Small group discussion questions

April 2015

Chapter & verse – Rosalind Selby (p22)
Read Mark 16:1-8, followed by Rosalind Selby’s article.

1. In paragraph two, Rosalind says there has been much speculation about why Mark would end his Gospel with the words “for they were afraid”. Does it strike you as a strange ending? What effect does it have? What do you think the reason might be for ending on these words?

2. What does Mark tell us about the women’s emotions at different points in the passage? Why do you think they felt like they did? Do you imagine you would respond in the same way in their situation?

3. It is good news, says Rosalind in paragraph three, “that the message Jesus leaves is completely focussed on human need”. In what way is it focussed on human need? Why is this good news?

4. What significance does Rosalind find in the words “just as he told you”?

5. At the end of paragraph three, Rosalind talks about Resurrection and “a new meeting”, happening today. How might those things happen in our own lives? Do those promises continue to be real for you?

6. In the final paragraph, Rosalind compares the women in this story with the two sons in Matthew 21:28-32. What is the similarity?

7. Has fear played a role in your spiritual life? What makes you afraid? How can we overcome our fear, as the women in Mark’s story did?
Rosalind Selby  Chapter & verse

Thirdly, Mark, the master storyteller, cleverly reminds us of a Jesus whose insights and promises are fulfilled. Jesus has gone ahead to Galilee “just as he told you” – words which remind us of other things Jesus told his disciples would come to pass: Three predictions of his suffering and death; a donkey that would be found tied up and which Jesus could use for the ride into Jerusalem; a man with a water jar who would show the way to the upper room for the Passover meal, and the sad insights that Peter would deny Jesus three times, that one would betray him, and that all these men would desert him. All these foretold events happened. So the whole gospel points to the good news that when Jesus promises his Resurrection and a new meeting with his disciples, we can trust that these too have happened, and will happen. These are promises that continue to be real for us.

Finally, these frightened women remind me of the parable of the two sons (Matthew 21), where one says “yes” and does nothing for his father, and the other says “no” and then does his father’s will. We hold in our hands the evidence that the women may, at that moment, have fled in fear, yet they also must have found the courage to go to the men and pass on that message just as they had been commissioned. If they had not, we would not have Mark’s gospel in front of us, we would not be able to open a work whose opening words are “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God” and we would not have good news to take into our own lives, God’s Church or God’s world. Thanks be to God for the Gospel according to Mark.

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The Gospels do not tell us precisely the same story of the tomb on Easter Day. Matthew has two women at the tomb, and John only Mary Magdalene, but in both gospels the women meet Jesus. Women are portrayed as faithful witnesses to the Resurrection, taking the story back to men who have failed Jesus. Luke doesn’t name the women until later in his story, but finally we discover they are Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and “the other women” – quite a crowd it would seem – who do not meet Jesus themselves but bear witness to the empty tomb and the message they hear.

Much ink has been spent over the eight verses of Mark 16 – much debate as to whether one or other of the added endings is original (they are not) and much (sometimes fantastic) speculation about how and why Mark ends with the words “for they were afraid”. Two women go to the tomb, which they find empty, and they meet a young man who tells them Jesus has been raised and has gone ahead of them all (women and men both) to Galilee. The women are commissioned to bear witness, but they are so terrified that they flee the scene and say absolutely nothing – we might be forgiven for scratching our heads and asking: “Where is the good news, in that?” I’m very fond of Mark’s gospel, and I believe there’s a rich seam of good news to be mined.

First, although it’s reported secondhand, there is a witness to Jesus’ resurrection in Mark and it is the young man – who has met and spoken to Jesus. Secondly, I think it’s good news for us, as well as for the first disciples, that the message Jesus leaves is completely focussed on human need. The deepest desire of the disciples’ hearts must have been to hear that Jesus’ death was not the end – hope is restored. More than that, having failed Jesus, the men hear themselves called “disciples” once more, so that they are all – including specifically-named and most-fragile Peter – drawn back into that circle of friendship.

For further reflection: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” Psalm 27:1

Prayer: Jesus, who promised new life to followers, and who promised to be with us always, help us to hear your promises to us. Help us to trust in your promises, and give us the courage to share that message. Amen.