

Finishing the Story

Mark 16:1-8

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. 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 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.

What is your favorite Easter story? John is the most familiar and perhaps popular. Over the past nineteen years I've preached on it more often than not. It's the classic - like Luke's nativity story at Christmas.

Mary and the other women go grieving to Jesus' tomb to anoint his body for burial. They find it empty and two angels give them a message. Mary thinks she sees a gardener in the graveyard, then realizes it's actually Jesus when he speaks her name. He makes her his first apostle and commissions her to share the Good News.

It's the timeless tale. But maybe you prefer another version of the Resurrection. In Matthew Jesus appears suddenly to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and then again to commission eleven disciples. In Luke, Jesus appears as two disciples make their way to Emmaus. They don't recognize him until he breaks bread, then their eyes are opened to new possibilities. In John's other resurrection tales, the Risen Jesus makes multiple appearances: in a locked room where the disciples are hiding, to Thomas who doubted Jesus was raised, and on a beach where we find him cooking breakfast for his friends after they'd been out fishing all night.

We all have our favorite Easter story. I'm partial to Mark because his resurrection seems unfinished. No one sees the resurrected Jesus. There's just an empty tomb with an angelic messenger and the women fleeing in fear.

"They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." I know it's not a very satisfying ending. But it's probably closer to what happened. As Preaching professor Tom Long writes: "Mark's ending not only fails to provide a proper narrative closure, it also lurches to an awkward grammatical stop. A more literal translation of the Greek reads, "To no one anything they said; afraid they were for..." It trails off in mid-sentence with Mark sounding like Yoda: "to no one they spoke... afraid they were..." It's as if he was dragged away from his writing desk while trying to finish the story."

Author Barbara Brown Taylor speculates on this mysterious abrupt ending: "Did Mark slump over his manuscript at that point, dead from a sudden heart attack? Did a Roman soldier walk up

behind him and say, 'You're done, son'? ...or maybe Mark was simply a brilliant storyteller, the James Joyce of his century, willing to take linguistic risks no one else dreamed of taking."

"They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." It's a strange way to end a gospel. If you were reading along in your Bible, you may have noticed this odd ending is followed by a couple other endings. The most ancient manuscripts of Mark end at chapter 16 verse 8. But other later manuscripts include a shorter or a longer additional ending. It seems scribes added a few sentences to round off the story and resolve that odd original finale.

Unfinished tales can be disappointing. I ask Libby about her favorite unresolved book or movie that just fades to black. She mentioned the beloved mystery writer Sue Grafton. She wrote 26 novels about a private detective named Kinsey Millhone in her Alphabet series. It began with "A is for Alibi" and ended with "Y is for Yesterday". But Libby and no other fan will know what happens to Kinsey because the author died before completing "Z is for ___". Grafton also stipulated in her will that no one could finish the story.

Unresolved stories can be frustrating. But they can also be inviting. We can imagine for ourselves what happens next. Instead of hearing the Hallelujah Chorus in Mark, we can play with the unresolved notes of terror and amazement. Instead of having everything wrapped up neatly at the end we can untangle this Gospel's incomplete plot lines. Where's Jesus? What's next for the women and disciples? What happens to the Good News?

This is why I love Mark's Easter story. My imagination and yours is invited into the Gospel. This unfinished story doesn't let us go. It works powerfully on us, drawing us in to ponder what happens next - to be a part of what unfolds - to finish the story.

As we ponder Mark's resurrection, it's important to focus on the words of the young messenger at the tomb: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised... He is going ahead of you into Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

This is a clue to Jesus' whereabouts after Easter. Galilee is the everyday world of his disciples. The place where they lived and worked, along with others: some wealthy and elite, but far more destitute, living at subsistence level. Some were immigrants or refugees.

Galilee is the place where we encounter the crucified and risen Christ who goes before us into our own everyday worlds. The ordinary places where you and I spend most of our time - where we live and move and have our being. This is where we work out the ending to Mark's Easter story.

Galilee is a place where the crucified of the earth live their daily lives, along with their crucifiers. It is a place of fear and violence. It is a place of partisan enmities. The shock of Easter is that it's also the place where the crucified and risen Christ goes before us. There we will meet him.

This is indescribably good news, truly earthshaking news, because it means the hate and fear and violence of our world does not have the last word. It means that this deadly pandemic does not have the last word. It means the divisive and conspiracy driven politics of the day does not have

the last word. The resurrected Christ, who goes before us, bears witness to a God who seeks to bring resurrection, new creation, out of our death-tending realities.

This astonishing news inspires hope, but also action. The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us. The Resurrection empowers us to live into the story as it continues to unfold - to finish the story in our everyday lives!

We finish the Easter story when we ordinary people step up to do the most extraordinary things, when the hungry are fed, the homeless are given shelter, and the sinner is forgiven.

We finish the Easter story when each and every one of us fight this deadly virus by continuing to love our neighbors enough to wear a mask, social distance and get vaccinated.

We finish the Easter story when we make the lonely a part of the church family, visit the sick, and comfort those who grieve with a hope that will not die.

We finish the Easter story when we as business people decide to do what is right regardless of cost, and when we stop complaining about petty issues and devote our energies to things that make a world of difference.

We finish the Easter story when we stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when we speak for those who have been silenced, when we cry for those who have no more tears left to shed.

We finish the Easter story when we lead others toward the kingdom of God, when we stop the pandemic of gun violence in our land, when we end our warring factions and come to God's still waters of peace.

We finish the Easter story when you and I decide for ourselves how the story will end. If that sounds scary, then we can identify with the women's terror and amazement.

Each of us has the opportunity to finish the story in our own lives. Jesus Christ died and rose that he might meet us here in Jemez or wherever we live. He comes to offer us new life, Resurrection Life. He comes not to bring closure, but to extend expectation.

"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised... He is going ahead of you, you will see him".

What will you do with this Good News? How will you finish the story?

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