

March 31, Easter Sunday

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

Mark 16:1-8

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Did you notice that in our Gospel reading from Mark, we were left with a cliffhanger? The three women who came to the tomb found the stone rolled away, and no Jesus! The young man in white told them to tell the disciples that Jesus would meet them in Galilee, but then, from their terror and amazement, they told no one. This Gospel ends with some unanswered questions. Although later manuscripts of Mark's Gospel have alternative and longer endings, all the earliest manuscripts end right here. I believe this was the writer's intention: to leave the story open ended. It allows us to jump in and take up our part in continuing it. Resurrection isn't a conclusion. It's an invitation.

This ending of Mark's Gospel reminds me a little of those stories where you get to choose your own ending. And it is a reminder that some stories grow, and are changed in the telling. Maybe you've heard about the little girl who was asked by her pastor to explain what Easter is about. She told the story this way: "Easter--is the day when we remember that Jesus died on the cross for our sins. Then he was buried in the tomb. On Easter morning, God rolled the stone away and Jesus came out of the tomb." "Excellent!" cried the pastor. "And then," the girl continued, "Jesus looked and saw his shadow, so he went back into the tomb and there were six more weeks of winter!"

I know—it's an old joke. But, the Gospel of Mark gives us an Easter that continues on. It is not neatly tied up in a bow. We are told that the women were seized with terror and excitement (in Greek the words are stronger: trauma, and ecstasy.) They were so shaken, that even though they were instructed to tell the disciples that Jesus is risen, (at least for a while), they told no one! Then the Gospel ends.

If we look back to the very opening sentence of the Gospel of Mark, we read: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God." In Mark, there is no story of shepherds, angels, and a mother and her newborn together in a stable as in Luke; there is no theologically soaring hymn to the Word made flesh of John; there's no long genealogy as in Matthew. Mark says straight off that all of Mark's writing is *only the beginning of the good news* of what God has done, and is still doing for the world through Jesus the Christ.

Friends, we are called to carry on where this story leaves off. We are invited to jump in and take our part, when we are feeling excitement. Even when we are feeling trauma. Even when it's unclear what may happen next. St. Andrew may be merely a couple of months away from identifying, calling and beginning a new chapter with a new, called pastor. And, maybe it will feel like: "Whew! We made it to the happy ending!" But the truth is-- it will be more change. There will be an ending with me as your interim, and there will be a joyful new beginning, with a new pastor. It may be, at times, amazing, and terrifying. Resurrection isn't a conclusion, but an invitation.

In this Gospel, then there is no scene with the resurrected Christ to confront the disciples' doubt and call forth their faith. This is probably why those monks (or whoever it might have been) who were given the job of copying Mark's Gospel, decided to take matters into their own hands. They added an ending (or two!) to clean things up. And so our Bibles have what has come to be called "A Shorter Ending to Mark" and "A Longer Ending to Mark" which tie a narrative and theological bow onto this abrupt ending in order to make it mesh with the other Gospels.

David Lose, professor at Luther Seminary in Philadelphia suggested that we accept that the writer knew exactly what he was doing, crafting an incomplete ending. The story was left hanging on this moment of ambiguity for a reason. Why? Maybe because no story about death and resurrection could possibly have a neat and tidy ending. Maybe because he believed that this story isn't over yet, and that we are to take up our part in continuing it.

After the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, the desertion of his disciples, and finally even the failure of these women, Mark ends here, inviting us to pick up where these women left off. We are to live and share the good news announced by the messenger at the empty tomb. The story of what God is doing in and through Jesus isn't over at the empty tomb. It's only just getting started. Resurrection isn't a conclusion, it's an invitation.

Mark's Gospel is all about setting us up to live resurrection lives. What does resurrected life look like for you? We are called to share the good news of Jesus' oneness with all who suffer. We are called witness to the "yes" that God lives in Jesus, and to say "no" to the powers of this world, based hate. And we are to trust in the triumph of Love over injustice and death. It's only the beginning, and we're empowered to work for the good in all situations because we trust God's promises that all will in time come to a good end, even when we can't see evidence of that.

Friends, remember, in the change ahead: of all the Easter Gospels, Mark's story invites us to stand where those first trembling witnesses stood. Those three women didn't see Jesus. They didn't hear Jesus call their names. They weren't invited to touch his wounded hands. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome are our silent sisters. The story is left for us to live out, and to tell.

How will we live and continue this story? Will we trust God in the trauma and ecstasy? Will we allow space in each of our lives for change? For growth, and learning, no matter our age? Will we look for the face of Christ in "the other?" and learn to care as much for the other, as for the self? The silence at the end of Mark's gospel is always waiting to be filled in by people of every generation. It's waiting now for you and for me.

I want to close with a personal story. My late husband, Daniel died in 2016. He and I only had a few years together. After trying every treatment for his rare cancer, it became clear that he was nearing the end of his days. After months of restricted diet to keep the cancer at bay, Daniel

used to (half) joke about heaven, and being able to eat chocolate eclairs with Jesus, see his beloved dog, Badger. He also wanted to ask questions of his mysterious Uncle Arthur, who had been part of the Manhattan Project. In Daniel's attempts to tie up the loose ends of his life in a neat bow, he decided to write his own obituary. All the time he made these plans to streamline the end of his life, I kept thinking to myself: we're not going to get to have the happy ending that we wanted. This story is not going to end in the right way.

Daniel concluded his obituary with words that I've re-read many times since his death. I share them today, because for me, they are part of my story, and my life, that keeps unfolding. Sometimes this has felt like trauma, and sometimes amazement. Daniel ended his obituary like this:

“And, of course, there is his wonderful wife, Laurie Lynn Newman. . . Her elixir of love kept him alive with daily transfusions well beyond his expected time. He admired her, and was always confident that her courage, brilliance, talent, and spiritual enlightenment would carry on where he left off.”

To carry on. . . I aspire to live into that invitation, daily.

Resurrection isn't a conclusion. It is an invitation.