

"Easter: The Story Continues"

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday, 2009

If you've watched the re-runs of **M*A*S*H** over and over like a lot of people, you may remember the episode about when the camp gets a copy of a mystery story. Everybody's been bored. So they start passing around this mystery story, chapter by chapter, so that everybody's reading it.

The *problem* is that the last page-- the one with the solution-- is missing! The doctors and nurses and everybody in the M*A*S*H unit go nuts trying to find the *ending*... and guessing what it might be.

Mark's unfinished story might make us a little crazy too. It bothered people in the early church enough that they wrote two different endings to tack on. It's bothered a lot of scholars over the years-- so much that some of them developed theories about how the last page of Mark's gospel was lost... or how it wore out and fell off.

However, scholarly consensus today is that Mark did indeed end his gospel with verse 8. In Mark's gospel, there are no joyfully amazed women rushing back with news of the empty tomb...no awestruck exclamations to the disciples that "he is risen!" There are no reassuring appearances by the risen Christ himself. We have to read the other gospel accounts that were written later to find these things.

What we do have is an unnamed "young man" outside the empty tomb, dressed in a white robe, who announces the resurrection and then issues two commands to the frightened women: don't be afraid. Go and *tell* Jesus' disciples that they will see him in Galilee.

The Gospel ends, however, with the women violating both of these commands. "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." In the original Greek, Mark uses a double negative to be even more emphatic. We might not like the grammar, but it gets the point across: "*They said nothing to nobody.*"

So here we have the Easter story, according to Mark. No joyful response. Just "They said nothing to nobody." Fear and silence.¹

There's something in most of us that wants to have some kind of ending *other* than fear and silence, some sense of closure, some satisfying resolution. It's discomfoting to have Mark's Gospel end as it does.

But I agree with the scholars who insist that the end of the manuscript didn't fall off, or get lost. I believe Mark meant for his gospel to stop abruptly, with its cliff-hanger ending. You see-- the end of the story hasn't been written yet!

Mark intentionally left the story *unfinished*-- because it isn't just a story about something that happened long ago. It's the story of the church... the story of a *movement* of those who follow Jesus...and the story isn't finished. That first Easter, the whole urgent, world-changing story was hanging on the testimony of witnesses who run away in fear and silence.

¹ I am indebted here to Thomas G. Long, in "Preaching Easter from the Gospel of Mark," in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2003, p. 10.

On this Easter Sunday in the year 2009, can you relate to their response? What do you feel when you hear the news of the resurrection? Are you confident... and joyful?

Maybe... maybe not.

I suspect that there are a lot of people in the pews of churches-- and *outside* the church-- this Easter Sunday who feel like they're living in a Good Friday kind of *world*. People who struggle with grief over the loss of a loved one... people who know the sting of failure. Some people who are angry and disillusioned about how their life is going during the current economic crisis. Some are unemployed...or on the brink of unemployment. Some families have lost their homes.

Some struggle with anxiety... or depression... or confusion... or addiction. Some struggle to keep going in spite of chronic, debilitating illness. Some face frightening medical diagnoses... and battles against the power of disease. Some are distraught over the way things are going in their family. Some are among the working poor, working full-time, maybe more than one job, trying to make ends meet, praying that they don't get sick—because they can't afford medical treatment or losing a day's pay.

People who feel they've been living in a Good Friday world can relate to the women who went to the tomb that *first* Easter morning. Those women were stricken with grief... disillusionment... bitter disappointment. Things haven't turned out the way they'd hoped. They'd hoped that Jesus was going to be the Messiah who would liberate them from the Roman oppressors.

As they approach his tomb, they see that the huge stone has been rolled away. They rush into the tomb. But instead of finding Jesus' body, they find a young man sitting there, dressed in a white robe. He says, "Don't be alarmed. You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was *crucified*. He has been raised. He isn't here. Now, *go*... and *tell* the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going before you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you."

"Don't be alarmed," the messenger says. But they *are* alarmed. They had every reason to be alarmed, startled, confused. They fled from the tomb, filled with terror and amazement. And said nothing to anyone, for they were *afraid*.

So...what happened next? What's the *rest* of the story?

I think Mark left the story open-ended, because he wanted his readers to know that the good news story of Jesus didn't come to an *end* with Jesus' *death*... or even with his resurrection. I think Mark wanted his readers to understand that what had begun with Jesus was still going on.

Mark didn't wrap things up with a neat ending, because the story isn't *finished*. It's *our* story-- the story of the church. What happens next is up to us.

We do live in a Good Friday kind of *world*. It can be a frightening place. Sometimes we can feel overwhelmed by all the pain and suffering... hatred and evil we see. We may feel overwhelmed by all the ways our society says "no" to Jesus and his teachings. We may feel afraid.

The women came to the tomb expecting to see a place of death and defeat. They thought the powers of this world had had the last *word*.

But the God we worship and serve is the God of love and life, who acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation. The Living God will have the last word, because *love* is stronger than *evil*. That's part of the good news of Easter.

I love the way our Presbyterian Brief Statement of Faith summarizes the good news of Jesus. Jesus "*proclaimed the reign of God... preaching good news to the poor and release to the*

captives... teaching by word and deed...and blessing the children...healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted...eating with outcasts... forgiving sinners... and calling all to repent and believe the gospel."

When Jesus challenged the religious authorities and the empire with his vision of love and justice and transformation, the empire-- the domination system-- executed him. *"Unjustly condemned for blasphemy and sedition, Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world.*

Just as surely as that first Good Friday was the domination system's "no" to Jesus-- Easter is God's "yes" to Jesus and his vision... and God's "no" to systems of domination and oppression. *"God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal."*

Our Easter faith assures us that in Christ's death on the cross and his RESURRECTION, God has already overcome the power of death and evil. *The old life is gone. A new life has begun—a life of gratitude and joy... a life in which the Holy Spirit "sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the church."*

Every Christian believer is called to be a *witness* to the Resurrection. We are called to GO and TELL.

As disciples of the Risen Christ, we are called to live into the joy and freedom of the new creation... and to share the gospel with anyone who needs to hear it. What happens next in the story depends on us.

God's redemptive purpose for the world will prevail through those who answer Christ's call to follow him and carry on his purpose and work.

The good news is that we are not alone. *"In a broken and fearful world, the Spirit gives us courage to pray without ceasing, to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior, to unmask idolatries in church and culture, to hear the voices of peoples long silenced, and to work with others for justice, freedom and peace.*

That's how the rest of the story *continues.*

Giacomo Puccini, who wrote such great operas as *Madame Butterfly* and *La Boheme*, was stricken with cancer in 1922. He decided to write one more opera entitled *Turandot*.

One of his students said, "But suppose you *die* before you *finish* it?"

"Oh, my *disciples* will finish it," Puccini replied confidently.

Puccini died in 1924, and his disciples *did* finish the opera. Puccini's best friend, Franco Alfano, worked from sketches left by the composer to complete the opera, which many consider it to be his best work.

The premier took place in Milan, Italy, at La Scala Opera House. Arturo Toscanini, one of Puccini's best students, was the conductor.

The performance began and continued to the point at which Puccini's work had abruptly ended. Toscanini paused... and said to the audience, "Thus far, the *master* wrote... and then the master died."

Then he picked up the baton and shouted to the audience, "But his disciples finished his music!"

We are called, as individuals and as Christ's church, to be about the task of finishing the music whose melody and direction we can discern in the acts of God in history and in the life and teachings of Jesus. The God who, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, is making all things *new* What happens next is up to us. So-- *go. Tell.*

We are called-- but not coerced-- to carry on the story. It's our choice-- yours and mine. Do you want to live in a Good Friday world? Or do you choose to be part of the Easter people? What kind of person do you want to be? What kind of church are we called to be?

God calls us to live beyond our fears and doubts. In the resurrection, God showed us love so amazing and divine-- that it demands our *all* in response. God has an amazing plan for our lives.

Think about it. Think about all the people who haven't heard the Easter story in all its fullness and power. Consider all the lonely souls out there long for hope... comfort... healing... and meaning in their lives. Do we care about them? What will happen next in the story for them?

Will someone tell them the good news of the Resurrection and show them the new, abundant life we can have through our faith in the Risen Christ? Will they see peoples' lives being transformed by the love of Christ? Will they see *your* life being changed? Will they see the light and love of Christ reflected in the Littlefield Christians? Will they look at the church and know we're Christians by our love?

What will happen in the rest in the story? That depends. It depends on us. How do we respond to the good news of Easter? Will we go and tell?

The gospel we heard today, the gospel according to Mark-- does have an ending, but it is GOD'S ending, not one we would have written. The story continues.

The women at the tomb were terrified and amazed. Yet they must have gone to Galilee and seen the risen Christ. They must have proclaimed the good news to the others-- or we wouldn't be here today.

Now it's up to *us* to carry on the gospel story. *Go. Tell.* As Christians, we are called to take risks... to make ourselves vulnerable in love... to share with strangers... to dare to challenge unjust power. We are promised joy and celebration-- as "*we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives.*"

God calls us to live beyond our fears and doubts. In the resurrection, God showed us his amazing, life-giving power. We know that the story of our life with God has a joyful ending.

Just as Jesus went on ahead to Galilee, to where the first disciples lived their everyday lives, Jesus has promised to be with us. We know his presence in very real ways where his story is proclaimed, and where bread and wine are shared as sign and seal of his risen presence in and among us.

But we will also find him in moments of despair or need. We don't need to be afraid, because God's love is stronger than sin and death. Christ is *alive* and is in and among us-- forgiving, healing, empowering, and calling each of us to follow until his promised final coming. Christ is alive, bringing hope and joy and new life!

Jesus Christ is Risen!

Thanks be to God! Alleluia!

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