

Mark 16:1-8 *From Fear to Freedom*
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
The Rev. Terry Hamilton-Poore

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

I’ve noticed, lately, that if I’m watching a TV show or movie and the characters start mingling in a large crowd or casually shaking each others’ hands or hugging or, heaven forbid, kissing, I feel a sudden sense of panic. The characters aren’t in the middle of a pandemic, but I’ve gotten so used to the idea of physical contact as dangerous, that I feel fearful even when it’s not rational to be afraid.

Of course, *we are* still in a pandemic, so it makes sense to stay masked and stay distanced. But someday, God willing and if we stay vigilant, the time will come when we’ll be able to take off our masks and let down our guards. I expect to feel a bit of panic the first time I do that!

You see, when you're used to "no," "yes" can be scary. Rules and limitations give us a sense of security—even if those rules and limitations are arbitrary or even oppressive. "No" makes the world predictable, even if the world it predicts is joyless and cruel.

So, of course Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, and Salome were afraid, that morning at the tomb. As women in that culture, they knew their place—to help, quietly, behind the scenes. One verse in the previous chapter mentions as sort of a throwaway comment that these three, along with many other women, had followed Jesus and supported him—that means financial support—all along the way [Mark 15:41]. But they've never been given a voice, nor seemed to expect one. And now, they've shown up to do the thankless, gut-wrenching grief-work of anointing the body—the emotional and physical work that no one else wanted to do.

Only, when they get there, they find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, and a young man who seems to be a divine messenger telling them to go report to the male disciples that Jesus is risen, and that they should go to Galilee to meet him. They—women!—who were supposed to follow, not lead, and stay silent, not

speak, were told to be the first to proclaim the resurrection, and give orders to the men about what *they* should do next.

No wonder they were afraid.

“Yes” is always scary when we’re used to “no.” One of my favorite quotes of all times is from the book, *The Southern Lady* by Anne Firor Scott, in which she tells how the Civil War changed gender roles in Southern churches and society. With the men away at war, women stepped in to fill the gap in leadership, forming their own missionary societies within the church—something that would have been unimaginable before then. It was threatening to the male leadership that remained. Scott recounts that one pastor “refused permission for a women’s prayer meeting on the ground that if the women were alone [and here’s the quote], ‘who knows what they would pray for?’”¹

Indeed!

¹ Anne Firor Scott, *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970) p. 138.

But as ridiculous as that sounds, we have seen that same dynamic at work in church and culture throughout history and even in our own lifetimes. That knee-jerk reaction of “no” whenever we’re asked to say “yes” to a change in the status quo, because who knows what would happen?

Who knows what would happen if: women had property rights or could vote and hold office or could make decisions about their own bodies?

Who knows what would happen if Black people were free, or if *they* had the right to vote and hold office, or if the races intermingled or even married?

Who knows what would happen if LGBTQ folks could serve in the military, or lead in the church, or marry and raise children, or live openly in their true sexual orientation or gender identity?

Who knows? Who knows what would happen? So with loud voices and even violence both the church and our culture have shouted “No! No! No!”

And yet, eventually, all those things have happened. Every one of them. And you know what? The world hasn't ended. In fact, when those things have happened, the world has gotten a little better, a little freer, a little more joyful.

But there are still an awful lot of “no's”, aren't there? What if *they* were turned into “yeses”?

What might happen if: everyone could count on the healthcare they needed? What would happen if *everyone* could easily exercise their right to vote? What would happen if everyone had access to a quality education and good employment opportunities no matter their race or gender or income level or the neighborhood they lived in?

What would happen if men took responsibility for their own actions, so that women could safely walk alone at night. What would happen if policing practices were changed and juries were unbiased so that Black people could count on the justice system. What would happen if bigotry were no longer taught or tolerated, so that people of Asian ancestry could leave their homes without the threat of verbal abuse or physical violence?

What would happen if there were actual changes to gun safety policy so that school children never needed another active shooter drill or *all* of us could go to work or the grocery store without wondering when we might be gunned down? What would happen?

“Yes” to changes like these can be scary. But where has “no” gotten us?

The Gospel of Mark ends with God having struck down the most reliable “no” of all: death. And in doing so, God has said a resounding “yes” to a life that is more abundant and free than we could have ever imagined.

But the women, we’re told, “said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

We know that’s not *really* the ending, though, don’t we, because *someone* said something to *somebody*, or we wouldn’t have this story. At some point, the women shook off their fear and embraced God’s big “Yes,” and that’s when the real story began.

I'm going to share a poem. This is "God Says Yes to Me" by Kaylin Haught:

I asked God if it was okay to be melodramatic
and she said yes
I asked her if it was okay to be short
and she said it sure is
I asked her if I could wear nail polish
or not wear nail polish
and she said honey
she calls me that sometimes
she said you can do just exactly
what you want to

Thanks God I said
And is it even okay if I don't paragraph
my letters
Sweetcakes God said
who knows where she picked that up
what I'm telling you is
Yes Yes Yes²

On that first Easter, God said "yes" to resurrection. God said "yes" to the women.

God says "yes" to us. What else might God be saying "yes" to, and how can we
say "yes" right back?

² Kaylin Haught in *In the Palm of Your Hand*, Steve Kowitz, Ed. (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House Publishers, 1995), p. 6.