

July 26, 2020 We Are Witnesses Pt. 14 Mark 16:1-7

Dearly Beloved;

Can you believe it is almost the end of July, the last Sunday in this month, and only 5 days to go before we change the page on the calendar? For anyone who thought the pandemic of 2020 was a flash in the pan, we are starting to come to grips with the fact that it is changing and will change the way we do things for some time. Acknowledging that, I am encouraged by a number of things. God has been faithful. We have not lost friends in our church by the pond, and Stirling has as a community done really well during the viral threat thus far. I am also encouraged by the number of cases in Ontario...just over a hundred yesterday...with no deaths. Toronto had somewhere in the low 20's, and given the population of our provincial capital, that is really significant. I am also encouraged by your continuing faithfulness. Your prayers are important. That you continue to walk the walk with Jesus in a time when you receive so little from your minister, is something I put in the category of miraculous. I never expected to see a time when the issues would be so clear. But here we are: challenged to follow Jesus as Saviour and Lord, with little earthly benefit except that we have air to breathe, food and shelter, and friends who love us, because we are one in the Spirit. So, yes, I am encouraged. I am also optimistic. That said, the one thing we need to anticipate is that unexpected things will still occur. Socially isolate to the extent you can. Wash your hands often. Use sanitizer when you have had to be out and about. Avoid being inside with crowds when you can and wear

a mask when you cannot. I pray for your safety every day, and for the safety of your loved ones. Barbara and I are well. Rebekah is still with us at the farmhouse. She and Barbara took Matthew back to Toronto after 2 weeks with us. In addition to this pastoral letter and sermon, I record a song with Rebekah each week for her video streaming ministry. And I plan. I have never done a series that has lasted as long as this one...it is beginning to take a great deal of thought to come up with the next pearl for the string. You came to this site, or received a copy of what was on the site, because you wanted the Word for the week. Time to turn to that!

The reading is recognizable. It is the Easter story. To be more precise it is the story of the resurrection of Jesus. Everything that shall be said this day begins with that reality. Jesus is alive and HIS Spirit is with us. Jesus is the Son of God as HE said HE was. The stories of miraculous healings are true because first and last in Christ we are dealing with God's victorious plan to save us from our sin and our being lost. And...this is really important to remember... it is not about our being good; it is about God's being faithful. He is faithful to HIS own word, the prophecies of the Old Testament. And HE is faithful to those who hear and heed HIS call to live in the light of the Gospel, empowered by the HOLY SPIRIT!

We tend to think that the status of women is a current issue, a modern issue. In fact, one of the things Jesus accomplished in HIS time, in three years of ministry, was that HE raised the issue of the status of women, and HE succeeded

in changing that status for all time. We are witnesses to this fact. And what I mean by that statement is that we can see it with our own eyes. We literally get to watch the change taking place as we read the Gospel accounts, the history of the birth of the Church in Acts, and comments throughout the pastoral letters. They compel us to think differently about women, than society or the human cultures, or the power structures visible in history have done.

I chose the lesson in Mark for specific reasons. One of the characteristics of my favourite Gospel (Luke) is that it contains many stories of Jesus with and among women. HE treats them with respect. HE treats them as people who are significant. He treats them as HE treats men, neither above them nor below them. HE teaches them (something unheard of among the rabbis of Israel and Judah). HE values them as disciples. We have every reason to suspect that they probably outnumbered the men who followed Jesus along the roadways, and listened to HIM in the various settings in which Jesus chose to teach.

I mention these things to make the point that Mark, who does not pay nearly so much attention to the ministry of Jesus to women, is absolutely clear when it comes to the resurrection of Jesus. Three women went to the tomb. Three women discovered it was empty. Three women saw the angel and heard the news that “HE is not here (in death’s cold tomb). HE is risen.” Three women were instructed to tell the disciples, the followers of Jesus, HIS students, (1) that HE is risen (2) that

HE is going to Galilee, (3) that they will see HIM there just as Jesus had said, before HE was crucified.

It is quite remarkable. There is not a man on the team of first witnesses to what is the heart of the Gospel's message. That Mark tells it so clearly, so frankly, without any editorial comment is testimony to another simple fact. Among the disciples of Jesus who were men, a change has already taken place. They have accepted that Jesus gave, gives, and will give, every opportunity to women to serve HIM, that HE gives to men. And to underline that thought, Mark shares just as frankly, the failure of Peter, and the boys to take their testimony seriously. A further underlining of the singular nature of the women's testimony is the fact that when some male disciples reported having met the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus, they too were not believed. The disciples were not looking for a resurrected Christ! That male and female testimony is rejected, is a statement of their equality. It also means that the three women and the two men were ahead of the curve of what would become the norm among Jesus' followers.

In my time as a teacher, (I taught High School English for two years as an interim step to going into the ministry) I was part of a 5 teacher team that taught a course called "Man In Society." One of the themes in the course was Revolutionary Figures. Two of the five teachers on the team were "disciples of Jesus," (believers). It was the other three who insisted you had to include Jesus on the list of

Revolutionary Figures of History. And one of their reasons was, Jesus attitude toward women. HE was a creator of change. I have never forgotten how easy it was for people outside the circle of believers to see that Jesus was the ONE, who invoked change on the way women were seen in HIS world, in HIS time.

And I cannot look at this portion of Scripture without stopping to think of who the three women are: Mary, Mary, and Salome. Mary Magdalene, may not have been a prostitute before meeting Jesus. She is certainly the woman who washed Jesus feet with her tears and dried HIS feet with her hair. There were rabbis present who assumed she was a sinful woman. And just like in Matthew's telling of the Beatitude sermon, it is surprising who Jesus says makes it into the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven. Most of those who are listed in Matthew 5 would not have been expected to be on that list by the Pharisees. For whatever reason, the mind set of the Pharisees would also have excluded Mary Magdalene as one of the chosen witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. But there it is. In the economy of God, Mary Magdalene is one of the chosen. I do not know for certain, but notice, of the three women, she is the first one named in Mark 16. We are witness to the fact that Jesus changes the status of women and that HIS male followers got the memo. Mark's greatest source, beyond personally witnessing aspects of Jesus ministry was his uncle, Peter, the great fisherman, the first bishop of the church in Rome. Can you really picture Mark writing this if Uncle Pete, did not agree with its being a fact?

And then there is the second woman. Mary the mother of James. James wrote the letter in the New Testament that bears his name. One of the key verses in that letter is the one that says, "faith without works is dead." In other words faith in Jesus is supposed to result in an altered lifestyle, a life style characterized by service to others, what boy scouts used to call "good deeds." Well, James is the younger brother of Jesus. So, why didn't Mark say, Mary the mother of our Lord? First of all he did. Because all the disciples knew who James was. And they had even spent time walking the roads with Mary, mother to both Jesus her firstborn, and James on down the line. The statement is more about the status of Mary and James in the early church than anything else. As Luke so aptly tells us, the early church knew all about Mary and Joseph, Bethlehem, the shepherds and the angels. How remarkable it is that Mary the mother of Jesus and James is number two on the list of witnesses to the resurrection. On the other hand, she is one of the first three to say out loud, the tomb is empty and Jesus is risen, an angel told us! As I have said on other occasions, she has credentials on this whole idea of talking with angels. And it makes me wonder if the church ought not to have relegated to her special status. Certainly, the Protestant churches have almost ignored her as one who followed her son, which is to say she seems to have understood things many wrestled with. She was with HIM until she lost HIM, and became a member of John's household.

The third woman is Salome. I never read this portion of Mark's Gospel that I do not think of Marilyn Monroe.

I do not remember which movie it was that she starred in, I do know I was fourteen or fifteen, and had not begun to notice girls. Marilyn Monroe played a ditsy blonde, and someone mentioned someone named Salome and Marilyn's line was in response, "Salome danced!" And of course that is a Biblical insight. Herod imprisoned John the Baptist because he was critical of Herod's new marriage. He refused to take further action because the fact is Herod was afraid of the Baptist. He touched Herod's soul. However, one night in the midst of carousing, he got drunk. Salome danced for the crowd. Herod offered anything she wanted for her performance. Her mother, Herod's new wife suggested she should ask for John the Baptist's head on a plate. Herod was displeased but he had also painted himself publicly into a corner. He gave Salome what she asked for. We do not know For sure, but what if this Salome, is that Salome in the household of Herod? And how did she come to be a follower of Jesus? No certain answer can be given this side of heaven. But as one who likes stories, is it not intriguing as a possibility, that the burdened soul of a young woman who had a preacher killed, and he a cousin of Jesus, finds forgiveness and the grace of God in Jesus, and becomes a close friend of Mary Magdalene, and Mary, her Saviour's mother. One thing is certain: the status of Salome is raised to this. She saw the open tomb. It was empty. She saw and heard the angel proclaim, "He is risen! He is not here." And she is part of the trio who carry the good news to the disciples in the upper room.

To put it another way, whoever this Salome was, she became one of the three women who witnessed to the factualness of that event which has become the hinge on which history swings. Jesus Christ saves. He calls us to faith. We believe HIM according to the grace we receive from on high. We praise the name of Jesus, for what happened in the past, for what we experience in the present, and for a future that will have no ending. To this, we are witnesses because of what Mark tells us three women saw and proclaimed. Amen

Let us pray;

Lord, we see in the text of Mark's gospel that you touch lives and their lives are changed. We thank you for the forgiveness of our own sins. We see in the text we have looked at today, that you changed the status of women in the eyes of the world, and to that we have been witnesses. We thank you for women who have been used by YOUR Spirit to shape our faith, that we too might be disciples. Help us to be open to change, that benefits our world and empowers YOUR church to minister in YOUR name. Amen