

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. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

3 They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 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. 7 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.”

8 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 YOUNG MAN

Sometimes I like to major in minors, those curious details in the story that we sometimes ignore. For example in today’s story we learn that when the women went to the tomb the stone was rolled away and the body of Jesus was not there.

But, there was a young man in a white robe, and he had a most amazing story. He told the women not to be afraid, that the Jesus they saw crucified was now raised from the dead. And more than that he was going ahead of them into Galilee to meet with the disciples as he had said.

And here’s where I want to major in minors. I want to know the answer to this question, “Who was that young man in a white robe?”

I guess since the other gospels talk about angels being at the tomb we could speculate that he was an angel. But, Mark’s description rang a bell with me. Mark said something else about a “young man” in his gospel.

And then I remembered. It was in Garden of Gethsemane when the authorities came to arrest Jesus. Mark tells us that there was a young man who was following this procession wearing nothing but a linen cloth. And the authorities grabbed him. Actually, they grabbed his linen cloth.

And to avoid capture this young man left the linen cloth with the guards and ran naked into the night.

This is the kind of thing that biblical scholars love to debate. Inquiring minds want to know, “Who was this young man?”

We could spend a lot of time speculating about this, but the truth of the matter is that we don't really know. We just know that in this encounter with violence he lost what thin protection he had and fled in fear.

But, I just couldn't get this thought out of my mind.

Wouldn't it be something if this young man who ran into the dark night was the same young man who met the women at the tomb?

Wouldn't it something if this young man who lost what little clothing he had was now wearing a white robe? Wouldn't it be something if this young man who was scared out of his wits was now the one assuring the frightened women that there was no reason to be afraid?

I know. The Bible doesn't say that.

But, wouldn't that be like our gracious God, to take a frightened young man who ran naked into the dark and turn him into the first white robed angel of hope?

A detail like that would invite us into the story. It would suggest that even when we run away into the night and abandon the Lord we love there is still hope. Our story is not over because his story is not over. That would be very much in keeping with the way Mark tells the story.

GOOD NEWS FOR TODAY

Mark's gospel is a story with a purpose. And we know that purpose from the very first verse. Mark tells us in that first verse that this is the "beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

You see all sixteen chapters of Mark's gospel are just the beginning because the story doesn't end with the report of Jesus' resurrection. The story continues all the way up to our own day and time and beyond.

This story is not old news. This story is good news, good news about how God intervenes in our life yesterday, today and tomorrow.

AN ODD ENDING

But, today's story presents a challenge.

We go to the tomb with the women expecting to anoint a dead body, but what we see is a young man in a white robe. And he gives us a very unexpected message.

Don't be afraid. The Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried is not here. He has risen. He's going ahead of you, just as he said into Galilee. Go tell the disciples.

And what happens? The women drop their spices and run away. They don't tell anyone because they are so afraid.

Mark's gospel is unique. It doesn't have what we might call a proper ending. There is no Halleluiah chorus in Mark's gospel.

Most scholars (conservative and liberal alike) now agree that Mark's gospel probably "ends" right here at verse 8. The earliest and best manuscripts all agree.

This is where the story "ends."
But, it doesn't really end does it?

In Mark's gospel there are no appearances of the Risen Christ. There are no breakfasts beside the Sea of Galilee. No, in Mark's gospel we have women running away because they are terrified. And they don't say anything to anyone.

What a letdown! How incomplete can a story be?

Indeed, when you read this story in the original Greek, the incompleteness of the story is even more striking. The last sentence in Mark's gospel ends with the Greek word "gar" which means "for" or "that." Literally the sentence reads, "They told no one for..."

For what? What happened? Why didn't they tell anyone? Tell us Mark. Finish the story. This is the most important part.

It's as if someone had jerked Mark up from his desk before he had the opportunity to complete his story. Where is Paul Harvey when you need him? But, unfortunately, Mark doesn't give us the rest of the story.

DO WE NEED A BETTER ENDING?

When I first learned that the gospel of Mark probably stopped at verse eight, I found it very disturbing. I wanted Mark to be like the rest of the Gospels. I wanted him to bring a sense of closure to the whole affair.

In my opinion he left the best part out!

It's no wonder to me that by the second century some helpful preachers took other ancient traditions about Jesus and helped Mark out by adding a "decent" ending to the story.

You can't blame them. You don't end an essay in the middle of a sentence. My English teachers would never have let me get away with that. Why should a gospel be any different?

Now don't misunderstand. Mark certainly believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. We've already noted that Mark tells us in the very first verse that this is gospel, good news. This is a story about Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (Mark 1:1)

In Mark's gospel when Jesus predicts his Passion he always predicts his resurrection as well. (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34)

In Mark 14:27-28 Jesus predicts that his disciples will run away when the time comes for the crucifixion, but Jesus also predicts that after he is "raised up he will go before them into Galilee." In Mark it all happens according to the word of Jesus.

So, we don't have to worry about Mark's faith. Mark knows about and believes in the resurrection from the very beginning. But, we do still have to wonder why Mark ends his gospel in such an unusual way.

I guess we could say that there is a lost ending to Mark that ties up all these loose ends. Quite often the last panel of a scroll was lost. Maybe this happened with Mark.

AN OPEN ENDED STORY

But, many scholars now think that Mark deliberately ends his story in this ambiguous way because he wants us to know that the story does not end. For Mark, the resurrection of Jesus was not the end of the story. It was just the beginning.

I love the way commentator Lamar Williamson puts it,

"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."

In other words it's not just about what some women saw way back when. We know without Mark writing it what those women did and what happened in the final analysis.

The women eventually told a whole lot of people. Jesus appeared to them. And 40 years later Mark is writing this gospel.

And nearly 2,000 years later we are here today believing and sharing this same message.

But, Mark also wanted us to think about the resurrection for ourselves. He wanted us to experience the holy fear ... the awesomeness of this moment in the hope that we too might leave the empty tomb this Easter transformed by the experience.

In some sense the resurrection should make us feel uncertain and afraid too.

AHEAD OF US

Mark wanted us to know that we will not find Jesus in the graveyard of history. He goes on ahead of us. This Jesus is not the domesticated Jesus that so many preach these days. This is not the docile, therapeutic Jesus who massages our ego and gives us what we want.

No, this story is much more disturbing.

This Jesus is the Risen Lord, the Son of God who rolls away the heavy stone of death. Nothing like this has happened before or since.

And holy, life changing awe and terror are the proper responses to such a message.

The women came to the tomb to give Jesus a decent burial. They came to the tomb with sweet spices to try and overcome the smell of death. But, much to their surprise they did not find the decay of death. They found signs of life.

He had gone on before them. He was ahead of them. The thousand pound stone had already been rolled away. And it scared them half to death.

The angel gives us the same message that he gave those women long ago.

He is risen. He goes ahead of us.

And I would contend that it is our job to catch up to Jesus. It is our job is to look for signs of the risen Christ in our own life and in the world.

AS HE SAID

I know that some of you ... maybe most of you ... are going through a difficult, fearful time this morning. It may be Easter morning, but you're still on the way to the tomb.

Your hopes have been dashed because your worst fears have become a reality.

You may think that things are about as bad as they can get. You may think that your story is over.

But, Mark tells us that the story, our story is not over. There are chapters left to write in your life. The Son of God is not powerless and dead.

He is risen, and He still goes ahead of us.

He continues to lead us forward into the future ... into whatever uncertain "Galilee" that you and I must face this coming Monday.

That's where He is, and that's where He'll meet us.

There's a mundane but important phrase that repeats itself through out Mark's gospel, three little words, "as he said." Throughout the gospel, whenever Jesus says something, it happens "as he said."

Unlike the other religious leaders Jesus speaks with authority. The words of Jesus are powerful because they come to pass.

For example, the disciples find the colt for Jesus to ride into Jerusalem just "as he said." The betrayal of Judas occurs just "as he said" it would.

The denial of Peter and the flight of the disciples all occurred “as he said.” And of course the rejection and crucifixion of Jesus at the hands of the political and religious leaders happened “just as he said” it would happen many times.

But, the young man at the tomb reminded the women that there was one more prediction to be fulfilled. Jesus was risen, and he was going ahead of his disciples into Galilee, “just as he said.”

The Bible tells us that the disciples ran away when the authorities took Jesus to be crucified. I wonder where they went.

I wonder if perhaps the disciples were on their way back home to Galilee, back to where it all started. It wasn't that they wanted to go to Galilee. They just didn't have anywhere else to go.

Can't you just see them trudging their way down the road, discouraged and defeated by their own unfaithful actions and by the death of their Lord?

But, before they get home Jesus is already there!

The disciples are unfaithful. They deny him and run away. But, Jesus still graciously comes to them “as he said.”

We too run away from our Lord and deny what we believe in most deeply. We too live by our fears instead of our faith.

We too give in to despair and grief. We too are afraid that the good news is too good to be true. And so we don't share the word with others.

But, the final chapter in our life will not be written by those faithless fears and sinful failures. The gracious Word of our Lord will write the final chapter in our life.

EASTER, A NEW WAY OF LIFE

This day, this blessed Easter day, a young man in a white robe and an empty tomb has given us a most extraordinary message. He is not here. He is risen. He goes before us just as he said.

Just as that monk in the second century attempted to give Mark's gospel a decent ending, we too are sometimes tempted to “fix” the bad endings in our own life.

We too are tempted to bring sweet spices to cover up the odor of death and despair. We too are tempted to deny what is wrong with us, to minimize the pain that we feel.

But, we worship the God who meets us precisely at the point where things seem to be at their worst. Our God meets us not to give us a temporary fix but to redeem us for all eternity.

God turns what looks like a bad ending, a failure into an opportunity for new life.

I'm not sure how our story will end, but I do know who will meet us at the end of our story. And I know how the big story ends. That makes all the difference.

In some ways it's a story that we cannot portray. It is a story that is beyond our comprehension, and a hope that is beyond our imagining.

But, we do know this. The story doesn't end where Mark left off. The story continues into our own lives.

THE DRAMA OF MARK

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.

After careful study, the student had decided to go with the scholarly consensus regarding the ending. 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 was obviously 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.

Juel said, "The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious, and as people exited, the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the non-ending."

EASTER CONTINUES

Somehow we need to get it in our head that just as the gospel of Mark doesn't end so Easter doesn't end either.

In an article on the Presbyterian Church website we are reminded that Easter is not just one day but a season. One day is not enough to celebrate and explore the hope of the resurrection, and so we have the season of Easter, which lasts seven weeks (a week of weeks).

But, the article also points out that even a season of celebration is not enough when it comes to the central tenant of our faith.

Easter is more than a day or even a seven-week season. In the fullest sense, Easter is a whole new way of living and looking at the world. For the believer every day is Easter.

According to the Apostle, Paul, Easter people are “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:11). Easter people are called to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

Today I invite you to become a part of that life long story. Today I invite you to play your role in this drama of hope and salvation.

His story is not finished. And your story is not finished either. He is risen, and he goes ahead of you.

Long ago that message filled some faithful women with fear and amazement. And that message has been doing the same thing to millions of people ever since.

Lord, help us hear that powerful message once again. Fill our hearts with holy fear and amazement.

Amen.