

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Audience:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. Please rise in body or spirit and join in our Responsive Psalm Reading, which is number 55 in your black psalter. "Hear my prayer, O God. Do not hide yourself from my petition."

Audience:

"Listen to me and answer me. I have no peace, because of my cares."

Elizabeth Propst:

"I am shaken by the noise of the enemy and by the pressure of the wicked."

Audience:

"For they have cast an evil spell upon me and are set against me in fury."

Elizabeth Propst:

"My heart quakes within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me."

Audience:

"Fear and trembling have come over me, and horror overwhelms me."

Elizabeth Propst:

"And I said, 'Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.'"

Audience:

"For had it been an adversary who taunted me, then I could have borne it. Or had it been an enemy who vaunted himself against me, then I could have hidden from him."

Elizabeth Propst:

"But it was you, someone after my own heart, my companion, my own familiar friend."

Audience:

"We took sweet counsel together, and walked with the throng in the house of God."

Elizabeth Propst:

"Cast your burden upon God, who will sustain you."

Audience:

"God will never let the righteous fall."

Elizabeth Propst:

Our reading this morning comes from the Gospel according to Mark 6:1-8. "When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint Him. And very early on the first day of the week when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back."

"As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who is crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see Him just as He told you.' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Here ends the lesson. This is the reading assigned to us by our lectionary, by our church calendar of readings. And this is the very end of the Gospel of Mark. There are technically 12 more verses that follow it, but scholars agree that these were later additions and that Mark, which is the oldest gospel too, originally ended with these eight lines.

There's a lot to unpack there, that in the first Christian narrative we have, Jesus doesn't appear at the end. We don't see Him. He's gone. He's just not here. We see where He was, but He is absent. And instead, we're left only with this image of three women fleeing in terror, unable to speak.

I'm not sure why the lectionary assigns this passage on what seems like a pretty random Tuesday morning in September. It's a lot to deal with, so I'm actually not really going to deal with it. And if you would like to learn more about the Gospel of Mark, you'll just have to join us from 9:30 - 10:30 on Sunday mornings for the Faith and Life Forum, where this year beginning in October, we're going to be reading through the four Gospels as literature, paying attention to what they mean as stories. It's a wonderful time. And our pastor here, Matt, has a beautiful reading of the Gospel of Mark that I cannot do justice to and I definitely can't do justice to in five to six minutes. So you'll just have to show up Sunday, October 1st.

Instead, what I'd like to dwell on this morning is another detail that jumped out at me reading this passage. To be honest, I've known for about a week that I was scheduled to speak for this morning, and I did not really sit down with the passage until last night. And so, given my own unpreparedness, I think this detail about these women's unpreparedness right at the beginning, where we're told that they're discussing who's going to roll away the stone, that leaped out at me. I found it relatable.

We've only had about one week of classes, and yet in defiance of the known laws of physics, I think I'm two weeks behind already. And so, I found this moment comforting, that they don't know what they're doing, that they are not ready, and they set out on the road anyways. Which is not to say that the task set before them is the same as mine, because the task set before them is to live in the wake of unimaginable and unexpected loss, and the task set before me is to send some emails, not even a lot of emails.

But when I imagine the emotions that they are feeling, I don't think they're emotions that are unfamiliar to any of us, and they're bewildered, they're grieving, they're afraid. I imagine they're angry. And often, regularly in my life, I look at the world and I feel a sense of all of those things, of bewilderment, of nameless grief, and I often feel a lot of anger looking at the world that I usually realize is just anger at

myself really for not feeling like I'm doing enough for other people or for God or for myself. And I don't mean that in a soul bearing, confessional way. I hope these are feelings that are relatable for many of us. And if not, who's your therapist? And may I please have their email?

Many of us here are embedded at an institution or residents within a country even that seem to define their identities just as being the best, like what's Harvard? It's just the best. What's America? It's just the best, which is a deranged way to think about who we ought to be. But that sense of who we ought to be echoes and is probably derived in some large part from a vision of Christianity too, that just defines being a Christian as just trying to be the best all the time, of trying to re-be the Messiah incarnate, when the whole point I hope of our faith is that we are not the Messiah, which is why Jesus has to show up in the first place. And that we might aspire to live like Him, but we also know that our failure is in some way inevitable.

And so, I find a lot of comfort in this detail. These three women, waking up before dawn, gathering their belongings, a couple of yawns, there's no Starbucks in ancient Judea. And they set down the road together, and at one point, Mary Magdalene, she turns to Mary, mother of James, and she says just, "Mary, mother of James, just to check, you've got the lead on the stone rolling, right?" And Mary, the mother of James says, "I thought Salome was in charge of stone rolling." And Salome says, "I indicated very clearly in the group email that I was not going to be the point person for the stone rolling." And like all people who've embarked on badly planned day trips, they eventually throw up their hands and say, "Well, we're just going to have to figure it out when we get get there."

And that's just what I'm going to carry away from this story this morning, not feeling ready to face up to the whole thematic and theological weight of what the ending of the first Gospel might mean for us as Christians. I'm just paying attention to these three women in their moment of deepest grief and confusion, who just set out to perform whatever act of mercy they can. And they're going to anoint somebody that they think is dead, which is something oriented towards the one that has died, honoring somebody who's lost. But it's also an act of mercy to themselves, to mourn, to perform difficult actions, and live amidst difficult feelings even if they don't feel ready. Nobody is ready for Christ's death. We see in this passage that nobody's really ready for His life, either. He shows back up and nobody knows what to do with themselves.

So that's what I'm going to take away. Amidst darkness and confusion and the total unreadiness that I feel for life, which again, I hope is relatable in some sense, that amidst that confusion, it is still incredibly sacred to just wake up and orient oneself to towards whatever space of need we see and just start walking. And if you'd like to think more about the Gospel of Mark, you'll just have to join us, October 1st, 9:30. I'll see you there.

Will you pray with me? God of all creation, there are many things about you that astonish and terrify us. Perhaps most of all, sometimes what we find most fearful is the extent of your mercy. It is difficult for us to be merciful to others, difficult most of all to be merciful to ourselves, given that we know our own faults so intimately. And yet, you know us better than we know ourselves and still we are forgiven. Teach us to do the same. Amen.

Audience:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise in body or spirit for the Lord's Prayer. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and

forgive us our trespasses, as we who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power of the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Please join in our concluding hymn, Now Thank Thee All our God, number five.

Christ has no hands in this world but your hands, no voice but your voice. May our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love, today and all days. Amen.

Audience:

Amen.