Today is the Feast of St Mark the Evangelist. In our first reading, Peter tells us, “The chosen one at Babylon sends you greeting, as does Mark, my son” (1 Pt 5:13). In sending greetings, from “Mark, my son”, Peter is acknowledging that there is a close relationship, not by blood, but by faith. Peter, at the time of the letter, was based in Rome. His reference to Babylon is actually a reference to Rome and descriptive of the challenges that existed in sharing the Good News. “The problem addressed [is…] the difficulty of living the Christian life in a hostile, secular environment that espoused different values and subjected the Christian minority to ridicule and oppression” (NAB Introduction)

Mark was an interpreter for Peter. He is not an eyewitness to the events but a faithful evangelist who learned from Peter and then wrote his Gospel to address the community he served a few years after the martyrdom of Peter on or around 70 AD. The Gospel of Mark encourages the Christian community to be faithful in the face of persecution.

Watch out for yourselves. They will hand you over to the courts. You will be beaten in synagogues. You will be arraigned before governors and kings because of me, as a witness before them. But the gospel must first be preached to all nations. (Mark 13:9-10)

The Gospel passage for today is taken from the end of the Gospel, chapter 16, verses 15-20 when Jesus has risen from the dead and is preparing to ascend into heaven. It is most fitting for the Easter Season. Scholars believe these verses were a later addition and that the Gospel of Mark originally ended abruptly with verse 8.

Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb on Easter morning with Mary, the mother of James, and Salome. The stone had already been rolled back. They are amazed as a young man, (perhaps Jesus himself or an angel as we hear in the Gospel of John12:20) tells them the tomb is empty. Jesus has risen from the dead. The young man instructs them to tell Peter and the other disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. But they don’t. “Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).

Mark ends the Gospel very abruptly at verse 8 in order to challenge his flock. The three women in the Gospel represent the fear of Mark’s audience. Why are you afraid? Why do you not fulfill your mission of proclaiming the Good News of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In a time of persecution, it is understandable that Mark would need to encourage the faithful to move beyond their fear and to remain true to the faith.

The additional ending beyond verse 8 is an addition from the 2nd century, when all 4 Gospels had been written, and when the Christian community faced a new set of circumstances calling for a new urging to live out the faith. Let us recall that in the book of Genesis, there are two accounts of the creation of Adam. On the 6th day he created male and female in his image (1:27). But in chapter 2, Adam is alone. The Lord casts the man into a deep sleep and from his rib fashions a woman. The 2nd account is easily explained by the book of Genesis being added to over time. So, to with the Gospel of Mark.

In this alternate ending, the writer of the addition is concerned that 2nd century believers are wavering in their faith while others have stopped practicing their faith. “To bolster the faith of his readers and help them respond to outsiders, the alternate ending emphasizes extraordinary signs with those who believe.” (LaVerdiere 336).

Jesus appears to the Eleven and commissions them to go into the world and proclaim the Gospel to everyone. Doesn’t it seem odd that He then rebukes them? It is not so much as Jesus rebuking them, but the author challenging his readers to believe. Unbelievers are not those who have no faith, but those who were at one time believers and have now stopped believing. They have heard the Good News, been baptized, and now are pulling back from the faith. Like a good
coach, the gospel writer is encouraging those who are not living up to their potential, to do their best so the whole team will succeed.

Our Gospel today ends on a positive note. Jesus ascends into heaven, and the Eleven go forth as active believers preaching the good news, healing the sick, driving out demons, and speaking new languages.

Written nearly 2,000 years ago, the Bible still speaks to us today. Like Peter’s original audience, it is increasingly difficult to live the Christian life in a hostile, secular environment. Like Mark’s original audience, we may be afraid to stand up for our faith and share the Good News while our sisters and brothers are hauled into court. This year, the Little Sisters of the Poor headed back to the Supreme Court for the third time, forced to defend themselves once more against the contraceptive mandate attached to the Affordable Care Act of 2011. iv Mark’s challenge to his original audience bear repeating. Why are you afraid? Why do you not fulfill your mission of proclaiming the Good News of the death and resurrection of Jesus?

And like the alternate ending of Mark’s Gospel, we live in an age when many have stopped practicing the Christian faith they were baptized in. We all need encouragement to practice our faith. Amidst the pandemic, when physically practicing our faith as we normally do is difficult if not physically impossible, it is encouraging to see so many positive ways in which the faith is coming alive despite all the obstacles. As the Eleven did at the end of today’s Gospel let us go forth sharing the Good News while the Lord confirms the word through accompanying signs (Mark 16: 20).

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