

He Is Going Ahead of You

Mark 16: 1-8

When tragedy or crisis strikes our lives, the impact can have us feeling lost, alone, and confused. The stress can be immobilizing as our world gets turned upside down and inside out, and we try to figure out what to do next.

To hear about the conditions in Puerto Rico where post-multiple-hurricane damage completely devastated the island and its already weak infrastructure, it sounds like a nightmare. We were one hot mess after losing electricity for just a few days when our area was struck by a hurricane last season. My sister on Cape Cod lost her power for a few days when the first and worst of multiple nor'easters slammed the Cape early in March, and she thought how awful it was for her. Then realizing that people in Puerto Rico were *still* dealing with the effects of their storms six months afterward, you wonder how they can cope.

For many, it was too much to cope with. Often with homes wrecked and uninhabitable – over 400,000 homes were total losses or sustained major damage – and no work to go to because the employment site was wrecked, too, people sought escape, sometimes physically by leaving the island altogether, sometimes in drugs and alcohol, and for some, even suicide, as the reports to crisis hotlines by people who had attempted suicide increased nearly 250% between November and January.

The poor are particularly vulnerable, of course, since they have few resources at their disposal without a storm's damaging effects to contend with.

Post-traumatic stress disorder can impact a large percentage, like 30-50% of the survivors of Hurricane Katrina, and similar numbers for those experiencing the impact of Hurricane Sandy.

The overall effects of suffering through the impact of such a crisis event and the aftermath can cause one's focus to narrow considerably, warping perspective and making planning and progress laborious if it happens at all. Decision-making gets clouded, attitudes and emotions become brittle, and nothing seems to be right with life.

The loss of someone close to you can provoke the same kinds of effects and feelings. Stress burdens your daily life as you try to adjust to new circumstances. Nothing seems to be quite right with life. What we could really use is some direction, but all of our usual compass points are muddled and appear useless.

At dawn on the day after the Sabbath ended, the third day since the crucifixion, three women in Jerusalem gathered the spices and other implements needed for anointing the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth. They set out in the dull light of a new day, bearing heavy hearts of sadness and regret, still in some shock about how things had turned out.

Together with the men, these women had been disciples and followers of Jesus of Nazareth, a preacher, healer, and prophet who had given them a new vision for the promise of God, a new understanding of the love of God, a new appreciation for being faithful to God alone, and for what the Kingdom of God is all about. All of their time traveling and ministering, learning and growing, they did not imagine things would end like this. Yes, they knew what had happened to John the Baptist when he challenged the status quo. Wasn't this different? Wasn't Jesus different?

Now it seems they were proven wrong; it was no different. The rulers of the day had no use for the gospel or its preacher who stirred people up, building expectations about how things should be different. The God talk, the Kingdom of heaven, the skewering of accepted interpretations of the Torah, the corrections and chastising of religious officials, it was all too much. No matter how right or just or good, it had been too much.

Yet Jesus confronted his death with acceptance. He even *predicted* that the authorities would come and arrest him and crucify him. None of the disciples wanted to hear of it, but Jesus insisted it would happen. Why couldn't the disciples hear those words? Why didn't they *do* something? Couldn't the tragedy of a few days before have been avoided? Why didn't they *leave* Jerusalem so that they could continue ministering?

Perhaps these were the kinds of questions occupying the minds of all three women as they headed off for the burial site.

Just before arriving at the tomb, it dawned on one of them to ask a really good question: *Who will roll away the stone?* The tomb where Jesus' body had been placed just before the start of the Sabbath was like a small cave carved out of a hillside. To keep out grave robbers and animals, a heavy stone is rolled across the opening to block access. But this stone was blocking *their* access.

I'm imagining that there were some smart and tart remarks back and forth when someone realized what should have been obvious from the start. The giant stone was far more than they could handle. It might take several strong men to pry and leverage the stone away from the opening.

In that moment of awareness, they discovered that even their unpleasant but honor-bound task was being thwarted. Hadn't they endured enough? Wasn't it enough that the mission had apparently failed, that the movement was as dead as its leader, so that even hope itself was nowhere to be found? And now the basic customs and rituals to honor the dead were being denied to them as well. The stone blocking access to the tomb blocked them from access to the deceased, to the corpse, to the completion of the rites of burial of the dead.

From the text, it sounds like they had come close to the burial area when this harsh realization hit them. Then staring ahead into the early morning shadows, they saw that it seemed the stone had been moved. What they expected to see – a sealed tomb – is not what their eyes beheld. The stone had been rolled away, only now the question

became, **who** had rolled away the stone and **why** had they done so? It seemed that someone had gotten there ahead of them.

The women quickly came to the tomb entrance when they were met by a young man who startled them. They immediately noticed that the lifeless corpse that had been laid there a few days before was no longer present. The young man easily understood their thoughts. He tells them what they seek - that corpse - and announces, *He is risen! He is not here.*

The young man gives the women a message to take back to the disciples ... and Peter. (That's an interesting expression, *the disciples **and** Peter*, and the best answer suggests that Peter is still considered within the circle of disciples despite his denials of being connected to Jesus and his ministry.) What's the message?

He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.

Yes, Jesus had said that; after the last supper when he predicted Peter's falling away and disowning Jesus three times (14:28). Jesus had said then: *After I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.*

The message makes a big impression on the women who remain stunned in silence and return to the others *without mentioning anything*. Even though they were told to speak this story, they fail in their fearfulness.

And that's the end of the gospel. The last sentence of Mark's gospel is: *They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid*. That is hardly the triumphant kind of ending we find in Matthew where we hear the resurrected Jesus announce the Great Commission, or in Luke where Jesus appears to the disciples after meeting a couple on the road to Emmaus, or in John where there are several endings with resurrection appearances by Jesus. In Mark's gospel, it ends with **fear**.

The very uncomfortable ending that Mark offers is nonetheless in line with the entire gospel which sees the disciples as utter failures who remain entirely dependent on Jesus. Jesus can talk about anything, can do anything, and we're almost always assured that the disciples will **not** get it. At the very end, the women are supposed to go and tell the others, but for whatever reason, they don't.

But fear not! If there is one thing that we have seen repeatedly is that Jesus is way ahead of his disciples. Before he gets to Jerusalem, there is dire talk from Jesus, meant for the disciples. He's out in front of them. When he's in Jerusalem, he's very direct about his upcoming arrest and crucifixion, again meant for the disciples who are generally disbelieving this kind of talk. At the Last Supper, he is openly talking about sharing his body and his blood as the elements of the new life covenant. He's way ahead of them; they don't seem to get it at that point. As the women come to the tomb, Jesus is way ahead of them and their mission, and the stone has been rolled away. Jesus has even left a messenger for them with directions on where to go next. Your kids should

leave you such a message when they leave someplace and you don't know where they're going. Jesus thought of that.

So, what does that tell faithful disciples today? Jesus is going ahead of you, preparing the way, out there ready to welcome you to the new life promise we celebrate today on Easter Sunday. In times of personal crisis, spiritual anxiety, and existential loss, Jesus has gone ahead of you, preparing your way to his new life promise.

As we come to the Lord's table to share in the loaf and the cup, we also know that the Lord goes with us. His body and his blood poured out for us are sign and symbol of the Lord's presence, leading us into faithfulness in every season, and beckoning ahead to the new life promise in the Lord for all.