

When the End is a Beginning
from the pulpit of
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Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Readings: Mark 15:42-16:8

Easter: April 5, 2015

It is a good thing we have three other gospels, because if Mark's story of Easter were the only one, I am not sure we would be here this morning, at least certainly not in so great a number! Did you hear that ending, the grand finale of Mark's Easter proclamation? *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.*

Now your Bibles will note parenthetically that there is a shorter ending and a longer ending to this gospel, but these were much later editorial additions by early church writers who could not imagine the gospel of Jesus Christ ending as Mark left it.

Not only that, our English translation has cleaned up the Greek syntax which is even more peculiar. Word for word, the original text reads: *And going out they fled from the tomb for fear and trembling seized them, and they said nothing to nobody. They were afraid for...* This is a grammar teacher's nightmare – the whole gospel ends with a double negative – on a dangling preposition!

The minimal space Mark allocates to the resurrection is also really curious. Nearly half of Mark's gospel (seven chapters) recounts the events of Holy Week. The arrest and crucifixion of Jesus take up two full chapters – a total of 119 verses. Then we get to the closing 16th chapter, and in a mere eight verses Mark describes Easter's good news: the sad journey of the women to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body with spices, their wondering about who might roll the stone away, the discovery that the tomb is already open, a young man sitting inside who says, "He is not here... he is risen... he is going before you to Galilee..." and then the women's reaction: "They fled ... and said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

As one biblical scholar says of Mark's version, "This is no way to run a resurrection!" In the other gospels the news that Jesus is alive is met by running feet and shared emotions, both fear and joy. In Matthew the women go so quickly to tell the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead, that they stumble into the risen Christ, take hold of his feet and worship him. In John's gospel, Mary weeps in the garden until Jesus calls her by name; he appears through locked doors and invites doubting Thomas to touch his wounds; later he joins the disciples for breakfast on the beach. Luke says the women ran back and told everything to the disciples, and Peter sprinted to the tomb to look for himself.

Later, the Risen Jesus takes that long, stroll to Emmaus until two grieving followers come to understand when he has supper in their home in the breaking of the bread. Luke further gives us a sequel in the Acts of the Apostles.

By comparison, Mark is reticent in his description, sparing of adjectives, rendering the women speechless, leaving the disciples out of it altogether. With few words, Mark ends the story abruptly, even awkwardly, certainly ambiguously. “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Remarkably, therein we find this gospel’s power. “The power of Mark’s gospel lies not in what it tells the readers, but in what it ASKS of them.” New Testament scholar Ched Myers put it this way: “To provide a ‘neat closure,’ to the narrative would allow the reader to finally remain passive; the story would be self-contained, in no need of a reader’s response.”¹ This is not an ending at all, you see, but a new beginning.

A famous film producer once said that every story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but not necessarily in that order. So, we come to this unexpected and abrupt ending in the women’s mute fear, and suddenly an insight shatters the silence. We remember what the young man said from inside the tomb: *Go tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him.*

Where is Galilee? It’s located in the opening chapter of Mark: *Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God.* Mark takes us back to the beginning – this time as players in the proclamation! Like the disciples themselves, we may not have understood Jesus the first time through, but after we’ve followed him to the cross and grave, we can read the gospel again with post-resurrection eyes.

We begin to take our places in his teaching, healing, and raising-the-dead-to-new-life ministry, and we become a part of God’s life in the world. This story does not end because what happened to Jesus begins to happen to us! His healing becomes our care and compassion, his breaking bread becomes our feeding the hungry, his eating with outcasts and sinners becomes our ministry of hospitality, his risen life gives

¹ Brian Blount and Gary Charles, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, quoting Ched Myers, p. 259.

hope when we stand beside the graves of loved ones. Those graves which catch our tears – but cannot contain those for whom we weep.

As Tom Long has said, “Easter’s good news is not that a mystical light goes on in our heads, but that the mercy and grace, embodied in what Jesus did with his hands, what he spoke with his mouth, and where his feet took him, is now validated in eternal truth...”² This unfinished gospel becomes the truth of our lives.

When those women left the empty tomb in fear and amazement, and said nothing to anyone, they take us back to the beginning of the gospel where we discover that this is no longer just a story about Jesus’ life and death. It is also a story about us. What happened to him – God’s power to bring life out of death – happens to us!

Christian writer, Nora Gallagher, tells the story of how even close friends can assimilate the news of resurrection in their life and faith in very different ways. She has a friend named Ann who came to believe in the resurrection rather suddenly. It was during a season in Ann’s life when she was really depressed. She was worried about her children and thought the choices they were making were leading to disaster. She had inherited a kind of faith from her parents that was fairly black and white: “if you do this, then that will follow,” but her life experience had belied that kind of religious clarity. She said sadly, “those rules didn’t hold” any longer.

Ann had not given up on the teachings of the church altogether, but reconciling the pain in her own family, and the chaos of the world, with her religious beliefs had become a struggle. Then one day, Ann “was sitting on a Trailways bus heading into Washington, D.C., when she looked up from the book she was reading, and she believed in the resurrection. She was reading a devotional book, and looking out the

² Tom Long, “Preaching Easter at Old First Gnostic,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2012, p. 23.

window at the telephone poles and trees zipping by.” Anne told her friend Nora:

“When I came to the words in the Creed, ‘I believe in the resurrection,’ I don’t know what happened; my guard went down, I guess. I really believed it completely in an instant. I mean I knew without a doubt that it was true. It was just enough to allow me to let go of my terrible fear, to see the goodness in my children, and to believe in their potential for good.” Anne said: The resurrection means that nothing is hopeless anymore.”³

Nora Gallagher ponders Ann’s clarity by noting her own experience of faith is very different. She writes: “Belief and disbelief in the resurrection trade places in my heart like ‘watchmen taking shifts.’ I’ve known for years that even those words – *belief* and *disbelief* – do not really describe what I think when I think about the resurrection. Something happened to Jesus, and thereby something happens to me.”⁴

Ann’s belief became clear and comforted her to know that in the trials of life, there is hope. By contrast, Nora’s faith comes and goes, and is more a thing to experience than to understand. Like Ann, for some of us the resurrection is a heady thing that our minds seek to understand. For others, like Nora, faith that Jesus was raised from the dead is a matter of the heart that can never be fully understood, but only known by experience.

What each of us considers, the essential meaning of the resurrection, may be as varied as the number of people in the room, but I think that on Easter there is at least one common quest among us – a yearning that resonates with both Ann’s story and Nora’s reflection – to trust that because of the resurrection of Jesus nothing is hopeless anymore, and a desire to experience the power of God over the powers of this world, the power of life over the power of death.

³ Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen*, p. 134.

⁴ Gallagher, p. 137.

Mark's briefest account of Easter morning frees us to respond to the good news of resurrection with our faith, our doubt, and our own lived experiences. You see, according to Mark, *we* become the disciples to whom the Risen Christ appears.

"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified? He has been raised. He is not here; he is going ahead of you to Galilee, which means to our homes, our schools, our work, our life in the community, our life through the church, so that Jesus' way of life becomes our way of life, serving and loving the world. We are assured that whatever happened to Jesus somehow also happens to us.

The gospel's unfinished ending is clearly the beginning of our life as disciples of Jesus Christ. This end is our beginning! This is amazingly good news.

AMEN.