

Sermon for the Sunday of the Resurrection: Easter Day, April 1, 2018
Solemn Mass

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year B: Acts 10:34–43; Psalm 118:14–17, 22–24; Colossians 3:1–4; Mark 16:1–8*

Duke University Professor Joel Marcus in his commentary on Mark’s gospel—my favorite commentary on Mark—calls today’s gospel lesson “Epilogue.”¹ “Epilogue” is a word I think I first encountered in a ninth-grade English class, when we had to read Shakespeare for the first time. Here’s the epilogue that I can almost remember from having to memorize it almost fifty years ago:

A glooming peace this morning with it brings;
The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head:
Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things;
Some shall be pardon’d, and some punished:
For never was a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.²

¹ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Bible 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), II:1079.

² *Romeo and Juliet*, Act V, Scene iii, Lines 305–10, from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 893.

Mark's narrative of the women going to the tomb "very early on the first day of the week"³ is not an epilogue—and ending, a comment. Today's gospel is Mark's account of the event that opened the way for the women and the other disciples really to see Jesus for who he is for the very first time when they meet him in Galilee.

Count me among those who think Mark's narrative of Jesus' crucifixion, in which there is no moment of human or divine compassion, is the most honest and most historical account that we have of his death.

Count me among those who think today's gospel lesson is the most honest and most historical account that we have of his resurrection.

And count me among those who would like to know how Mark told the story of the women and the other disciples meeting the Risen Jesus in Galilee—if Mark wrote that story, because we do not have it.⁴ Again, it's in Galilee that the disciples will see Jesus for who he is

³ Mark 16:2.

⁴ Marcus, II:1088–96.

for the very first time, the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God⁵—and believe.

The late Raymond Brown, who died in 1998, was one of the most respected scholars of his generation. His last great work was a two-volume study, *The Death of the Messiah*.⁶ Brown's student, and herself a very respected New Testament scholar, Sandra Schneiders saw Raymond Brown "a few weeks before he died."⁷ She wrote, "By strange coincidence, our conversation on that day turned to death, its inevitability, its meaning for us personally and for our work, and what lay beyond that mysterious frontier. [He] told me he had been asked if . . . he planned to write a work on the Resurrection. He . . . replied, 'I prefer to research that topic face to face.'"⁸

Father Brown was much more than a scholar's scholar; he wrote many, many books with an eye toward ordinary practicing Christians and ordinary

⁵ Ibid., II:1084.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, 2 vols. (Doubleday: New York, 1994).

⁷ Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Resurrection (of the Body) in the Fourth Gospel," *Life in Abundance: Studies in John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*, ed. John R. Donahue (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005) 168.

⁸ Ibid.

Christian pastors. Carefully written, his were words that the reader could trust without knowing Hebrew, Greek, and other languages—not to mention not knowing a great deal about two thousand years of Christian theological writing.

In a very small book of essays on Jesus' birth, he wrote that it was an encounter with the Risen Lord that enabled the men and women who were his disciples, who followed him from Galilee, that brought them to faith. On the morning of resurrection, God changed how humankind would think and believe. There could be no more talk about Jesus' life, Jesus' words, or Jesus' death, without knowledge of the Risen Lord.⁹

Jesus' death is a historical reality. His resurrection is the point in time and out of time when history meets eternity. The resurrection belongs—may we say—to the “time before time,”¹⁰ the time outside time and beyond creation.

⁹ See Raymond E. Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas: Essays on the Three Biblical Christmas Stories* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1985), 6–7.

¹⁰ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. “αἰών,” 32.

Before the resurrection, Jesus' disciples in Mark had never been able to see beyond Jesus' humanity. The women would not have gone to the tomb with spices if they had believed Jesus' words that he would rise from the dead,¹¹ if they knew him already as the anointed one.¹²

At least since seminary, I've always thought of John as my favorite gospel. There's only one thing that matters for John's Jesus, one question, "Do you believe in the Son of man?"¹³ There's nothing in John about being perfect, complete, as God is perfect, complete.¹⁴

My heart wants to own all the glory of John's Jesus, a Jesus who truly reigns from the cross, a Jesus who lays down his own life and takes it up again.¹⁵

I don't want you, me, or anyone to suffer when we meet death. I don't want you, me or anyone to be overwhelmed by doubt and fear. In Mark, the two Marys didn't meet the Risen Lord—as Mary

¹¹ Mark 8:31, 9:30–32, 10:32–34.

¹² Marcus, II:1084.

¹³ John 9:35.

¹⁴ Matthew 5:48. See Bauer, s.v. "τέλειος," 995–96.

¹⁵ John 10:17–18.

Magdalene does in John and as Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph meet him in Matthew. For all of the disciples, it's the encounter with Jesus' risen and transformed body that human lives become lives of faith.

One final reason to know Mark's gospel. Only in Mark is there an epileptic boy whose father brings him to Jesus and says, "if you can do anything, have pity on us and help us." Jesus replies, "All things are possible to him who believes. Immediately the father of the child cried out . . . 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"¹⁶— words that I hope will always be in my heart.

Jesus' death could not be more terrible than it was in Mark. Jesus' compassion could not be more forgiving, more understanding, more merciful, than it is in Mark.

Let me conclude with words from Psalm 95 for you and me, "For he is our God, and we are the people of

¹⁶ Mark 9:22–24.

his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today [we] would hearken to his voice!”¹⁷

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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¹⁷ Psalm 95:7.