

To Be Continued...

Mark 16:1-8

Easter, 2009

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary 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 where 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.

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This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

“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’m usually not too big on unfinished endings.

Whether it is book or a movie or a television show – I am someone who prefers resolution and closure. I like to know the facts and I like to know what to expect.

Mark’s gospel doesn’t seem to care what I like.

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Mark’s gospel account starts this way: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark is a story teller – and he has a story to tell. It is a story that is compelling, full of intrigue, mystery, a real struggle between the powers of the world and the inbreaking of God’s kingdom embodied by the person of Jesus. It is a story that matters to us – as the very people whom Jesus came to redeem. Mark opens his gospel in a way that suggests that we had better pay attention. It leaves us expectant – waiting to hear about this good news.¹

And then, at the end of Mark’s gospel, we are left in that same place of expectancy.

Mark’s story of the first Easter is much different than the other three accounts. The women – the two Marys and Salome – come to the tomb equipped with the materials needed to properly care for a corpse. Upon their arrival at the tomb, they see that the stone has been rolled away. Daring to go inside, they find a young man (an angel?) who is definitely not Jesus, but who shares with them some pretty earth shattering news: “you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place where 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.”

¹ Williamson, Lamar, *Interpretation: Mark*, p. ?

Responding to this news, the women flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

The end. Gospel over. Or is it?

If you open your pew Bibles you will see that some people were dissatisfied with Mark's story. If you open your pew Bibles you will see that there are two alternate endings to this story with brackets around them. These alternate endings pick up after the women leave the tomb and describe how the disciples and the women encounter Jesus. What you need to know is that these endings were added later, much later, by people like me who preferred resolution and closure.

Maybe the people who added these endings had read the other gospels – where Matthew, Luke and John all record appearances of the risen Christ. Maybe they added these endings because they felt like they needed to prove the logical conclusion to this most illogical news: that if Jesus was no longer in the tomb he must have been seen by somebody. Or, maybe they were just uncomfortable with an unfinished story. Who knows?

Whether we like it or not, scholars are clear that Mark's gospel ends right where we ended today: with the women running away from the empty tomb in a terrified silence.

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“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 wonder. I wonder how long it took for those women to tell the story of what they had witnessed. Obviously, at some point one of them decided they could not hold it in any longer. Somewhere along the way, their fear gave way just enough to confide in others what they had seen and been told: “The tomb was empty! Jesus has been raised! He will meet us in Galilee!”

I wonder how long it took. We would not be here, gathered to hear the good news some 2,000 years later if these women had never told

the story. Somewhere along the way their silence gave way to testimony.

Somewhere along the way their testimony turned into belief. The words that they shared with Jesus' disciples and followers became for them truth.

Somewhere along the way their belief turned into action. With other believers, they began to build community and tend to the sick, the weak, and the poor. They began to be the body of Christ in the world.

Somewhere along the way their actions began, with faint brushstrokes, to paint the outline of the kingdom of God; a kingdom that was inaugurated by the inbreaking of Jesus Christ – the word made flesh – in his birth, life, and saving death. A kingdom whose boundaries continue to increase with every act of mercy and compassion.

I wonder how long it took for those women who fled from the tomb in amazement and fear and silence to finally speak. To move from silence to testimony to belief to action to full participation in the work of God's kingdom?

And maybe that is Mark's point.

Maybe Mark leaves those who read this gospel with an unfinished ending because we are the ones who will write the next chapter in the great story of God's people.

Perhaps, rather than tying up the loose ends and providing us with a satisfying resolution, Mark leaves some room and enough things unsettled so that in his story of Jesus we will find our story.

Rather than providing us the comfort of a story that is settled and familiar and without demand, Mark ends his Easter account with a challenge: You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth. He has been raised. He is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.

They are not only words addressed to the women gathered at the tomb. They are words that are addressed to us, and to every

person gathered in Christ's name. Jesus of Nazareth has been raised – he is going ahead of you – there you will see him.

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The theologian Karl Barth has said that on Easter Sunday most people come to church with one question on their minds: is it true? Maybe you are here today asking yourself that question: is it true?

Mark isn't too concerned with providing proof. The empty tomb is enough. For Mark, it is through the lives of those who continue the story of Jesus' ministry that we find the proof of the fact that he is raised. We will see the living Christ wherever we see acts of discipleship; where people and groups and churches invest themselves in way of the cross as opposed to the way of the world.

Maybe that is why the women were afraid. They arrived at the tomb afraid that death had achieved its victory. But the stone had been moved and Jesus had been raised. Death had been defeated. Maybe the women left the tomb full of fear because they understood for the first time the demands of the life that they would now have to lead: a life of discipleship that followed in the path of the cross.

A commentator on this text says that anyone who truly understands what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ should be afraid. If you're not afraid to follow in Jesus' footsteps, you're not paying attention.²

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A few years ago, a US veteran turned CIA officer turned pastor and activist named William Sloane Coffin died. Besides being provocative and controversial, Coffin was an avid follower of Jesus Christ. It didn't always make him the most popular person in the room and there are certainly things that Coffin has said and done that rightly offend, but Coffin's commitment to the life of Christian discipleship is something to be admired.

² Blount, Brian, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Westminster/John Knox, Atlanta, 2002) p. 260.

A preacher tells the story of a time when Coffin's discipleship journey landed him in prison. One of his cell mates, a priest, described being scared and depressed spending that night in jail. Recalling their night in prison, he said,

"I have no idea what prompted him to do so, but at some point in the night, the man in the next cell began to sing, softly at first. His resolute baritone gradually filled the air as he moved easily into what you recognized as Handel's *Messiah*: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people." And then you recognized the voice as that of William Sloane Coffin. . . . Others in the cell block joined their voices. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light." . . . [Hearing those voices sing], you did believe that "Your Redeemer Liveth" and more than that, you believed that your Redeemer had stood upon earth with you."³

True Christian discipleship has a streak of defiance; like the defiance seen in singing about the power of faith while sitting in a jail cell because of your commitment to that faith. To believe that Christ is alive is to believe that God is stronger than everything in this world, including death.

There is freedom in that. It is a freedom that can give us courage to face whatever life throws at us because we know that God is a God of resurrection and that there is nothing, in life or in death, that can separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ.

Writing about death, Coffin said, "Before every birth and after every death there is still God. The abyss of God's love is deeper than the abyss of death. If we don't know what is beyond the grave, we do know who is beyond the grave."⁴

Make no mistake. It is scary to live your life believing that God is bigger than death. It is scary living in obedience to the God who asks that those who call on the name of Jesus follow in the path that led him to the cross. But such is the Easter challenge for a Christian.

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³ James Carrol, as found in the sermon "The End is the Beginning" by the Rev. John Buchanan (April 16, 2006)

⁴ Coffin, William Sloane, *Credo* (Westminster/John Knox, Atlanta, 2006) p. ??

I don't need to tell you that there are plenty of places in our world that are in need of redemption. And every day, each one of us wakes up, ties up our shoes, and walks out into the mission field: encountering people who need God's compassion, or challenge, or mercy, or comfort.

If you are here this morning, wanting to have proof to substantiate the incredible story about a God who died for us and who was raised for our salvation, then here is an Easter challenge for you: be the proof. Be the proof that you seek.

Take a risk; take a stand; extend compassion to the stranger; work for justice; lift up the brokenhearted; support the weak; comfort the lonely.

Your life is a living testimony to the good news of our risen Lord.

The story of God's redemption of the world in Jesus Christ is still being written.

I know that you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is going ahead of you; there you will see him.

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Alleluia! Amen.