

SOLEMNITY OF EASTER (VIGIL)

Mark 16:1-7

This Sunday is extensive and covers two entire chapters of Mark's Gospel. Sunday we celebrate the great Solemnity of our Lord's Resurrection (Easter). The primary liturgy for this celebration is the Easter Vigil. Our Scripture passage for this liturgy is taken from the Gospel of Mark 16:1-7. The New Testament accounts of the Resurrection of Jesus are well known to us. Due to our familiarity with these texts we can easily overlook significant details by which each of the Gospel writers wished to communicate particular meaning. The Gospel of Mark offers numerous insights that are meant to inspire, encourage, and guide our lives as disciples.

One of the first things to note about Mark's account of the resurrection is the emphasis he places on the stone (Greek: *Lithon*) used to seal the tomb of Jesus. This emphasis is demonstrated by the frequent use of the word "stone" (four times) in these short verses. The stone that was rolled in front of the tomb is a real preoccupation of the women who go to anoint Jesus and who wonder who will roll it back from the "entrance". It is described as being "very large". Mark is emphasizing the stone because it serves a symbolic function: the stone is the obstacle that separates the women from their friend and Lord. The key to understanding the symbolic role of the stone is that it obstructs the "entrance" preventing those who wish to enter from doing so. If we were told that the stone closed the "exit", that would indicate that it was an obstacle for Jesus' Resurrection, but that is not the case. The stone is not an obstacle for experiencing Jesus; rather, the stone is the obstacle that disciples encounter, which prevents them from entering into the tomb (dying with Christ) so as to be transformed by His risen life (Resurrection).

To enter the tomb and be transformed was an image of Christian Baptism in the Early Church. The stone becomes a symbol for all the obstacles of faith we must overcome in our journey to embrace and live out our Baptism as disciples of Jesus. For the early Christians during the age of persecution, it was difficult to make the decision to become a disciple of Jesus because that decision might cost them their lives, their friends, or their possessions. Yet still so many overcame that obstacle. For the early Jews, becoming Christian could mean being "cut off" from their families and loved ones and declared "dead" with no further contact or relationship or inheritance. That rejection was a tremendous obstacle (stone) that prevented many from making the decision of faith. Our world of discipleship is different from that of the first century Christians. Some of our obstacles are more ideological instead of practical.

1. *What have been some of the "stones" you have had to overcome in your journey to Jesus?*
2. *What internal fears can prevent someone from being willing to "die with Christ"?*
3. *How does the message of the resurrection address those fears?*
4. *Mark's Gospel does not tell us who rolled back the stone for the women, but someone did. Who do you think was the instrument that removed their obstacle of discipleship?*
5. *Who do you know that is struggling with the ability to surrender fully to Jesus, and how can you be the instrument that helps remove the obstacles holding them back from embracing and living the fullness of Christian Baptism?*
6. *The women in this passage went to the tomb despite the fact that they believed*

the stone would still be there (preventing them from entering). Why do you think they did that and how does their witness of faith motivate you to face a situation in your life as a disciple?

The second detail that Mark includes is that of the women's names. Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary (the mother of James, known as the lesser), and Joses from Mark 15:40 are no newcomers to Jesus' family of disciples and friends. They have been a part of the Gospel story for some time. In fact, some of them had rather diverse and even turbulent backgrounds. Salome is the mother of Zebedee's children as we can infer from Matthew's account of this event (see Mt 27:56). She is also the author of that impertinent petition to have her sons sitting with Jesus--one on His right and one on His left-- in His Kingdom (see Mt 20 :20-21). Mary Magdalene will be identified in Mark 16:9 as the one from whom Jesus cast out seven demons. These references tell us that at least two of these women came from less than holy or healthy backgrounds! We were also informed in Luke 8:3 that these women ministered to Jesus in Galilee. We were further told in Mark 15:40 that they witnessed Jesus' death. Finally, Mark 15:47 mentions the two Marys as having witnessed the burial of Jesus. Mark tells us the names of these women at various points in the Gospel story for a reason; He wants us to see in them examples of people who care for and minister to Jesus until the end.

Relationship with Jesus doesn't just mean assisting Him for a moment and then sending Him on His way. Instead it means being there to serve Him as His needs warrant at different moments and stages of His life--and our lives. Relationship with Jesus means that we are never exempt from the duties of discipleship so long as Jesus needs our loving service. The women served our Lord by supporting His ministry, standing by Him in His agony, and caring for His crucified body. They were with Him when He was popular and welcomed by the crowds in Galilee, as well as when He was jeered and despised on Calvary. They are examples of perseverance and thoroughness to inspire us. It was not a glorious task to serve Jesus by anointing His body, but it was the task the women thought Jesus needed and so they were willing to do it. The love they had for Jesus motivated them to go early in the morning with a humble and caring attitude to seek Him. As a result, something happened to them. Not only did they become disciples who received the news of the Resurrection but they were also sent to proclaim that news to others. Those who had cared for Jesus in His earthly ministry are now told to bring others to the Lord through their witness of faith. The example of the women offers us some guidance for our lives as disciples as well.

First, we need to look at our service to the Lord and evaluate how well we live out the qualities of perseverance and thoroughness. Sometimes we can limit our discipleship to doing the things that are easy or the things we enjoy rather than responding to whatever the Lord's needs are in a given moment. (Remember: The needs of Jesus are presented to us in the lives of others--those who bear His name as Christians.) Sometimes, too, we can find it easy to follow the Lord when it is popular or non-threatening but difficult when it means standing alone with the Crucified One abandoned on Calvary. We can also find it difficult to live out our discipleship in obscure hidden actions like caring for the details of a proper burial. When disciples enter into a committed relationship with Jesus, then nothing is more important than being with the Lord in every moment no matter what the cost or the

reward.

Second, like the women, we need to be reminded that there is a point in our discipleship when we are called to be witnesses who invite others to Jesus rather than keeping our relationship with the Lord only to ourselves. Discipleship may be a deeply personal experience, but it is not a private experience. Just as the women were sent to share the message that transformed their sorrow into joy, so, too, we are sent to do the same.

1. *If someone were to ask, "Are you a committed Christian?" how would you respond and what reasons would you give?*
2. *What are ways in which people can be tempted to limit their discipleship to only doing what they want rather than doing what Jesus needs (present in the lives of those who bear His name)?*
3. *Which action of the women do you find most challenging to live out in your life as a disciple (supporting Jesus through their resources, standing with Jesus on Calvary, going quietly to care for His body in the tomb, or becoming witnesses of the Resurrection to others)?*
4. *Salome and Mary Magdalene show us that people from distressed backgrounds can become incredible disciples. How does this insight give you encouragement?*

The third detail that Mark gives us in this account is when he refers to the timing of the women's visit as being on "Day On". Some translations read "first day of the week" but that is not really accurate. Mark uses the phrase "Day One" for a reason--because it alludes to Genesis 1:5 as it is written in the Greek copy of the Old Testament also known as the Septuagint. References to Genesis have been present in other areas of Mark's Gospel as well (see Mk 1:1). By including this phrase in the context of the Resurrection, Mark is telling us that a new creation is taking place and that the disciples are becoming a new reality. Indeed, through Baptism (immersion into the Death and Resurrection of Jesus), we are transformed from our human nature into Children of God and we become a new creation. Day One is a powerful day for Christians! The Gospels relate that on Day One many other things happen as well. This is the first day that Jesus' disciples truly understand the fullness of the "Good News" (lit. Gospel). It is the day on which the women become witnesses of the resurrection--the first disciple missionaries who share the good news with others. The other Gospels relate additional important elements that take place on the first day of the week. For Luke it is the day on which disciples recognize, celebrate, and receive Jesus' hidden presence offered to them in the form of broken bread (see Lk 24:35). In John, it is the day on which the Apostles receive the Holy Spirit and are sent to carry on the mission of Jesus in the world (see Jn 20:22).

Day One for us as Christians is Sunday. It is the day on which we gather each week to experience, celebrate, and receive each of these graces in our lives. In our liturgy, we hear the message of the Gospel and receive the hidden presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. We are also commissioned to "go forth" at the end of our worship to be missionaries who share what we have received with others. The liturgy is where we are regenerated and renewed in our Baptismal identity as the Body of Christ in the Church. What an awesome privilege to experience Day One each and every Sunday! Unfortunately a misunderstanding of, or lack

of appreciation for, these graces can reduce our ability to receive and experience them when we gather for the liturgy on Day One of the week. If we are not seeking to hear the Good News of God's action in and through Jesus, we will not listen well to the Scriptures and the homily. If we are not seeking to live our lives more fully in Christ, we will not welcome the graces that challenge us to become the Body of Christ. If we are not seeking ways to be more generous with our time and talent, we will not understand how we are being sent to bring Christ to others.

1. *If we do not believe that Jesus truly offers His "Real Presence" to us in the Eucharist, we will be indifferent to an opportunity for a life-transforming encounter every time we receive Communion.*
2. *How does this understanding of Day One, as experienced by the women, challenge you in your experience of Day One each week?*
3. *For which grace of Day One do you need to have a deeper understanding and appreciation?*
4. *What can a faith community do to help all people experience the diverse and enriching graces of Day One in the liturgy?*

Lastly, Mark states that when the women enter the tomb they see a young man dressed in a white robe. That detail is intentional and Mark is trying to tell us something by it. In order to understand the message, we need to recall that in Mark 14:51 we were told about a "young man" who fled Jesus as our Lord was being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. When that young man fled, he left behind even his garment and ran away naked. In the ancient world and in Christian symbolism, clothing was a statement of a person's identity. The young man who fled Jesus was casting off his "identity" in order to detach Himself from the Lord in a moment of fearful suffering. Now we are told that a young man is sitting in the tomb dressed in a white robe. The white robe is a symbol of the Christian's Baptismal garment--our identity in Christ. The young man in the tomb represents a disciple who is committed in Baptism and is able to "die with Christ and be buried with him" (see Rom 6:3- 5 and Col 2:12). White is the color of the Resurrection, and the robe of the young man symbolizes that he also shares in Christ's Resurrection. It is this young man who now announces the Gospel message to others. He has come a long way! His journey of discipleship has led him from being someone who would discard his Christian commitment as soon as it involved personal sacrifice, to becoming someone who could not only die with Christ and be buried with Him, but also share in our Lord's resurrected eternal life. He is no longer afraid of rejection, persecution, association, or any other sacrifice; he is now a courageous witness of how God's grace can transform us into a new creation when we consciously and intentionally "clothe ourselves" with Christ in the waters of Baptism.

1. *Do you identify more with the young man in the Garden of Gethsemane or the young man in the tomb of Jesus?*
2. *What are significant milestones in your life of discipleship that have demonstrated your ability to remain steadfast in faith and not falter in fear?*
3. *What do you think were the significant factors that helped transform the young man's faith from one that faulted in fear to one that courageously witnessed the resurrection?*