

**Sermon Preached
by Doug King
January 26, 2003
Mark 16:1-8,1:1**

I have a confession to make. This morning I have no entertaining anecdotes, not witty bon mots, no sassy one-liners. This morning's sermon is, heaven forbid, a teaching sermon.

Our lectionary schedule of scripture readings over the next year will provide us with a healthy dose of the Gospel of Mark. I thought it might be helpful this morning to lay out a theological framework for the Gospel so we might better understand the texts we will be hearing in the months ahead.

For that reason I have taken the unorthodox approach of reading the end of the Gospel of Mark followed by the first verse of the Gospel as a single text. You see the gospel of Mark is circular in nature and this circularity is just about the only way to understand what is going on in the book. The verses in chapter sixteen tell of the women at the tomb, confused and frightened because Jesus' body is missing. One of the elements we can almost always count on in Mark is that the people around Jesus never really understand what is going on. It is one of the reasons I enjoy the book so much. I have a fine appreciation for confusion in matters of the divine being so often afflicted by it myself.

The confused women are given some instruction, they are sent on ahead to Galilee where they are told they will find Jesus risen from the dead. This instruction functions to send us back to the start of the book where Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee. We are given this pronouncement in the midst of our fear and confusion, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

This first verse of the gospel provides a key to understanding the rest of the book. It gives us two titles for Jesus, the Christ who is our strong armed saviour, and the Son of

God who is our suffering servant. Throughout the Gospel everyone around Jesus is confused about who he is because they cannot synthesize these two images into a single entity. I share their difficulty. It is not that easy for us to reconcile a God of immense power and this single mortal man who will be mocked and limply hung upon a cross. Mark constantly tells us stories where the people around Jesus either doubt his power and authority, or believe in his power and authority and are perplexed at his decision to be so vulnerable to the whims of this world.

There is only one rubric, one filter, one keyhole to look through, that may provide us with a glimpse of the truth of this man with two conflicting titles. We can only begin to make sense of this puzzle when the shadow of the empty cross falls upon it. The gospel of Mark is written in a circular fashion because the only way we can understand any of it is in light of the resurrection. It is only after watching the vulnerable Son of God crucified, and all of his vulnerability and our sinfulness transformed into new life, that we can begin to understand how he can be so powerful and so filled with suffering simultaneously. That is why we the readers are sent immediately back to the start of the book as soon as we reach it's completion in Jesus' resurrection. It is the only chance we really have to understand what is going on.

The resurrection as mysterious as it may be, is perhaps the only event that begins to clue us into the vast power of God to transform what we believe is beyond all hope of being changed. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is always doing battle with elements and systems that no one thinks can be changed or defeated. He is healing people that no one has been able to heal. He is rebuking demons that have held people captive for a lifetime. He is challenging the authority of the temple and throwing out the money changers when everyone knew you could not question the way the temple functioned. These actions instead of enthralling people with hope, tended to leave them fearful and confused.

You see, we like to believe that God is present in our midst but most of us tend to assume that God's presence is rather benign. It makes us jumpy to believe that our God

can be hurting, and suffering, and angry at the broken-ness of this world. And it makes us even a little more nervous to think that maybe God will do something about it all. We tend to want our God to be tame and comforting.

A friend of mine attends a church where every time one of the ministers does the time with the children she carries and cuddles a doll she calls Jesus. Well that is not Mark's image of Jesus. Brian Blount from Princeton describes Mark's image of Jesus this way, "Jesus is God on the loose—ready to run wild through human history, out of religious and regulatory control, able to turn the world upside down and able, as well, to release us, too, from all that possesses us in order that we might be possessed instead by God. The wild world Jesus has in mind is a world on the edge of time, a world that thinks the reign of God might break in at any moment, a world so sure that God is right around the corner that it stops thinking about standing in line and starts lining up the ways, all the ways people in the world can think of to help each other. It's a world that cares more about purifying those who are sinners than being pure and separate from sinners. It's a world that cares more about touching and holding those who have dirtied themselves or have been dirtied by the situations of their lives than it cares about sweeping their churches and lives clean of anybody who's made mistakes. It's a world that would willingly and willfully break laws and customs that segregate people from each other, break laws that send people into unjust wars, break laws that allow the powerful and wealthy to have more opportunity in life than the weak and the poor."

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is a dangerous man. He is a singular amalgam of the mighty power of God and a mighty will that is willing to suffer on behalf of all of us who suffer. This is the beginning of the good and scary news of Jesus the Christ, the Son of God. The Gospel of Mark gives us a God who will not be cuddled and controlled. None of our tame assumptions, beliefs, and systems are safe, which is enough to make us tremble. But none of what we consider the world's painful realities are beyond the changing power of God, which is the best news we could ever imagine. Amen.