

“Endings & Beginnings”

Easter—Year B

Mark 16: 1-8

April 1, 2018

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Endings matter. They really do. I don't care how good the game was. If your team loses a nail-biter on the last play, does it still seem like that good of a game? Personally, I think Super Bowl 52 is the greatest football game of all time. But I doubt New England fans agree with me on that. And what about the book that kept you mesmerized 90% of the way through, but then just fizzled out at the end? Would you still call it a good book?

Still, I confess my focus on endings can go too far at times. My family will tell you, I don't just want a story to have a good ending. I want it to have a *happy* ending. I want to know the movie will have a happy ending before I buy my ticket, or I'm not going. Just as I want to know the book will have an uplifting conclusion before beginning the first chapter. It's why, amid the Harry Potter craze, as soon as I'd spot a new book on an end table at our house, I'd scoop it up and turn to the last 5 pages, anxiously trying to see where things were headed. I just don't want to waste my time digging into something that will end up leaving me sad... or angry... or stressed out... or just sort of hanging, you know? Without any real sense of closure, as Mark's Gospel seems to do.

It's why I totally get how Mark came to have not one, or two, but *three* separate endings. Look it up in your Bible, and you'll see it plain as day. There's the original ending, which is where we ended our reading this morning. Chapter 16 verse 8. But there's also two more endings that've been added over time... ever-so-creatively titled the “Shorter” and “Longer” endings.

You see, early Christian found Mark's ending so abrupt, so unsatisfying, so not-at-all-what-you'd-expect that at two separate times in history they couldn't help themselves. They rationalized, “You know, Mark couldn't have *really* wanted to end his gospel like this, right? Surely there's a page that's gone missing. Maybe just a paragraph. So we'll just add one in for him.”

Except, scholarship largely agrees Mark really did intend his gospel to end right where it did. As awkward as it seems. With the women going to Jesus' tomb, but instead of finding a body inside, they see the stone's been rolled away. And a divine messenger greets them with the amazing news that God has kept God's promise. Resurrection is real. New life isn't just possible... new life is here! “So go,” the messenger tells the women. “Tell the others that Jesus is going ahead to Galilee. You can catch up with him there.”... But the women don't go. And they don't say anything to anyone. They just run away, terrified and amazed.

And that's how Mark ends. Jesus is resurrected, but only three women know, and they're sayin' nothin' to nobody. It's like having the best news you could ever tell someone, but never uttering a word about it.

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I certainly don't blame the women, though. Far from it. If I'd been there that first Easter morn... If I'd seen what they saw and heard what they heard, I wouldn't have been standing there long enough to hear the angel finish. Uh-uh. The body of a man who'd just been convicted of sedition—treason against the government—and killed by capital punishment in the most brutal, public possible... is now gone? And an angel says he's been raised? To new life?

I mean, let's be honest. Because Easter is over 2000 years old, it's easy to hear the story as if it's not altogether shocking. As if the Easter story isn't world-changing. We assume it's good news to everyone who hears it. That it's beautiful and delightful anywhere we encounter it.

But let's not kid ourselves. There's a reason Mark unabashedly conveys the women's fear. Resurrection is scary stuff. If for no other reason... resurrection only occurs upon death. Think about it. Someone... or something... has to die in order for resurrection to take place. And resurrection or no resurrection, death scares us. The death of people, sure. But also the loss of things... or priorities... of values... or possessions.

Any way you slice it, we're afraid of the death and loss that precedes resurrection.

Which is why so few Christians actually pursue resurrection. Like the women at the tomb, we've heard the message. "Jesus has been raised. Resurrection is real." But that doesn't mean we're ready to trust it. That doesn't mean we're willing to relinquish what has to die... what has to go in order for resurrection to take place.

So we turn away... afraid of what resurrection might require. Afraid of letting go of what has to die in order for new life to rise up.

I mean... We don't like the pain of our grudge... but we're not ready to let it die, either.

We may not be able to stand our current job... but we're still not willing to let it go in order to pursue new opportunities that might rise up.

We may hate how we never seem to have enough quality time with the kids or with our spouse, or enough time to engage in what really matters to us... and yet, we're also not yet willing to say no to the things that we allow to pull us in different directions.

Make no mistake, life is full of possibilities... Our time here is overflowing with opportunities to live into the life God intends. But in order to live into God's way, there are undoubtedly old ways, old perspectives, old boundaries that will have to die so that new ones might rise up. And any way you slice it, that's scary stuff.

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So clearly... the women weren't ready. They weren't ready to go and tell the others what they'd seen and heard. As Mark writes, "they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

And yet, the author of Mark, which was written 60-70 years after Jesus death¹... he came to hear and see the good news of Jesus and his resurrection. He even says so, plain as day at the very onset of his book. Mark chapter 1, verse 1, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That's how Mark begins his gospel. Not with a beautiful prologue like John's. And not with the story of Jesus' birth like Matthew and Luke. No. Mark's gospel

¹ Wayne A., Meeks (General Editor) *HarperCollins Study Bible: NRSV with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993).

begins just about as abruptly as it ends. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God.”

Except... there’s something absolutely critical in Mark’s first line. Did you hear it? I certainly didn’t for a long time. Mark not only says his gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God! He says it’s *the beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.²

Meaning... Mark tells us from the get go that the good news of Jesus Christ isn’t complete. He knows his gospel is really just the start of it all... so while he offers us the beginning of the gospel, *he wants us to know... it’s just the beginning.*

So by the time we get to the end of Mark, and the women are fleeing the empty tomb with fear and amazement, saying nothing to anyone... we need to understand... these may be the last words Mark writes... but it’s not the end of the gospel. Not by a long shot. *It’s just the end of the very beginning.*

For Mark knew that the story of God’s love in Jesus Christ is a story that will keep taking shape through the lives of those who choose to follow Christ’s way, who choose to pursue the resurrection to which he calls us. So Mark has intentionally left space for the rest of his gospel to be written by those who follow... our forerunners in the faith... those who birthed the church and handed it down through the centuries until you and I find ourselves here... invited to take our part in the story of a God who’s still far from done loving this world into redemption and fulfillment.

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So let me ask you, friends... What will you write? What will you be adding to the Good News of Jesus Christ? How will you be pursuing resurrection in your life? In your family’s life? In the world around you? What will you let go of so that resurrection can burst forth? What old ways will you release so that new blooms may blossom? How will you begin to walk the way of Jesus, understanding that a life lived for ourselves is not the life God intends?

But more than that, Towson Presbyterian Church, how will *we* pursue resurrection in the lives of those around us? How will the ministries we share proclaim resurrection both within and beyond our walls? How will we proclaim Jesus’ triumph over systems of injustice and paths that lead to death? How will we speak truth to power? How will we seek resurrection’s new life for the oppressed and silenced? What risks are we willing to take to seek a better life, new life not simply for ourselves, but for the last and the least—those with whom Jesus most completely identifies?

What will we write, Towson Presbyterian Church? What resurrection stories of new life will we be adding to the Gospel as we reveal how God continues to love this world into redemption and fulfillment?

Personally, I can’t wait to find out. I think the year before us is one of great possibilities if we’re willing to take the risks. For there will be obstacles. There will be resistance from parts of this world—perhaps even parts within ourselves—that will do everything possible to keep the status quo from changing.

² For more on the development of this theme, see David Lose, Partner In Preaching, <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/easter-b-only-the-beginning/>

But as Jesus reminds us every time we come to his table, nothing—not even death—can stand in the way of God blessing us with love and with life. So what will we proclaim? How will we live the story Mark's left for us to tell? Amen.