

SERMON NOTES

Easter

Synaxis Gospel
Mark 16:2-8

THE RESURRECTION

INTRODUCTION

Although the Church reads the account of the Resurrection from the other Gospel writers during services on Saturday evening and at other services on Sunday, the Gospel of Mark is read during Divine Liturgy on Easter Sunday. Mark's account of the Resurrection ends abruptly with a statement of fear, a statement that has puzzled biblical scholars and caused scribal copyists to add another ending, giving a summary of the rest of the resurrection story. However, Mark's original ending has a message for the Church as a whole and for the Armenian Church in particular.

Although verse 1 is not a part of our selected reading, it is Mark's introduction to his account of the Resurrection and a few notes about it may be helpful.

*And when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene,
and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought
spices, that they might come and anoint Him.*

Mark 16:1

There were a number of Sabbaths in Old Testament Law. The seventh day of the week (our Saturday) was called the Sabbath, but also other designated days such as Passover were called Sabbaths. The Sabbath mentioned here was a Saturday, because the next day was the first day of the week (our Sunday). The Sabbath ended at night fall.

Evidently, the markets, which were closed for the Sabbath, reopened at nightfall and the women were able to buy the spices. Because, according to John, Jesus died and was buried just before the evening of Passover, the women were unprepared for the unexpected death and burial of Jesus. Thus, they had to wait more than twenty four hours for the markets to reopen to prepare for their early morning visit to the tomb.

Mary Magdalene was a follower of Jesus that we know only a few things about. 'Magdalene' may indicate that she was from a town called Magdala on the Sea of Galilee. She had been possessed of seven demons and Jesus had cast them out.¹ She was one of the women at the crucifixion.² She was one of the women who watched as Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus buried Jesus.³ She was with the women who planned to

¹ Luke 8:2

² John 19:25.

³ Matthew 27:61

anoint Jesus' body with spices as soon as possible.⁴ She ran back to tell the disciples that the women believed that the body had been stolen.⁵ She returned with Peter and John to the tomb, and after they left, she was the first person to see the risen Lord.⁶ She reported this to the disciples who did not believe her.⁷ Despite Dan Brown's fanciful fiction, we know nothing more about her.

Mary, the mother of James, was Mary the mother of a disciple, James the less (not the brother of John), and of Joses, and was mentioned as one of the women who watched the crucifixion in Mark 15:40.⁸ Here she is named as the mother of James⁹ and in Mark 15:47 she was named as the mother of Joses and one of the women who observed the burial of Jesus.

Salome is only mentioned in Mark 15:40 as one of the women who watched the crucifixion and in 16:1 as one of the women who came to anoint his body.

Other women are mentioned in the group of women disciples:

Matthew mentions that "many women were there looking on (the crucifixion) from a distance, who had followed Jesus from Galilee, ministering to Him [probably cooking for Jesus and the twelve, as well as supplying funds from their own means as He traveled from place to place] among whom was Mary Magdalene, along with Mary the mother of James and Joseph (Joses), and the mother of the sons of Zebedee. At the tomb, Matthew only lists two, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary."

Luke's list is described as "the women who had come with Him out of Galilee" and includes Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and "the other women with them."¹⁰

John lists only Mary Magdalene.¹¹

Obviously, these women disciples of our Lord no more expected that Jesus would return to life in three days, than did the male disciples. None of them had understood Jesus when he had said that he would rise again in three days.

SYNTAXIS READING

Mark 16:2-8

And very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?"

And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at

⁴ Mark 16:1

⁵ John 20:2.

⁶ John 20:11-17.

⁷ John 20:18; Luke 24:23-26.

⁸ She is also mentioned as the mother of James and Joses in Matthew 27:56

⁹ Another passage in which she is called the mother of James is Luke 24:10.

¹⁰ Luke 23:55 and 24:10.

¹¹ John 20:1.

the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed.

And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, Who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him.

But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you.' "

And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

NOTES

And very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?"

"They" are the women Mark has listed in verse 1: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome.

"When the sun had risen" means 'just after dawn.' The time is put differently by the other Gospel writers. Matthew says, "as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week."¹² Luke says, "At early dawn."¹³ John writes, "While it was still dark." [Literally: she came in the morning darkness]¹⁴ The point they all make is that it was very early.

The tomb was fashioned with a heavy stone rolled in a groove in front of the tomb opening. Once the stone was in the groove it was difficult to move it. The women pondered their dilemma.

And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed.

They looked up possibly as they rounded a curve in the road, or else they had been watching their path because of the darkness.

All of the Gospel writers mention that the women who came saw the rolled away stone. It is at this point that we have to piece together what happened from all the accounts.

From Matthew:

We learn that before the women arrived there had been an earthquake and an angel had descended from heaven and had rolled away the stone and had sat on it. His appearance was so

¹² Matthew 28:1.

¹³ Luke 24:1.

¹⁴ John 20:1

frightening, the guards, which the Jews had placed there, had been completely stunned.

From John: We know that before the women saw the angel, they had decided that the body must have been stolen. Mary Magdalene ran back to tell Peter and the disciples.

From Matthew: We read that the guards came to, and ran off to tell the Jews what had happened.

From John: Peter and John ran towards the tomb with Mary evidently following.

From Matthew and Mark: Meanwhile before Peter and John arrive, the women enter the tomb.

From Luke: The women are perplexed, and suddenly two men appear in shining clothes and the women are terrified.

From Matthew and Mark: Only one angel is reported. The women see the angel and hear the report that He has risen. Mark stops his account with the terror of the women. Matthew relates that they are terrified and leave to leave to go to the disciples [somehow missing the running Peter and John, or perhaps the women were too terrified to speak at that point and do not stop the running three.]

From John: Peter and John see the empty tomb, and decide that, indeed, the body was stolen. They go to their homes. Mary Magdalene stays behind at the tomb, weeping. Jesus appears to her there.

From Matthew: Jesus then appeared to the other women somewhere along the way, as they were going to report to the disciples. The disciples did not believe any of the women.

And he said to them, “Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, Who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him.

The women were frightened. The angel tried to calm them, unsuccessfully, by pointing out the facts of the resurrection. They have come to the right place, but Jesus has risen.

But go, tell His disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you.’ ”

The women had a job to do. They must go and report the glad tidings to the grieving disciples. The angel especially mentions Peter. Peter was shedding bitter tears over his failure the night of the arrest—three times he had denied even knowing the Lord, the last time with curses. It is believed that Mark wrote his Gospel account with the assistance of Peter. Thus, this special mention of his name by the angel must have been very meaningful to Peter—as a sign that he was not cast off by our Lord for his betrayal.

Before the crucifixion, according to Mark, Jesus had told the disciples about the ordeal to come, and that, afterwards, He would meet them in Galilee. This message the women were to carry reminded the disciples of that promise to meet them.

Five times in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus told the disciples that He would rise again from the dead. They did not understand, because they did not believe that the Christ would ever die, but would reign forever.

The Son of Man was a divine title of the Christ, the Messiah, the King. The title is the one Jesus chose most often in referring to Himself. It is derived from Daniel 7:13-14

Mark 8:31-32

“And He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. And He was stating the matter plainly. And Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.”

Mark 9:9-10

And as they were coming down from the mountain [of Transfiguration], He gave them orders not to relate to anyone what they had seen, until the Son of Man should rise from the dead. And they seized upon that statement, discussing with one another what rising from the dead might mean.”

Mark 9:31-32

“For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, ‘The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later.’ But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.’ “

Mark 10:32-34

“And they were on the road going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking on ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were fearful. And again He took the twelve aside and began to tell them what was going to happen to Him, saying, ‘ Behold we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him to the Gentiles [Romans]. And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again.’ “

Mark 14: 26-28

“And after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, ‘You will all fall away, because it is written, “I WILL STRIKE DOWN THE SHEPHERD, AND THE SHEEP SHALL BE SCATTERED.” But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.’ “

And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The women, like the men, had not understood Jesus’ teaching about His death and resurrection. They were, therefore, not ready for this event. When it hit them, it was so amazing—God Himself had been among them and they were terrified. Was part of their terror caused by the realization that they had not believed?

We know that Mark knew the rest of the story, that the women did go and tell the disciples, after Jesus Himself met them on the way. Perhaps, seeing Him restored their courage. But Mark chose to make a point by ending his Gospel on this note—the terror and silence of the women at the appearance of the angel who gave them the news of the Resurrection.

APPLICATION

Among the traditions of the Armenian Church are stories of courageous women, women we celebrate as saints and examples of Christian virtue. Women such as Hripsime and Kayane faced and endured horrible tortures rather than break their vows to our Lord. We get the impression that they were absolutely fearless, unlike many of us. However today's reading shows us women who, on the one hand, were quite loyal and devoted to our Lord and very courageous, but on the other hand, were petrified with fear. We can, both in our tragic history and even today, relate to the women of this reading.

Who were these women? The three women that Mark names are Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary, the mother of James and Joses. Mary Magdalene was probably from Magdala, a village on the Sea of Galilee—hence her name. She had been afflicted with severe demon possession (seven demons in all). After Jesus cast the demons out of her, she became one of his most devoted followers and disciples. She, along with many other women, followed Jesus on His travels, listening to His teaching, and providing assistance to Him and the twelve from their own funds.

Mary, the mother of James and Joses, was probably the wife of Clopas and may have been the sister-in-law of Jesus' mother, Mary. Her sons were not listed as belonging to the twelve Disciples, but they may have been among the much larger group of disciples that included both men and women.¹⁵

Salome was a follower of Christ and was so well known in New Testament times as far as Rome, she could be identified simply as Salome. We, however, must depend on the ancient records, and it is not clear to us who she may have been. Some believe she may have been the wife of Zebedee, and thus, the mother of the disciples, James and John. However, there were many women disciples of our Lord, and the Gospels give different names in their lists. It is difficult, if not impossible, to match up names from one list with nameless descriptions from another.

The important reason why the women are mentioned is because they were witnesses—witnesses to the crucifixion, burial and resurrection of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. In an hour when the male disciples of our Lord had fled for their lives (with the one exception of John), these courageous women followed Him to the Cross, enduring the long hours of agony as they watched our Lord suffer and die. They watched as John supported His Mother in her grief and then, at the command of Jesus Himself from the Cross, take her under his own care. They watched as the Roman drove the spear into Christ's side and pronounced Him dead. They watched with shocked surprise, when two of the most prominent Jewish rulers, Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, tenderly removed the body from the Cross, and wrapped it in a linen cloth. No one had known that these two men were secret disciples. The women followed and watched as Jesus' body

¹⁵ If, however, she was the wife of Alphaeus, her son James *was* one of the twelve, but not the brother of John. Clopas and Alphaeus are thought by some to be two names for the same man.

was placed in the newly hewn tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, and the heavy stone rolled into place at its entrance.

The women had believed that Jesus was the Christ that the prophets had foretold would come and save their nation, that He was the King Who would rule forever over a transformed world with peace and justice. How could He die! They were devastated with grief. In spite of their overwhelming disappointment and loss of hope, they were courageously loyal to the end. They resolved to return as soon as the Sabbath was over, and anoint His body for a proper burial—their last act of devotion.

Jesus had known that the ordeal He had to suffer would cause those who loved Him excruciating pain, but the dark depth of hopelessness which engulfed them was absolutely unnecessary. He had told them over and over that He would have to die. He even told them that He would be crucified. He tried to prepare them for what they would see—the arrest, the beating with the bone tipped whip that ripped and tore the flesh, the mocking, the spitting—everything that He had to endure. But they should not lose hope. They must remember that though He would die, He would rise again in three days. He would be in the tomb just three days. Over and over He told them, but they did not listen. Though they heard the words, they did not believe; they refused to believe that their beloved, all powerful king could be crucified. Now they—on the third day—when they should have been eagerly and joyfully awaiting His resurrection, were preparing with broken hearts to anoint His dead body.

Suddenly, the women were faced with the truth. A bright angel pointed to the empty niche where Jesus' body had been placed. A bright angel was telling them that their Lord was alive again; that they must go and tell the Apostles that Jesus would meet them in Galilee, as He had promised. The shock was too much. They fled in terror.

It is understandable that suddenly encountering an angelic being would frighten one. But in other instances recorded in the Bible, such as when the angel appeared to Mary or to Zacharias, the angel was able to calm the fears of the person. In the case of the women at the tomb, these otherwise courageous women were not calmed, but were gripped with fright. Why? Perhaps they suddenly realized that the One they loved and served was not simply a wonderful man, a wonderful king, but Almighty God Himself. They saw themselves as weak and full of human frailty, and they fled in terror.

Later, we know, from the other Gospels, that the women did recover, and did go to the disciples with their wonderful message. Why did Mark cut short his report of their actions? Perhaps he wanted his readers to realize that fear is normal. His first readers were members of the Church in Rome and they were under the most severe persecution. The emperor Nero had them crucified, thrown to wild animals in the circus, used as human torches for his gardens; it was a terrifying situation. And they were weak. Yet they had a message to tell, the same message as the women of our reading: the crucified Savior has risen from the dead, and is alive forevermore. He is God!

The Roman Christians knew that the women had overcome their fear and had completed their mission, for, according to church historians, Peter had preached in their midst before he was martyred. They knew, then, the rest of the story. Jesus had met the women on the way. They had fallen down and worshipped at His feet. They had experienced acceptance; their former unbelief had not barred them forever from His Presence. They were given the power to succeed in their mission.

Like the Roman Christians, the Armenian people have experienced the terror of persecution. Will the effects of the genocide cause us to doubt our God? Like the women of our reading, will those of us who suddenly see the truth of the resurrection, realize that the Christ we have neglected to hear is God Himself? Will terror and silence be the end of the story? Or will we fall in worship at the feet of our risen Lord and experience the loving acceptance He offers? If we do, we will know that we can do all things through the living Christ who strengthens us. We can tell His wonderful story of love and grace to the ends of the world.

Krisdos Haryav e merelots
Orhynal eh Harutiounn Krisdosi