

“With Fear and Trembling: Mark’s Resurrection Story.”

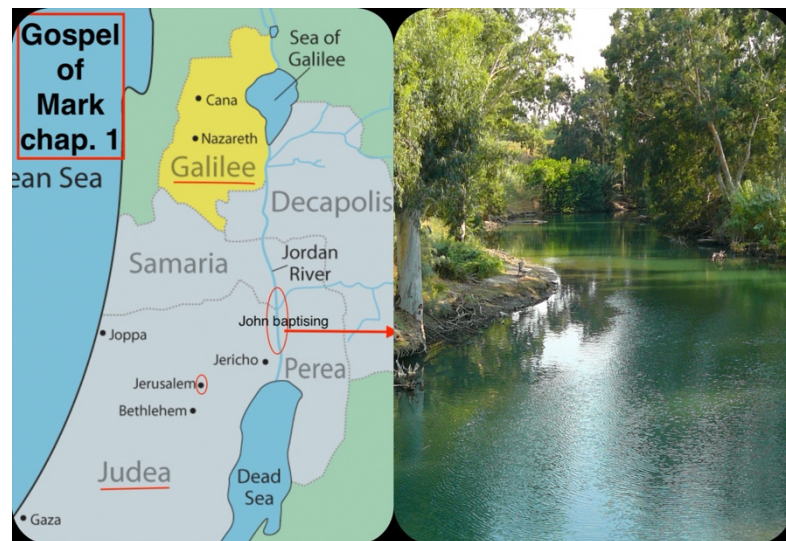
TUMC sermon, 12 April 2026, Tim Schmucker

Note that this sermon included two scriptural story-tellings that I performed in front of the congregation. The first was in the service order space of the first bible reading.

Scripture #1: Mark Chapter One (excerpts)

Introduction:

I’m going to share with you two biblical passages from the Gospel of Mark. The first one, that I’ll share now, is from the very beginning of Mark, and then the second one, during the sermon, is from the very end of Mark. The translation I’m using I have adapted from two renowned Mark scholars. It attempts to translate the original Greek without interpretive smoothing out, and so it maintains the Greek language’s idiosyncratic syntax and grammar.



The beginning of the good news about Jesus the anointed one, the son of God....

John was baptising in the desert and proclaiming a baptism of turning around for pardon of sins. And the whole Judean countryside and all the Jerusalemites were going out to him and being baptised by him in the Jordan River, publicly admitting their sins....

And then it happened! Jesus came from

Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And coming up from the water, immediately he saw the heavens being ripped open and the spirit like a dove coming down onto him. And there was a voice from the heavens, “You are my beloved son. I delight in choosing you....”

And Jesus went through Galilee proclaiming the good news about God, and saying, “The right time is fulfilled, and the rule of God has arrived. Turn around and put trust in the good news.”

Sermon introduction

I want to share a story with you this morning. But I have a dilemma. The story is actually the very end of a much larger story. So I can't just begin with today's story, because, well, how can we fully understand a story if we only hear the ending, the climax? For you Blue Jays fans, it would be like knowing the end-of-season standings in April. Or it's like watching the final 10 min of "Beyond the Spider-Verse" before it is even released next year. Or it's settling down in a comfy sofa with a Stephen King best-seller and starting with the last chapter. — What? You actually do that?!?

Last Sunday, Easter morning, we culminated our dissonance-filled walk with the Gospel of John through Lent and Holy Week. A joy- and hope-filled resurrection it was. This morning, on what many Christian traditions call the second Sunday of Easter, I want to share with you the Gospel of Mark's story of Jesus' resurrection. It's significantly different from John's. There's just an empty tomb. Only the three women go there. It points back to Galilee. It's the last eight verses of Mark's entire gospel. Yes, only eight verses. If you remember more verses at Mark's ending, those were added a century or two later. Apparently, the scribes copying Mark's Gospel by hand didn't like his ending, so they added many more verses. Today we're sticking with Mark's original ending.

So, I need to give you a bit of context of Mark's Gospel story as a whole. The first to note is that the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels, was shaped as one story— a cohesive and gripping narrative with plots, subplots and twists. One major plot is the identity of Jesus: "Who is this man?" many people ask. Who is this guy announcing that the Rule of God has come?

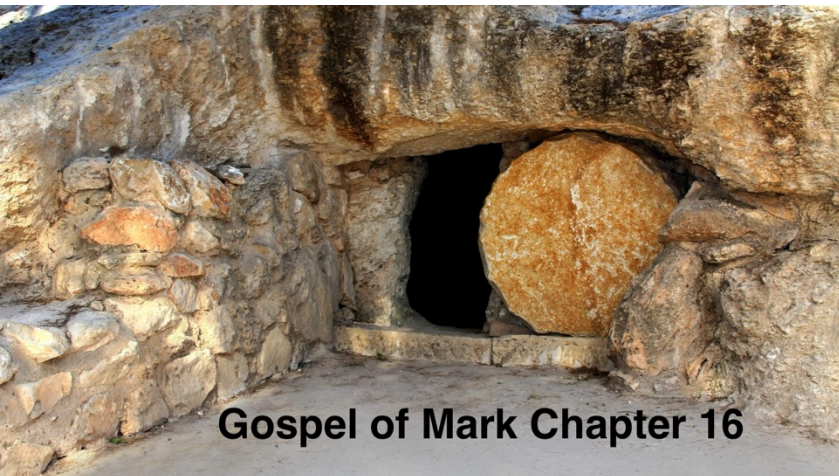
Another plot theme throughout Mark is the cluelessness of Jesus' disciples. The women and men who follow him just don't get what he is about. At one point, an exasperated Jesus shouts out, "You have eyes but don't see, you have ears but don't hear. How is it that you still do not understand?" Only in the last days do some finally get it. But that's getting ahead of the story.

The second context detail you need is that in the many decades after Jesus' death, Mark's Gospel was not read. It wasn't a book. Now today, we read the Bible and gospel passages, but first century culture was oral. Only the elite were literate. Only the 5% could read. But reading wasn't necessary because all stories and news, messages and gossip, letters and

literature were shared orally. And often dramatically, in public and private presentations. So, Mark's gospel wasn't read but rather performed. As one complete story. And there's more: audiences weren't silent during lively two-hour long performances but rather were active and engaged listeners who would shout out their approvals and disapprovals throughout.

I'll now share with you the very end of the Gospel of Mark. You may heckle, if you wish.

Scripture #2: Mark Chapter 16



Gospel of Mark Chapter 16

When the sabbath was past, Mary the Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salomé went and bought aromatic oils, so they might go and anoint Jesus' body. And getting up very early — on the first day after the sabbath — they went out to the tomb — just as the sun was rising.

And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us, away from

the entrance of the tomb?" But looking up, they saw that the stone had already been rolled back! — Now, it was a big stone!

And going into the tomb, they saw a young man, sitting on the right, clothed in a white robe, and they were terrified.

But he said to them "Don't be terrified. You're looking for Jesus — the Nazarene who was crucified Raised! He is not here! Look, the place where they laid him! But you, go tell his disciples — even Peter — 'He is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

But going out from the tomb, the women — they fled. For trembling and terror had seized them. And they said nothing, to anyone. For they were afraid.

Sermon

They said nothing. To anyone. Mark's Gospel ends with the three women disciples not following the instructions of the divine messenger because they ... were ... afraid. Was fear, though, reason enough to disobey? We may want to immediately answer, "no, fear was no excuse." But wait! They had serious reasons to be fearful.

Imagine. Imagine Mark's Gospel being performed during the horrendous and tragic Judean/Jewish uprising against Roman imperial rule. This insurrection began about 30 years after Jesus' death and culminated in the complete destruction of the Temple and most of Jerusalem. 20–50% of Judea's entire population died during this seven-year-war. 200 to 500 thousand Jews lost their lives. Imagine what would be good news for this war-weary people. ... Peace, perhaps?

Imagine. Imagine that the audiences receiving Mark's Gospel consisted of both committed followers of Jesus and others who weren't so sure. Mostly Judean Jews and some Gentiles. Now imagine yourself as one of these in the audience. Are you fully with Jesus? Or are you wavering? Or perhaps even skeptical? Are you a Jew, rooted in a 2000-year faith tradition? Or a newbie Gentile?

Imagine. Imagine hearing Mark's Jesus proclaim at the beginning of his ministry in Galilee "the time is fulfilled. The rule of God has arrived. Turn around and put your trust in the good news." Imagine then hearing stories of Jesus' Galilean ministry of holistic well-being— for both Jews and Gentiles. And how time and again, he rejects violence as a response to the oppressive domination of the powerful rulers and authorities. How he enters Jerusalem on a donkey rather than a war horse. How he chooses to submit to being arrested rather than responding with violence.

Imagine you recognise the Judean tradition of releasing a prisoner each year during Passover. Pilate the Roman governor in Judea offers to release Jesus. But "the crowd"—this crowd very unlike the adoring crowds in Galilee; this one linked in with the Judean religious-political establishment—this crowd screams no, and yells for Barabbas to be set free. Who is Barabbas? A Judean Jewish fighter in the insurrection against Rome who murdered, presumably a Roman soldier.

Imagine what it is like to finally understand that Jesus is the Messiah of Peace. A non-violent Messiah. The King is a servant. Against all expectations. Good news! The Rule of God turns everything upside-down.

During his ministry, Jesus' followers repeatedly don't get it. They think following Jesus is about gaining power and privilege and honour. Towards the end, they do come to understand Jesus as God's Messiah of Peace, and some are even willing to die with him. But they are unable to follow through. The cost is too high. Peter for example not only gets it but even commits to

following Jesus all the way to the cross. To death. Well, we know how that turns out. Cue the rooster.

Let's return to Mark's empty tomb / resurrection story. As you know, the other gospels have their own resurrection stories, with additional and different details. The Gospel of John's narrative is fresh in our minds from last Sunday. Today however we are focused on Mark's Gospel story, on Mark's literary whole. If we bring into Mark details from the other gospels, the integrity and focus of Mark's message becomes diminished, even lost. So, if you remember other details, please set them aside. They don't belong to Mark's story.

So Jesus is crucified and buried. Three women disciples, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James—this Mary is actually Jesus' mother—and Salomé get up very early Sunday morning while it's still dark to take aromatic oils to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. Now, anointing the body was a core part of Jewish burial rites, but it had been ignored or bypassed, perhaps due to the fast-approaching sabbath.

So the women head to the tomb to offer Jesus a proper burial. Worried about the huge stone blocking the tomb's entrance, they are amazed that it's already been rolled back. Inside the tomb, they encounter a young man wearing a white robe—a symbol for a divine messenger—who tells them that Jesus is not in the tomb. He has been raised. In Greek that sentence is one word. RAISED! The young man then gives the women clear instructions—to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus will meet you all back in Galilee, just as he told you.

But Salomé, Mary Magdalene, and Mary, Jesus' mother are seized by trembling and terror, and they flee. They say nothing, to anyone. They are too afraid.

Afraid — the very last word of the Gospel of Mark. This is not the eucatastrophe pastor Peter preached last Sunday—Tolkien's term for a surprise good ending. This is not the eucatastrophe of the other gospels: Mark ends in fear. There is no rejoicing. Jesus, God's non-violent Messiah of Peace, is crucified by vicious Roman and Judean leaders. Fear of these authorities hinders Jesus' disciples from fully following him. Fear of these violent rulers prevents the three women from delivering the message to go back to Galilee and meet up with Jesus again. Yet, I think they deserve our compassion, our understanding. Even though their fear paralyzes them.

There's a crucial nuance in the divine messenger's dispatch to Peter and to all the others who abandoned Jesus: Your failure is not the end, it's not unforgiveable. You didn't understand,

but let's try again; in Galilee you have another opportunity, back where you started with Jesus. There is restoration in trying again, in continuing to join in with God's Rule. Jesus' call remains: Come and follow me.

This divine message is also for us today. If you've failed Jesus, that's not the end. You didn't understand? Okay, let's try again. Let's go back to Galilee, back to the beginning of Jesus' life and teachings. You can again join with Jesus' way, with the rule of God. We can again choose to follow Jesus. This is indeed good news!

Today at TUMC, Mark's resurrection story calls us to deep and honest reflection.

1. Are you a follower of the Messiah of Peace? If not, what's holding you back?
2. What have you—we—not understood?
3. In what parts of our lives do we deny Jesus?
4. Where does fear prevent you—and us as a congregation—from fully living into God's Rule of Peace and Justice? From fully following the risen Jesus?
5. Jesus had strong words for people in power. If your faith doesn't challenge systems of power, it becomes a tool of oppression rather than liberation. Is it?

Fear though is real. And paralysing. Fear is also the opposite of faith, and of trust. Perhaps our first step is to recognise and name our fears. Audrey shared last month that Mennonite young adults across Canada are fearful about their future. I see that among my extended family and friends. Some fear the coming WWII. Others the climate apocalypse that is upon us. Many feel a deep sense of doom with the demented madmen, autocrats and theocrats, waging wars on whims. Panic and dread are bedfellows of fear.

Fear can be paralysing. In my neighbourhood, just a few blocks northwest of here, there is a house with a large red banner across the front porch that declares "LAND BACK." I've often wanted to stop and talk to the Indigenous family who lives there. But I haven't. I fear that their truth may include personal responsibility for reparations, not just governmental. I don't know. For me, uncertainty and dread engender fear.

Fear and dread can also lead to despair. Robin Pacific is a Toronto artist, peace activist and spiritual director, and she writes in today's Toronto Star, no matter how we deal with all this impending doom, "the temptation to sink into despair is always there."

Now, as Canadians "peace, order and good government" are foundational to our society. As they should be. But what about when our government policies—and our voting—

support the status quo for the privileged, leaving only breadcrumbs for the rest? Does fear compel us to support the status quo? Does fear lead us toward finding the myth of redemptive violence compelling? That myth certainly has our country preparing for violence rather than peace. And when we fear, we respond in the ways we have prepared for, as pastor Peter so poignantly challenged us last Sunday.

Yet fear is not the last word; it's not the end. We too can go back to Galilee. We too can go back to the beginning of Jesus' life and teachings. Deepen our understandings. Walk with Jesus again to Jerusalem, to confront the rulers. We can face our fears, knowing that God embraces and holds them.

Good news: Jesus is risen! He's back in Galilee, eager to give us another opportunity to more fully understand him and God's Rule of justice, peace and non-violence. Jesus is calling us back to Galilee, back to the beginning. He is still saying "come and follow me."

So, what will it be? Is your faith stronger than your fear? Will you invite others to join in the good news and go back to the beginning in Galilee? Will you go? To walk with Jesus again, to deepen your understanding? Let's go back to Galilee.

Or will you keep silent, stuck in your fear?