

**Easter Day**  
**12/4/2009**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 10:34 - 43**

**Psalm 118**

**1 Corinthians 15:1 - 11**

**Mark 16:1 - 8**

**There are no words for it: holy awe**

---

In recent months, as bushfires ravaged the state, we have witnessed some devastating scenes. During that time a rural newspaper came out with this on its front cover: THERE ARE NO WORDS... The experience was so horrendous it rendered people speechless. It will take time before many in the community will be able to put into words their response to the suffering and devastation. There is a link between this experience and the text from Mark *...and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid...* This verse, regarded as the oldest ending of Mark, is well reported in the early church. There were no words....

Many scholars now believe Mark intended to end this way and we know the following verses 9-20, which proclaim the Resurrection in the traditional way were added later. There was a time lapse but does this explain why the disciples had “no words” to describe what had happened? There may be many answers, but today we shall think about just two that are not separate, but are two sides to the story, one of them mystical, the other textual.

The Greeks would find it very easy to see the mystical side of this story. That there were no words connects with one aspect of the deep traditions of prayer known in the Early church, which developed two approaches to prayer and theology: the way of affirmation (the kataphatic tradition) and the way of negation (the apophatic tradition). The way of affirmation emphasises that what is in God is revealed and apparent, while the way of negation dwells on glory that remains concealed or hidden from view.

In the way of negation God is understood as the one who is “beyond words” and images, transcending every category of human thought and idea. God’s uniqueness and grandeur is seen as something that so overwhelms our mind and senses that God is described as hidden, invisible and even “dark”. If we study the encounters between God and Moses and the Prophets we can find elements of this way of thinking. We can find it in many other places in Christian tradition, and we know it best through the mystical poets like John Donne and Henry Vaughan. Henry Vaughan wrote:

*There is in God (some say)  
A deep, but dazzling darkness; As men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear.  
O for that night! Where I in him  
Might live invisible and dim.*

The way of negation does not deny God, nor does it speak of God as absent. Rather, it speaks of God as present in ways for which there are no words.

Looking at Mark's ending through these eyes makes it possible to see that he does not intend the story to end. His words may seem to present us with a literary problem and what might even seem like a theological mistake, but within them there is a proclamation that teaches us something about the nature of God, and the human response to the works of God. Mark may be showing us that resurrection is so radically other it could never have been calculated from nature, or from the things we know. This revelation is of such a kind that it is beyond nature and reason, and challenges us to rethink what we mean by transcendence. The way of negation would understand the resurrection as a great challenge because here God speaks when there is no trace of the human left to go on. In the resurrection the world experiences a manifestation of the unimaginable difference of God re-created. Because of this we must empty out practically everything we know and start again.

It is no wonder that fear and awe marked the day and that there are no words for it. But this does not mean God is absent, rather it means God is present in what we experience as absence.

Mark's story also makes use of the way of affirmation, the kataphatic approach. The words of the angel are like a rich text, so rich the witnesses can't decode it, but it proclaims all we need to know: "*Jesus who was crucified has been raised; he is not here... tell the others he is gone ahead of you*". Throughout Mark's Gospel the disciples' journey with Jesus is one of misunderstanding, and it is no surprise the story ends in fear and silence. But the proclamation remains, is heard and understood. It is like a seed that is planted, and later grows. Mark who was not one of the twelve is alive with the new life otherwise he would not have written his Gospel. And ironically his account of the fear and doubt witnesses to the faith of Easter. He shows that resurrection faith is the knowledge that God succeeds in spite of us, without our aid. His ending testifies that even silent, fearful, un-comprehending followers cannot bind the word of the living God. It will not be held back by fear or unbelief. The church springs to life, not because of the virtue of the disciples, or the amazement of the women, but because of a revelation that comes from God's side, which changes the way we see life, and renews our faith. Mark's tantalizing ending seems to deny closure, but the silence can be read as holy awe. One way to think about the traditional verses that were added later is to regard them as the result of holy awe clarified in words of understanding. The way of negation and the way of affirmation go together, and so we can celebrate the outcome of this story today.

The Good News of Easter Day, which will terrify some, is that the power that was in Jesus Christ will not be domesticated or confined by us, not in experience, not in doctrine, not in church structures, or communities, or anything perishable we establish. Fear and silence, and the words of an angel testify that he is no longer bound – and he will not be bound. Jesus who was crucified goes before us on the road of faith, and calls us to meet him there to become part of his living body – part of his never-ending story in the world.

May that be true for each one of us, this Easter.

\*\*\*