

“When The Ending Is Not The End”

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

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Our Scripture reading is what I would term the most difficult of the Easter stories. Like the other gospels, the Gospel of Mark tells in great detail all the events of Good Friday, of Jesus' death. Unlike the other Gospels, this Gospel does not have the expected stories of the risen Jesus meeting the women and other disciples. This Gospel, written 30-something years after that first Easter, knows that Jesus was raised—that is not the question. This Gospel has said all along: Jesus is going to be raised. In fact, in the scene just before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus tells his disciples: “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” And then there is Peter's reaction: Peter said to him, “Even though all become deserters, I will not.”[14:28-29].

There is absolutely no doubt that Jesus will be raised from the perspective of the Gospel. There is absolutely no doubt that when the Gospel was written, the faith of the church was completely invested in the Easter message. Here is the historical and literary puzzle: Why does this Gospel not tell us more? Listen to the ending of the Gospel of Mark:

16 *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.*

Here is where the earliest version of the Gospel of Mark ended. The women were told not to be scared but they were. The women were instructed to go tell but they “said nothing to anyone.” The end...no hallelujahs...no appearances...no more.

Perhaps you can understand why many faithful people have had a problem with the ending of the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel promises that Jesus will be raised and go before them to Galilee...but nothing is said about it. The other three Gospels do not end this way. Matthew tells of a great earthquake rolling away the stone and the descent of a glowing angel. In that kind of Easter story you get great drama—big, loud, and with lots of special effects. Matthew goes on to tell of Jesus meeting the women and meeting Jesus on a mountain in Galilee. Luke tells of Jesus walking on the road to Emmaus with two disciples. Their hearts burn as they walk

with Jesus; and then there are forty days of appearances of Jesus. John tells of a race to the tomb by Peter and an unnamed disciple, of Mary Magdalene in the garden, and of Thomas with his doubts. Even the apostle Paul, from whom we do not get many stories of Jesus, tells of multiple appearances of the risen Jesus. How could Mark not do so?

If you look in your Bibles, there are about four or five different additions to the end of the Gospel of Mark—one is called the “shorter ending,” one is called the “longer ending,” and the other endings are some combination of the two. What they all share in common is this: none are original...they have all been added to help the Gospel of Mark be complete. Scholars are universally convinced that the oldest version of the Gospel of Mark ended at verse 8. Some argue that we have just lost the ending. If you have seen pictures of the Dead Sea scrolls, or even pictures of that document called the Gospel of Judas (not written or connected in anyway to the historical Judas), you have seen how old manuscripts get torn and might very well lose a section. So the argument goes, the ending of the Gospel of Mark was torn away. Others have speculated that the writer was called away at this point...perhaps arrested by the Romans...and he never got back to finishing the Gospel. The writer would not end the Gospel with the last faithful followers of Jesus beings afraid and silent? Or would the writer do so? What if Mark intended to end this way? What if that earliest version is also the final version? Let’s take a second look.

Who is there on that Easter morning? The women. The Gospel of Mark has been clear to tell us that these women were with Jesus in Galilee, that they had taken care of him (the implication is that part of their care was monetary: Jesus and the disciples did have expenses), that they had stood by on Golgotha as he died, that they had seen the tomb where his body was laid, and now they were coming for that final service of anointing the body with spices. But then, they fail...they fail to pass on the message that Jesus is not there but risen, that the tomb is empty, that he is going to before them to Galilee. They exit afraid and silent, even when they are told: “Jesus goes before you to Galilee.” The women fail...just as the men failed.

And where are the men? Jesus told the men disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: You will all desert me...but after I am raised up, we will meet in Galilee. You are going to fail me but there will be another chance...after I am raised up. And remember Peter argued with Jesus: I will not desert you! And we know how well Peter lived up to that promise: before the cock crowed twice that morning, he had sworn three times that he did not even know Jesus.

Here’s what we have: The men failed to stay with Jesus...they couldn’t face the cross...they could not hang on to the end. The women failed...they saw the stone rolled away...they saw the empty tomb...they heard the message of the young man dressed in white. They fail to tell the story.

Here are two ways of missing the mark: failing to stay with Jesus when the going gets rough...failing to speak what you know. Everyone misses the mark. But to the men and to the women, the promise is the same: meet Jesus in Galilee and start again. Here is where Mark’s Gospel ends.

And so the Gospel waits for you and me to ask some questions. One reaction is “Well, did those women ever join the disciples and tell them...did they go to Galilee...did they face their fears?” And before skipping over to the other Gospels for the answer, this Gospel is saying: “That’s *their* story. What matters now is your story. You have heard the message. Are you willing to go...are willing to speak?” The focus shifts back to you and me.

Another reaction to this ending might be “Women, what’s wrong with you? You’ve seen the stone rolled back, the empty tomb, and angelic-like messenger! How can you be silent? Why we would have loved to have been there and experienced it!” And the Gospel whispers back, “You know the story. How can you keep silent in the face of the same message: He is not here; he is raised?”

And then perhaps there is that reaction of wanting to meet in Jesus in Galilee. Here Galilee is more than just a place...it is the environment and setting where these disciples were first stirred to faith. Galilee, for the disciples—men and women—was the place where it all began. There they had met Jesus...there he had been with them...there he had fed the multitudes, healed the sick, taught in ways that warmed their hearts. Galilee is a return to the place where things were making some kind of sense...some kind of wholeness. Galilee is the place that we left and got mixed up in so much other stuff. Galilee is even the place for those who have failed miserably.

That’s why the message of the young man at the tomb is to go and tell the disciples AND Peter. In fact, our English translation may miss part of the intention of the message. It is, “Go and tell the disciples, even tell Peter.” Even tell Peter to come to Galilee. Peter is singled out because his failure is so evident. Remember he swore on his life that he would stay with Jesus but he ran away in fear. Have you ever made those commitments? Count on me, God. I will not be driven by selfishness...I will pray daily...I will complete my promises...I will do what I say am going to do...I am back in worship today and I going to be back regularly. And then to fail miserably! All can come to Galilee...even those who have made a mess of things.

Here is that radical grace of God—you and I are welcome home, no matter how much we have failed. Here is the radical response: you have to leave where you are and meet him in Galilee. He will meet you there...but not here in the midst of living the failure. There is absolute good news...but it does mean moving from where we have been...for many of us that is moving back to where we first knew Jesus...or where we long to meet him beyond the mess of things in our own Jerusalems.

The ending to the Gospel of Mark is no ending. And if none of these reactions are yours, how about this one? We know what the women really did...we know the story. Perhaps you are saying: I really prefer a cleaner ending to this story, something like

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

That's one of the endings that has been put on the Gospel of Mark. Nice closure...a sort of exclamation point...but not originally in the Gospel of Mark.

Sometimes the ending of work can only be understood in light of the beginning. Do you happen to know how the Gospel begins? It reads: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." Not "The Good News of Jesus Christ"—that sounds complete and finished. No, this Gospel is only the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ. The good news is not finished: Disciples who can't seem to hang with Jesus during the rough times...Disciples who can't seem to give voice to the message they know...Disciples who have said, "I'll do it" but end not doing it...all of these disciples are invited to come to Galilee. Go back to where you met Jesus...and you'll find that he is there for you. Go to Galilee.