would lead them from here?

By some accounts the women at the tomb that day turned back. They fled from the tomb. Terror and amazement had seized them. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. By some accounts the story ends right here with Mary, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome unable, like the male disciples before them, to carry out their assignment, to accomplish their mission, to participate in Jesus' dangerous story.

By other accounts they recovered from their fear and went and accomplished what they had been asked to do. But I'm not sure it matters what happened next on that first Easter Day. I'm not sure it matters whether they overcame their fear or not. Because by the time we've heard the story they've already taken *us* to the empty tomb. By the time we've heard the story,

they've already taken *us* from the edges of the story to its center. They've already taken *us* from the margins of his mission to its center; from the periphery of his ministry to the center.

We've already seen the empty tomb, *we've* already felt the danger of that comes from getting close to Jesus. *We've* already realized that our best plans for an unnoticed witness have been put to rest. Someone else's plans for our brokenness have been unleashed. Someone else's plans for our losses have been unfurled. Someone else's plans for our failures have been ignited. Someone else's plans for our hurts have been let loose. Someone else's plans for our world have been set free. Someone else's plans for our life have taken root.

Despite our plans to keep our witness restricted to logistical support,
or despite the efforts of those who consider themselves closest to Jesus to push us to the margins,

or despite our desire to stay out of the lights that hone in on Jesus, *God has called us to the center of the story*, to see the empty tomb for ourselves so that *we* might be sent to tell a world in need of hope, in need of good news, that our God will not be managed by any inner circle,

our God will not be killed by any powers;
our God will not be put to rest in quiet anonymity;
our God is on the loose!

The God who proclaims good news to the poor, and justice for the captives; the God who promises there is enough to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and house the homeless even in a down economy; the God who counts the hairs on every treasured head, who promises a future to widows, and immigrants, and orphans; the God who welcomes prodigal children home, who embraces the rejected, and wipes away tears that come in the evening; that God who empties tombs

has brought marginal disciples like us from the edge of that story to its center –
so that we might tell it,
so that we might share it,
so that we might teach it,
so that we might shout it,
so that we might sing it,
so that we might feel it,
so that we might live it.

Whatever plans we had before we came to the tomb on Easter morning have been put to rest. And it's too late to wish we had stayed at home.