

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Evensong Easter Day 2008

Mark 16.1-8,

**'...for they were afraid.'**

It seems a very strange way to end a Gospel story – more especially if you look at this sentence in its original Greek, and find that it ends with the weak word, (the preposition, as it would be in English) 'for'...

But it's generally agreed that this is the ending of St Mark's Gospel as we have it from the pen of the original writer. Subsequent verses, appended in later times to 'round off the story' seem to be rather wooden compilations of material from other Gospels, and from the Acts of the Apostles.

So why does Mark's original Gospel end 'for they were afraid', at this moment when one should have expected a resounding announcement of Good

News? (After all, his Gospel begins with the words, 'The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God...' Why not a proper ending?

Some people put it down to accident – he originally wrote more, but the papyrus got torn off here, before any copies were made; or - if we take Mark to be the amanuensis of St Peter during his last days in Rome – suddenly the crisis of Peter's being taken for execution intervened before the last words could be discussed and written.

Others think this ending is intentional – it signals the awe that the resurrection should evoke.

But, whatever the reason, we can take it as a bit of divine serendipity – the reader is left with a cliff-hanger. And a cliff-hanger invites you in to the feelings and experience of the actors in the story in a way that a 'happy ever after' ending never does.

'...for they were afraid...'

Why? What would we have felt in the circumstances. I've already mentioned awe. That is one kind of fear

– and the experience and the words the women had received might well evoke awe. Mark tells of a mysterious young man. By the time of the writing of the Gospel of Matthew the young man has become an angel; in Luke we're back to young men again – but two of them. In John – two angels.

We know that from the earliest books of the Bible strange men mysteriously appearing may be more than they seem (see Genesis 18 and 19). We also know that angels, in their appearing, very often have to say, 'do not be afraid'. Clearly, the women here are touching the realm of the supernatural – and fear is a normal response. But fear enough to stop their mouths?...

Let's take another, more psychological approach: might the women have thought they were going mad, hallucinating or hysterical? The message was strange enough. Fear for one's own sanity might easily stop our mouth. And fear for what other people might think of you. We know that women's evidence was habitually and legally considered much less reliable than that of men. To carry such a strange

message – who might not be afraid of the reaction they would evoke?

Or what about this: what if the women believed the message was true – understood the joy of it – but also understood the unsettling challenge of it? The whole of life changing in an instant, the rug of normal certainty being pulled from under your feet. Wh among us has not greeted good news, sometimes, with an element of shock – of cold feet. And perhaps some rational fear.

The local paper recently carried the headline – 'Mum to be, 57, was told her bump was cancer'. The picture showed a middle aged woman standing proudly pregnant. But go back to that moment when she was told – not cancer after all (Good News!), but a baby (what! At my age? What about my health...the baby's health...its future with an unusually old mother...what will that future bring? And what will people say?) Good News – yes – but understandable shock and fear, too.

These are all kinds of fear – awe, fear for one's sanity, fear of people's reaction, fear of future

challenges and dangers – all kinds of fear which can accompany even good news.

We may well have felt all or some of them.

But we know that Jesus met the women in their fear – if not, they might never have told, We might never have been here.

Jesus meets us in our mixed feelings – in our joy and in our disturbance. And when he meets us, then he reassures us – not by making his good news less disturbing, but by making us know we are utterly loved and utterly held – whatever happens.