

COVENANT WORD

Happily Ever After

Acts 10:34-43; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 19:1-8

A message by
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Dear Friends,
Thank you for wanting to read and study these thoughts more carefully. Please know that I do not take full credit for anything that may be contained within, because I may have read or heard something at some point during my pilgrimage and do not remember its source and thus, cannot give the rightful author his/her credit. I pray that you will find inspiration and encouragement.
Sarah Shelton



WHERE FAITH COMES TO LIFE

Just in case you did not know, I am married to a ten year old! Not literally, of course, but figuratively. Although highly educated with more tax information than one person should be allowed and certainly well-schooled in social etiquette, Lloyd's humor would be welcomed on any grade school playground. In fact, he could be "King of the Monkey Bars" with his riddles, jokes and oft expressed, "Hey, Sarah, pull my finger!" So I knew I had a "win" when I presented him with a treasure from my attic foraging. It is a clear acrylic ice cube that entraps a very dead wasp. Lloyd almost jumped for joy thinking about putting it in his sister's iced tea. His only regret is that I did not find the plastic poop to put in her chair! So should you feel the earth shift a little at noon, don't be alarmed. It's only the Shelton clan shouting "April Fool's!"

Maybe you have staged an air horn under your least favorite co-worker's chair, or replaced the can of air freshener in the restroom with shrimp odor spray! April fools! You might place a chicken bouillon cube in the head of your shower or strategically place a plastic snake between the lettuce heads at your local grocery store! All these things and more for an April Fool's prank.

When we come to church on Easter, we anticipate "Alleluias!" "He is risen!" We do not expect an April fool's joke to rise up from the pages of holy writ! But when we read Mark's gospel, we wonder what sort of joke he is trying to pull over on us, because Jesus does not even make an appearance. This is no way to stage a resurrection! But there are no post-resurrection appearances in Mark; no joyful seaside meals; no scenes of

reconciliation and forgiveness; not even a garden embrace. (Thomas Long, "Dangling Gospel," *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006) What we get instead is a bunch of grieving women who witness an empty tomb, and then, the story lurches to an awkward grammatical stop. "To no one anything they said; afraid they were for..." It feels like Yoda is talking: "To no one anything they said; afraid they were for..." Because we explored Mark's Messianic Secret last week, this ending has us wondering if the followers of Jesus have caught on too late or at the wrong time if indeed all they did was say nothing to anyone because they were afraid for...

This is no way to stage a resurrection!

If you follow along in your Bibles, you see that chapter 16 of Mark's gospel does technically continue after verse 8. Scholars, however, are convinced that scribes supplied the two endings found there. Why? Because they could not sit comfortably with a text that did not end with "happily ever after."

We love happy endings, don't we? A happy ending is so important at our house that Lloyd and I often have trouble finding movies to watch. He says that if a dog is involved, the ending will not be happy. He says that if there is somebody in love, the ending will involve some dreaded disease or a broken heart and so the ending will not be happy. This need for positive closure is a problem, really. We want all the characters to be tucked in and the plot solved with a pleasant surprise.

The surprise in Mark's narrative is the fact that the main character is not

present, and the characters who are present are women. It is not very satisfying even though we are assured that for this text to have survived the centuries, the women's presence must be truthful or it would have been edited out like the happier ending is edited in. The early church would have been embarrassed by women at the tomb. They would much rather have had a male disciple or two, but in Mark's gospel it is the women who follow Jesus all the way to the cross. The women keep vigil at the crucifixion, praying and weeping as Jesus draws his last. They silently watch as Joseph of Arimathea takes Jesus' crucified body down off the cross and wrap it in a linen shroud. They form their own kind of funeral procession, walking behind Joseph as he takes the corpse to his family tomb. They see where the body is laid and promise one another to return after the Sabbath to anoint Jesus' body with oils.

Mark names all three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. Their names are important not for biographical information. Their names are important for theological irony. (Marie Sabin, "Women Transformed: The Ending of Mark is the Beginning of Wisdom," *Cross Currents*, summer, 1998) Early in Mark's gospel, Jesus' miracles are rejected because he is too common, too ordinary. Yet, the miracles themselves prove him to be fully capable of making the common and ordinary holy. So his mother, Mary, a common woman that the homefolks think cannot possibly be the mother of a prophet, is shown to act with uncommon faithfulness and courage at the crucifixion.

What is remarkable about these ordinary women is not who they are but what they do.

You will also remember that when John the Baptist is beheaded, it is because Herod's daughter, Salome, danced for the result of death. But here at the end of the gospel, we find another Salome who is bringing spices for the result of new life. The

repetition of their names from the beginning of the gospel to the very end conveys a sense of alter egos. It reiterates to us the possibility of transformation for anyone who is a faithful follower.

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The scene involving the women is also full of gospel echoes. These women, like Simon's mother-in-law in the first chapter of Mark, get up and minister to Jesus through their service. Just like the woman who anoints Jesus "for his burial," these women come to the tomb for that very reason but find that Jesus' body is not there. Their spices will not be used to seal the body in death, instead they become a liturgy for new life. What is remarkable about these ordinary women is not who they are but what they do. They are faithful followers, i.e., like called disciples; they are servants, i.e. like ministers; and they are unfailing witnesses and anointers, i.e., like apostles.

Their significance becomes clearest when they are compared with the male disciples. The disciples are called to follow Jesus (ch.1), to follow after his cross (ch 8), to follow him in being the servant of all (ch 9). The male disciples are called to be prepared for his death and to watch him in his distress (ch 13-14). The male disciples are called to bear witness to God's kingdom and to heal through anointing with oil (ch 6). Within the boundaries of the Markan narrative the male disciples of Jesus fail to do any of these things, while the women fulfill them all. They follow and serve (ch 1, 5, 15); they follow Jesus to the cross and the tomb (ch 15, 16); they watch faithfully to the very end and beyond (ch 15, 16); they prepare for his death, they anoint with oil (ch 14, 16); and they are the first to be sent forth as witnesses of the resurrection. While Jesus repeatedly reproaches the male disciples for their lack of understanding, he commends the women (both Jewish and Gentile women) for their faith (ch 5, 7). In his dying, while the male disciples betray, deny, and flee from Jesus, the women are solidly and faithfully present. (Sabin)

In a trance-like state, filled with grief, these about-to-be-transformed disciples head to the cemetery at the break of day. They bring funeral

spices not expectations. They come to conduct a funeral, not a revolution. They come to grieve, not to organize. They grieve his death, yes, but they also grieve their now dead hope of a future where the sick are healed; demons flee; the hungry are fed with baskets of food left over; the old are cared for; and the women are worth listening and talking to. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Easter Sunday 2006," *Journal for Preachers*, 2008)

The grave site is a dangerous place for them to be seen. Remember that Jesus is a folk hero executed by the state. If they listen really hard, they might hear camera shutters clicking in the bushes for the wanted posters that will go up later in the day. The two Marys and Salome might as well wear T-shirts that say, "This way to the men folk." But they are not scared yet. They are not scared because they know how to behave in the face of death. You view the body, you seal the tomb, and you go back to the house to eat fried chicken and green bean casseroles with the neighbors. You tell stories about the deceased. You accept that there is no going back and you get on with your life, diminished as it is. But when the stone is rolled away from the entrance and then tomb is empty and the body gone? That is when you get scared. (Taylor and Thomas Long, "Preaching Easter from the Gospel of Mark," *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2003)

A young man dressed in white is sitting inside. "Do not be afraid," he tells them, which alerts us to his angelic status. He continues, "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who is crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. So 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." Did you hear that? The young man doesn't say that Jesus is going ahead of them to heaven! He says that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee which means that God's hope is alive on earth!! (Taylor)

But the women say nothing to nobody, or at least according to the oldest version of Mark's gospel, which reads: "And no one anything they told; they were scared, you see, for..." It's a whole new *Da Vinci Code* waiting to be written so that the ending can be found! (Taylor) Mark did not know exactly what we would be scared of all these years later; he just knew we would be. By ending his gospel right there, right

in the middle of a sentence, he also leaves us free to decide what to do about it. Will we tell or won't we? Will we go to Galilee or won't we? That is where the Lord Jesus has gone – not to the town in northern Israel, but all the real places on earth that we have come here from – where we bring up our children, earn our livings, pay our taxes and cast our votes. It is exactly in that ordinariness that God is raising the dead. If we are going to practice resurrection, then that is where we will go too. (Long)

The women obviously tell someone something or else we wouldn't have the gospel. In their trauma, in their grief, in their ecstasy, in their silence, they find a way to tell their story so that we can find a way to tell ours. I believe this is why the narrative stops so abruptly. It stops because Mark is inviting us to make our own beginning out of his abrupt ending. The narrative is left for us, the new disciples, to complete.

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Brian Blount says: ("Is the Joke on Us?" *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel*, Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller, eds. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, p. 28)

At the end...when Jesus goes off searching for human representation in Galilee, God establishes yet again the desire to make and use human disciples. [God keeps looking for people who are] willing and able to overcome their fear of this good news and thereby finish the story...Jesus started. That is why Mark writes this Jesus story in the first place: to let would-be disciples know that God is searching for them to finish it.

We finish the gospel by standing boldly in the face of death; we finish the gospel by speaking good news to the poor; we finish the gospel by feeding the hungry; we finish the gospel by binding up the brokenhearted; by breaking down the dividing walls of hostility; and by gathering about this table. All believers in Jesus Christ are invited to this table. This table where we remember his great sacrifice of love. It is no April Fool's joke! It is the greatest gift in all the world and it is for you. You do not have to be a member of our church to participate. We welcome all to the Lord's Table to remember our charge to shout "Alleluias" as we write an ending to the Gospel story that Christ began.