

The Story Goes On

Mark 16:1-8

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One time my parents and I were watching TV. This was when I was young, before the days of the internet or DVRs or streaming services. The show we were watching was a cops and robbers story. We got interested in it and watched to see what would happen. Some detectives got in a car and started down the street. And the show ended. They started running the credits. I never did know if that was an episode in a series or a movie that got cut off. It just stopped.

Occasionally, on courtroom dramas, when the jury comes out at the end, the show will simply stop without revealing the verdict.

It seems like Mark did something like that with his Gospel. Most scholars agree that what Mark wrote ends at 16:8. The rest of this chapter isn't in the earliest and best manuscripts of the New Testament. And verse 8 seems to end in the middle of a sentence. So there's some debate about what really happened there.

Some ancient writers did end their works suddenly like this. So a lot of folks believe that Mark intentionally ended his Gospel in a mysterious and open-ended way. So we're left with this odd ending where the women leave the tomb in fear, saying nothing to anyone.

Mark began his Gospel abruptly as well. He just launched in: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God." When he says, "the beginning," is he just introducing his book or is he saying that the entire book is "the beginning of the gospel"? Luke says something similar about his writing. He refers to his Gospel as "all that Jesus began to do and teach" (Acts 1:1). Then the book of Acts takes up the story from there.

Maybe Mark also saw his story of Jesus as the beginning. Imagine Mark's Gospel being read to a group of Christians. At the end, maybe they call on someone who was an eyewitness of the events to tell their part of the story. The listening congregation would realize that they were caught up in those events, that they were part of the story, and that they had a role in continuing the story. That's our experience as well when we hear the

Gospel. In the word of the gospel and the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus continues to be present with us, teaching us and showing us what he did for us in his death and resurrection.

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo and Sam wonder if anyone will ever tell stories about their adventures, like the stories they'd heard all their lives. As they recall one of those old stories, they realize that it's still going on and they're part of it.

The true story that began at that Jerusalem tomb so long ago is still happening. We have a part in it that helps keep it going. Telling it to others and helping them find their place in it is part of that. And, we don't just make up whatever we want to complete the story. We keep it consistent with what Jesus has said and done all through the Gospel. And we have the rest of Scripture to guide us in how to live as part of what God is doing.

The gap at the end of Mark's Gospel gives us an opportunity to enter more fully into the story, to let the gospel make a beginning in us and continue to grow and spread through us. The women's silence here is really a call for every future disciple to serve as an evangelist, a messenger of the good news (David Fenton Smith, *MARK. Wesley One Volume Commentary*).

I like what Michael Card says about Mark's ending:

By not recording the women's words, Mark corners us, he leaves us out of breath, running beside the women, perhaps trying to keep up with them. He hopes we too will be left trembling and astonished at having read his testimony of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (*Mark: The Gospel of Passion* 191)

This open-ended gospel story shows us a new beginning. The resurrection of Jesus is a new beginning for all of creation. We keep experiencing new beginnings from God.

Confirmation Class finished last week and the students will be confirmed next week. Those young people are just getting started. We spent four sessions just introducing Christian faith and what it means to follow Jesus and belong to the church. We barely began to see what that

means. I just introduced some guides and things to help them as they continue on the journey.

I also told them my story about getting started in the adventure of following Jesus. That was forty-seven years ago and I feel like I'm still a beginner in many ways. Some of you have been at it much longer, but you realize that there's still so much more ahead of you. We've made progress, but it's like being beginners because there's still so much more to explore of God's character, so many more ways to tell and live out the good news, so much more of life to be renewed and transformed, so many places and ways to see the risen Lord.

And, there are so many more questions to ask and answers to seek. Becoming a follower of Jesus doesn't mean you stop wondering and asking questions, but you keep exploring and discovering and learning—all through life. We can find answers to many of our questions. At the same time, Mark's open-ended Gospel gives us freedom to keep discovering new insights and to keep experiencing new dimensions of God's grace—even into eternity.

Let's look back at the Gospel. Jesus died and was buried before the Jewish Sabbath. No work was done on the Sabbath. So as soon as they could on the first day of the week, the women who had followed Jesus and had seen where he was buried went to his tomb. They wanted to anoint Jesus' body with spices and perfumed oil. This was an act of honor and respect as well as a way to mask the stench of a rapidly decomposing body.

Mark's including these women in the story as witnesses of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection is surprising. And it does two things. First, it turns upside-down the value placed on women in that society. Their courage in being at the cross (even at a distance) is contrasted with the fear of the other disciples who abandoned Jesus. The testimony of women wasn't admissible in Jewish court, but Mark shows that these women are key witnesses of these major events.

Second, the witness of these women points to the reality of these events. Jesus really died, he really was buried, his tomb really was empty. The women's presence at each of these stages provides continuity between them. The same Jesus who died and was buried is the risen Lord.

They didn't realize this as they came to the tomb that morning. They brought spices to anoint a corpse. Their main concern was with how to get the huge stone rolled away from the tomb's entrance so they could get in and anoint Jesus' body as part of mourning his death. They weren't expecting a resurrection.

So they were surprised to find the stone already rolled away and Jesus' body gone. We might wonder, what surprises does God have for us? In the midst of darkness, grief or despair, surprising displays of God's power can come to us. That's part of the great adventure as we follow Jesus together.

What the women saw as they entered the tomb was cause for alarm and amazement. They saw what appeared to be a young man in a white robe sitting in the tomb. His message to them was cause for even greater amazement.

The "young man," an angel, 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. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you into Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you" (vv 6-7 NRSV).

The empty tomb was evidence, but that alone wasn't enough. The women needed this word of explanation, of revelation, to know what was going on and what it meant. We also need that word, the good news. And we have it in the angel's message to the women.

I heard a great quote recently: "The world offers promises full of emptiness. But Easter offers emptiness full of promise." Think about it—an empty cross, an empty tomb, empty grave-clothes. But all are full of promise. Carolyn Arends shares some thoughts about this:

I guess this is what we should expect from the Servant King—the God who decided that the best way to save the world was to let it kill him. I don't understand the way God thinks. But on those days when I feel hollowed out and broken—half-dead, even—it makes me glad to remember that for Easter people, even death is full of promise.

The world makes lots of promises. Smoke and mirrors, mostly. Frantic, cartoonish attempts to distract us from the gaping holes in the middle of our souls (or to sell us the latest product in order to fill them). There's no life in those promises.

So I'm hoping that ... I'll be a little more willing to die to that stuff. I'm praying to become more aware of the empty space within, and that I'll resist the urge to fill it with any old thing I can find. I'm going to wait, carved out, vulnerable, a cracked and crumbling jar of clay, on a life God's offered to deposit anywhere there's room. I'm going to believe that if I'll just leave my empty spaces empty, he'll fill them. (www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2010/march/1031510.html).

Finding the promise and fullness in emptiness is part of the ongoing story of the Resurrection.

And, the angel's message is filled, it's packed with tremendous truths that are at the heart of the Gospel and that guide us in the great adventure of living in Jesus.

Jesus, who was crucified...has been raised; he is not here.

A man was driving with his five-year-old son in the car and they went past a cemetery. The boy noticed a pile of dirt next to a newly excavated grave and he said, "Look, Dad, one got out!" (www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2009/april/1040609.html).

Jesus is the one that got out. His death wasn't the end. God vindicated him and gave him the victory. He wasn't where they expected him to be. Just when we think we have Jesus all figured out, pinned down and boxed in, he surprises us, he gets up and moves on. Jesus was raised from the dead—anything can happen!

He is going ahead of you. The Risen Lord always goes before us. There's no place we can go that he's not already there. There's nothing we can face that he hasn't already confronted. He goes before us to lead us, to give us direction and purpose.

There you will see him. The Risen Lord is with us. When we follow him, we know him and experience him for ourselves.

Just as he told you. Christ's promises are true. His word is sure. We can trust him, count on him, depend on him.

In the midst of all this is a wonderful word of pardon and restoration. The message says, "Go tell his disciples *and Peter* that he goes before you into Galilee where you will see him, just as he told you." The disciples who abandoned Jesus, and Peter who denied him, are invited to follow him once again. Though they had often failed to understand Jesus and, in the end, ran away from him, he still cares about them. He wants them back. He wants to forgive them and restore their relationship with himself. Jesus didn't give up on Peter and the other disciples.

He doesn't give up on us. He gives us many opportunities to renew our faith in him, to be forgiven, to receive a new beginning.

Today, we can renew our commitment to Christ. We can find new direction in our journey. We can recover hope that was lost. We can continue telling and doing the good news of Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God who died and who is risen. That's our part in the ongoing story.