

April 12, 2009 ~ **Easter Sunday** ~ Acts 10: 34-43; 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11; **Mark 16: 1-8**

*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.*

### **THE END?**

I have a friend with whom I am often in conversation. This person has a habit that has taken me years to get used to – he starts to tell me something and then just stops – mid-sentence – mid-thought. It is a bit disconcerting – like someone walking in and turning off the TV right in the middle of a show or grabbing the newspaper out of your hands while you are still reading it or snatching your pen while you are writing a note. There was an episode of MASH once where the entertainment-starved company found a book, a mystery novel. There were all sorts of antics as everyone in camp was desperate to read the story. They divided the book up with sections being passed around in order until the first person to get to the end of the tale discovered that there was a new mystery to be solved – where was the end of the book? Everyone was in an uproar to find out whodunit – there was no end to the story – it just stopped.

The Gospel of Mark is like that. It just stops: *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 know that if you look in your Bible you will see the shorter and longer endings of Mark but scholars overwhelmingly agree that these are later additions – someone else's attempt at an ending to correct their own discomfort with the lack of ending that is the conclusion Mark deliberately offers to us – someone who clearly believed Mark had not ended his gospel very appropriately. He dangles something incomplete and unsatisfying before us – something that fails to provide proper narrative closure and, even more disquieting for some of us, lurches to an awkward grammatical stop. A more literal translation would read: *To no one anything they said; afraid they were for....* It is almost as if the author of Mark had suddenly been dragged from his writing desk in mid-sentence.

Mark tells us that the women fled. They ran away but not with a skip in their step. They were bewildered. They didn't even tell anyone a single, blessed thing because, as Mark tells us in the end, they were flat out afraid.

Not much of an ending is it? The bewildered silence of women who were too afraid to speak begs the question, "Why?" Why end the gospel in silence? Surely Mark knew what profoundly good news this was. Surely Mark knew that these women did not remain silent forever – they must have told someone – eventually. That the story can

be recounted at all presumes that someone spoke and yet the gospel resists resolution in a way that is truly troubling. It has bothered people for ages – it should bother us. Things are not all wrapped up and neatly concluded. We are left with unfulfilled promises and silent witnesses.

Endings are an important part of the writing process – they do something for readers. They offer us a sense of satisfaction. In this brief account from Mark we are provided with testimony that Jesus has been raised, that death has not succeeded in silencing him, and that God will not allow things to end here. But it does so in a way that is not finally fulfilling – there is no proper “sense of an ending” – no closure – no resolution.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, the late Donald H. Juel tells the story of one of his students who had memorized the whole of Mark in order to do a dramatic, Broadway-style reading before a live audience. The performance was very effective. In the student’s changing of position on the stage, shift in tone of voice, and occasional pauses, the Gospel story made good sense and came to life. After careful study, the student had decided to end with chapter 16, verse 8 – where we ended today. At his first performance, however, after he spoke that ambiguous last verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other, the audience waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for a proper ending. Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, “Amen!” and made his exit. The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively. Upon reflection, though, the student realized that by providing the audience a satisfying conclusion, his “Amen!” had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the text. So at the next performance, when he reached the final verse he simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence. No amen to close the performance – no applause to properly end the evening. “The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious,” said Juel, “and as people exited the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the nonending.”

Mark’s ending creates discomfort and uncertainty so it is no wonder we turn to other accounts, to other stories looking for a more fulfilling last page! In other gospels the Easter story is told differently. Easter is supposed to have post resurrection appearances, joyful seaside meals, scenes of reconciliation and forgiveness, garden embraces of the risen Lord, and the disciples’ excited shout, “He is risen!” But Mark offers us none of these, choosing instead to end his story with frightened women fleeing from a cemetery in silence. As one commentator put it: “That’s no way to run a resurrection.”

How do we get from, *the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God* at Mark’s beginning to this flawed finale? If this is Mark’s ending, how then is it a conclusion? What do we do with this nonending? Where do we go from here?

Maybe that’s the whole point. Maybe this story has no end, at least not yet. Perhaps this awkward sentence that falls off the edge is Mark’s way of saying: “This story isn’t over because now it’s your story and mine.” It’s like one of those plays where the audience gets to vote on how the play ends after a break in the action. Only in this case, it’s the audience that gets to live the ending.

It’s like *the song that never ends* but circles continuously back to the beginning. You will recall that Mark’s is a fast paced story – always moving from one event to the next – going immediately from one place to another. The passage that Hope read for us

this morning is framed by motion. The women begin in verses 1-4 moving toward the tomb, and they end in verse 8 moving rapidly away from the tomb – almost exploding away from the tomb, hurtling outward like projectiles from the middle of a blast site. Verse 8 is like some freeze-frame which catches the women in mid-flight. Picture them with eyes wide in surprised terror, their arms outstretched like some sprinter racing for the finish line, their feet a blurry smudge of rapid motion. They flee the tomb, and Mark snaps a photo for us, freezing the action, showing the women in motion.

And Jesus is also on the go. The women arrive at the tomb and encounter a young man who says, “You are no doubt looking for Jesus – the Nazareth one – the crucified one.” It makes sense, doesn’t it, that they would seek Jesus in a cemetery? But he’s not there.

The young man as much as says, “You just missed him. He’s gone, on the road, moving right along to Galilee. He’s going ahead of you.” To disciples who had abandoned him and to Peter who denied him, Jesus’ word was, “I will meet you in Galilee. There we began together; there we will begin anew.” If they want to see Jesus, they need to get going once again themselves. Jesus did not hang around to be encountered at the tomb. Easter morning, according to Mark, is not about running over to where we think Jesus is and then sitting down with him for coffee and conversation. Easter morning is not about throwing a party; it’s about Jesus in motion. It’s about our being in motion, too, if we hope to catch up with Jesus and see him ourselves.

It is good news without an ending – it just keeps going and going, from one life to another, touching and transforming us one by one. Jesus was not at the tomb but going ahead of his friends. Jesus was not there that morning because there was too much work to do! And the risen Christ is not in the tomb today – he is out there ahead of us. A dying world is in need of the renewing grace which only the resurrected Jesus can give. This is a task that can not wait. Where charity and sacrifice prevail over injustice and violence; where compassion and hope replace cynicism and despair; where peace and love take root in lives that are empty and lost; where human beings know joy and justice, dignity and delight: there is the risen Christ, beckoning to us.

Mark’s gospel tells us not to look for endings – not to expect things to be tied up in a neat package. Mark’s gospel charges us to go and tell – that everything is just as Jesus said it would be – that we can be sure of the promises of Jesus. Mark’s gospel advises us that not all promises can be spelled out – that whatever will happen is in God’s hands – that this story has a future.

When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb – and when a gospel ends in the middle of a sentence. Leave the empty tomb now and go...