

But... How Does it End?

If, having never heard the story we are celebrating today, someone heard only this version of it from the Gospel According to Mark, they might wonder how in the world a religion known as Christianity, based on the life and teachings of an itinerant rabbi from an obscure corner of the Roman Empire in the first century of the common era, ever became a worldwide phenomenon. What we have here, after all, sounds rather like a not very scary ghost story. A group of women visit the tomb of a recently deceased friend, have an encounter with a strange young man who gives them a message, supposedly from the dead man they have come to anoint, and they run away in fear. Not terribly inspiring. But because we have heard this story before and from sources more forthcoming than Mark, we know that there is more to tell. Without that knowledge, though, we, too, might be left asking, "But... how does the story end?"

Because of their priority of place in our New Testament, and because stories are always more fun to read than essays about ideas, it can be easy to focus on the Gospels as our sources for the important details about the story of Jesus. But in fact, Paul's letters to his friends in different churches, those "essays about ideas," are actually our earliest written sources of the Jesus story. It is Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth that provides the oldest written source for our Easter celebration: "I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."

As Paul wrote, he was not the originator of the story. It was taught to him and he, in turn, taught in those churches he founded. Meanwhile, those who'd witnessed the appearances of the Risen Christ were spreading the story far and wide. This allows Mark, the writer of what scholars believe was the first Gospel, to do something odd. Knowing full well that if his prospective audience knew anything about Jesus, it would be about his death as a criminal at the hands of the Empire and his subsequent resurrection, he stops his retelling of the story at a very odd point: the resurrection has happened but the only ones who know about it are too afraid to tell anyone.

Evidently, the story does not end there. So, what did happen? And why would Mark leave us with this abrupt ending? The unfinished nature of this Gospel bothered people enough that at least two attempts were made, fairly early in its history of dissemination, to give it what seemed a more fitting ending. But there are those, me included, who think Mark knew exactly what he was doing when he brought up short his version of the Easter story. And I think that what Mark has done in leaving his story hanging, unfulfilled, is just exactly right for the rather peculiar times we are living in.

Before I get to that, though, let's take a look at what Mark did tell us in these eight short verses. As in the other Gospels, it is a group of women who are first to the tomb on that morning of the first day of the week, although you have to read between the lines in the Gospel According to John to realize it is a group and not just Mary Magdalene. They are there to anoint Jesus' body with spices. They'd not been able to perform this duty to their friend at his death, which was the usual practice, due to the rush to get him into a tomb before Friday's sunset marked the

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beginning of Passover. Mark records that as they came, their minds were on practical matters: “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”

It is a question that may have resonance for us this morning: “Who will roll away the stone?” For some of us, the stone in our lives may be one that traps us or burdens us. We may be carrying the burden of unrealized dreams or unmet expectations. We may feel the weight of our own brokenness, of past mistakes, of current limitations, of an uncertain future. We may feel that we are the ones in a cave, blocked in from freedom and new life by a huge stone of sin and darkness. Or, for some of us, the stone may be symbolic of the very thing that worried the three women, something that keeps us from experiencing nearness to Jesus, though unlike them we know it is the Risen Christ that we seek. Bad habits may get in our way from walking alongside of Jesus, or anger, or sorrow, or pride, or simple busy-ness. But whatever our stone may be, the answer is the same. God can roll away the stone; God will roll away the stone; God has rolled away the stone. The power of the resurrected Jesus reaches across the miles and the centuries to us this morning and, with our simple consent, liberates our spirits from all the burdens that life, the world and our own fallenness have piled upon us. Jesus said, “Come unto me, all ye who are weak and heavy laden, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” There is no need for us to worry about carrying the weight of the heavy stone in our lives.

That good news of Jesus’ rising is here in our brief Easter story, delivered by an angel, or at least a young man in shimmering white. He says to the women, as angels seem to always say, “Don’t be afraid. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified: he has risen, he is not here. See, here is the place where they laid him. But you must go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; it is there you will see him, just as he told you.” The news is certainly astounding, even to us who expect it. Perhaps it is stunning enough that we do not notice something rather odd in what the angel says. “Go, and tell his disciples and Peter...” Why is Peter singled out? Is he not one of the disciples?

When a group of people are in a bad way, embarrassed, ashamed, it is always easy to look for a scapegoat, someone to blame. Obviously, Jesus’ disciples are embarrassed and ashamed. They abandoned their Lord in his hour of greatest need. And clearly, the most obvious scapegoat for them would be Judas, the betrayer. But he’s inconveniently removed himself from the picture, hung himself in his despair at the realization of what he had done. Ah, but here’s old Peter, sitting in the corner, so very ashamed of himself for denying he knew Jesus, not once but three times. The others know what he has done. They may be giving him the silent treatment, may be shunning him, may be wondering which of them he will deny next. It would only be human nature, after all, to let him know just how badly he’d failed so that they wouldn’t feel so bad about their own failings. Besides, Jesus had told them, as recorded in Luke’s Gospel, “he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.”

But there is good news for Peter. “Tell them all, and make sure you tell Peter, too, Jesus is waiting for you all in Galilee.” Mark does not tell, as John does, the story of the meeting in Galilee between Jesus and Peter, but there is no doubt that Jesus, who forgave the men who beat him and mocked him and nailed him to the cross, is ready to forgive his blustering old friend Peter, who always could talk the talk, but couldn’t always walk the walk. It’s good news for some of us, too, I imagine. If the weight of stone we bear this morning is the weight of our own

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failures, isn't it good to know that Jesus loved failures like Peter. And to know that, once he had accepted the forgiveness of Jesus, that Peter could pull himself together and become again what Jesus knew he could be, the Rock, whose faith was emblematic of the faith upon which the Kingdom of God is built. As you hear this brief Easter story this morning, let it remind you of Peter the Rock, the failure who became a leader, and remember, too, that whatever our failures, God always has a place for us in the Kingdom. And let it remind you also that Peter's faith was in Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of the Jews and Savior of the world, and that is the rock upon which the universal Church stands.

"He'll see you in Galilee," the angel tells them. This is not simply traveling orders for the women and the other disciples of Jesus. It is also a clue to Mark's readers, to us, on how to proceed. Galilee, in the Gospels, is where the action is. A former professor of myself and Charlotte Keyes and former colleague of Charlie and Pam Scalise, Rev. Dr. Alan Culpepper, explains it in his commentary on Mark: "Galilee was the place of Jesus' ministry, where he taught the crowds, cast out demons, prayed alone, healed the sick, called disciples, and fed multitudes. Galilee was the place where Jesus crossed the boundaries between "clean" and "unclean," and the symbolic boundaries between Jew and Gentile and male and female. Galilee was the place where, through all these activities, Jesus announced the coming of the kingdom of God... The angelic commission therefore continues, at least figuratively, to be an invitation for every reader of the Gospel: Go to Galilee, continue the work of the kingdom that Jesus left unfinished, and there you will see him. He is not in the tomb. You will find him still among the suffering, needy, oppressed, and estranged in Galilee, with all who share their bread, give a cup of water, receive children, protect women, care for widows, and extend grace and hope for all. 'Go to Galilee; there you will see him.'"

But where is Galilee for you and me? In the metaphorical language of Mark, it is home. For those to whom the women were to carry the message, Galilee was home. Galilee was where they first met Jesus, where they heard him teach, saw him perform miracles. Galilee was the first place they thought of going after the dreadful events of the Passover week. It was comfortable, it was family, it was what they knew. Jesus promises to meet us in the most homely of places. Wherever Galilee is for us, he will be there. Wherever it is that we cook our meals, pay our bills, go about our work to earn our daily bread, lay our heads to sleep, Jesus is there. In the car in traffic, in the crowded supermarket, in the lonely room, Jesus is there. Jesus is with us in the hospital, in the airport, at the school, in the cemetery. Wherever our journey through this life takes us, Jesus is there, just as he promised. We do not need to go to Jerusalem to find him. He is with us in Galilee every minute of every day.

Those are just a few of the things packed into this dense eight verse retelling of the Resurrection. But what of the rest? What about what Mark didn't write? How does it end? To answer these questions, we may look to the experience of the women at the tomb and how it is like our own. Barbara Kay Lundblad has written, "Those three women didn't see Jesus. Neither do we. They didn't hear Jesus call their names. Neither have we. They weren't invited to touch his wounded hands. We haven't touched Jesus' hands either." When all is said and done, we take the resurrection of Jesus on faith. Whether we read or hear of a strange young man in white telling three frightened women that the miraculous has occurred, or whether we read a laundry list of the times and places Jesus appeared after Easter, the burden of proof still lies on simple faith.

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There is no way, really, to prove the resurrection, any more than there is a way, really, to prove the existence of God. Those of us who choose to believe have our reasons, of course. But it is ultimately an act of our God-given free will, whether to believe or not. Our faith is not coerced. Mark's abbreviated ending to the Jesus story is simply a more obvious challenge to us than the other Gospels. The question remains, will we believe or not?

It is in this way that I think Mark's Easter story is perfect for us this morning. This moment in our lives is a perfect microcosm of the challenge to the Church over the ages. Our faith teaches us that the Kingdom of God, the Beloved Community, is here, begun, inaugurated among us. But the world is in a terrible mess. How will we respond? This week's newspapers have covered the growing number of Americans, and in particular, residents of our region, who have been vaccinated against the virus that has plagued us for the past fourteen months. But they have also covered the growing concern of epidemiologists that the vaccinations are not happening fast enough, that a fourth wave of infection is at hand, perhaps with vaccine-beating variants of the virus. How will we respond? Our salvation, both physically and spiritually, is both now and not yet.

Perhaps, Mark has left the end of his Gospel without a further appearance by Jesus to remind us that the manifestations of the Spirit of Christ are now, in large measure, up to us. We, the Church, are now the Body of Christ on earth. It is our sacred calling to be the hands and feet and face of Jesus to the world. If we truly believe that God has touched us, has healed us, then we must take that healing out into a world that is desperate for it. We are called to feed the hungry, to give water to the thirsty, to house the homeless and clothe the naked. We are to be the Body of Christ and to stand for peace in a time of war, to work for justice for those who receive none. It is we, the Church, who must manifest the spirit of God who calls for protection for widows and orphans and strangers in our land. We are the Body of Christ in these post-resurrection times and His Spirit is within us to guide us and to empower us. When men and women and children cry, "God help us," it is we who should respond. Jesus does not need to appear at the end of Mark's Gospel. He is here and I see him in your faces.

The unfinished nature of Mark's Gospel leaves us with questions. What did the women do? Did they go to the disciples? Did they tell their amazing story? We may answer, "How could they not? How could they possibly remain silent after all this?" Perhaps though, we should further ask ourselves, "How can we remain silent?" We are careful, those of us called Good Shepherd Baptist Church, to base our speaking of our faith to others on relationships and the kind of meaningful witness that happens when we live our faith. But sometimes, I wonder, are we so squeamish about not making a bad impression, about not looking like those models of evangelism that we've discarded, that we remain silent even when people really want to hear what it is we have to say? Are our actions speaking for us, or are we silent there, too? Let us never forget that we really do have the Good News that the world needs to hear, that brokenness can be healed, that failures can be forgiven, that demons can be defeated. The world needs to hear that this is the acceptable day of the Lord, the Jubilee when all debts are forgiven. Are we saying it? Even in our quiet, introverted Good Shepherd way? As we remember the stone that was rolled away from the mouth of the tomb by the power of God let us also know the truth of the stones that are rolled away from our mouths by the indwelling Spirit of Jesus, so that we may proclaim the Good News with joy and with courage.

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The Gospel according to Mark is a book without an ending. And unfinished works are intriguing. They call to us, subtly or overtly, to come and try our hand at finishing them, to dream the dream of creation along with the author, the composer, the artist. Chapter one, verse one of Mark's Gospel says, "The beginning of the Good News about Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It is a book of news that has no end. We are the continuation of the story of the Good News. The stone rolled away, the story rolls on, unfolding until the end of time itself. As long as we are willing, the last words of the story are not "they said nothing to a soul, for they were afraid...." They are "He is Risen! Alleluia!" "He is Risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!" Thanks be to God! Amen.