

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday

April 4, 2011

Christ is risen! Finally! Enough of this gloomy Lent. Enough of sackcloth and ashes. Enough of fasting, enough of the wilderness, enough of temptation and self-discipline. It's time to party! It's time for flowers and bunnies and baby chicks and chocolate eggs and joy! It's time to spread the good news of the resurrection!

But instead, Mark gives us terror, amazement, and silence.

What kind of Gospel is this, anyway?

Jesus' followers are clueless. He predicts his arrest, his crucifixion, *and* his resurrection several times, but his disciples don't understand what he is telling them, don't understand why it is necessary, and act surprised when he is arrested and crucified. When Peter is identified as one of his followers, Peter vehemently denies knowing him; those who are associated with an accused and convicted revolutionary risk sharing his crucifixion. His male followers flee in terror, leaving the women to watch at a distance. Jesus is executed on a Friday, and lies in the tomb on a Saturday. Three of his female followers approach the tomb on Sunday, to anoint his corpse for burial as was the custom. When they arrive, they find the stone rolled away and the body gone. He has been raised, says the mysterious man in white. This is just as Jesus predicted, and he

tells them to "go and remind his followers that Jesus will meet them in Galilee as he promised," he says. All of his followers, male and female alike, seem to have forgotten this promise. Those who are supposed to know all about Jesus, do not.

There are some who recognize Jesus for who he is: the demon possessing the young man at Gerazene, for example, which Jesus famously sends into a herd of pigs. Or the Roman centurion who realizes at the cross that "Truly, this man was God's son." But demons are likely to be unreliable witnesses, and Jews are unlikely to listen to a member of the occupying forces.

That's how Mark ends his Gospel, with terror, amazement, and silence. Those who should understand the resurrection, don't, and those who do understand the resurrection can't be trusted to proclaim it.<sup>1</sup> How will the Good news be told? What kind of ending is this?

If this was a movie, audiences would be dissatisfied. Movies should have happy endings, and the Gospel in particular: the word means, "Good News," after all, and Easter is supposed to be good news. We all want some good news, because so many things seem to be ending right now. Life is messy. Life is sad and frightening particularly in the midst of a pandemic, and so we want happy and tidy endings to our stories because they give us hope: hope that our lives can be happy and tidy and meaningful instead of ambiguous and uncertain.

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, "Just the Beginning."

With the expectation of warmer weather and wider vaccination distribution, Dr. Henry at first loosened some health restrictions. It was even possible to have limited indoor worship services for Easter Sunday. But the infection numbers kept climbing, and she had to slam the breaks on. It hit the hospitality sector especially hard; Big White ski resort in Kelowna had to lay off dozens of people. I can imagine their frustration and despair: after an on-again, off-again season, most of them wouldn't have work again until next winter. And so they gathered at a local restaurant, Charley Victoria's, which was also ordered to close within a few hours. And they drank and danced and tossed away their masks, in defiance of this health order that was ending their jobs. I can understand their rage and frustration, because this was a COVID story with an abrupt and hopeless ending.

We like happy endings so much that a few generations after the Gospel According to Mark was first written, some anonymous monk took it upon himself to create one. The longer ending to Mark, which we'll hear later in our service, redeems those women disciples. They go around telling their male colleagues that Jesus is alive, in stories very similar to those found in Matthew and Luke, but predictably the men don't believe the women. Until Jesus shows up, chastizes them for their lack of faith, and sends them out to spread the good news, empowered by God.

But what if, instead of giving into the impulse to slap a tidy happily-ever-after on the story, we sit with the uncomfortable but true-to-life shorter ending for a while? What if we sit with the anxiety and the acknowledgment that the grief and uncertainty and, yes, terror of this story echoes that of our own lives?

With that in mind, let's quickly note how this Gospel begins. Whereas Matthew and Luke begin, respectively, with Jesus' genealogy and a touching nativity story, Mark simply states, "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It's more of a title, really. This entire Gospel account is just *the beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

So, if the Gospel doesn't end the way we expect, what if it doesn't end at all? What if there is more to be written? Because the disciples couldn't tell the good news and the demons and Romans wouldn't, but there's one more person who knows the whole story: the reader. You and me. The story didn't die with those first disciples because someone *did* dare to tell the story. As did someone else, and someone else, and then someone we call Mark wrote it down and a lot of people read it and a lot of other people thought about it and what it meant in their lives and wrote other Gospels, and a guy named Paul went around telling people what Jesus' resurrection meant to *him*, and suddenly we have a Church. And a Bible. And Good News, and a story of hope. Or, rather, lots of stories of hope, because if this abrupt end to Mark means anything, it's that the story needs to be

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<sup>2</sup> David Lose, "Just the Beginning."

retold again and again and again. Matthew and Luke have Jesus come back onstage and explain the meaning of the resurrection; Mark leaves it up to us.

So, what is the meaning of Easter during a pandemic? What is the meaning of Easter to scared and frustrated ski resort workers? What is the meaning of Easter on April 4, 2021?

You tell me, Christian. You tell me.

Please.

Tell me.

Amen.

**Source:**

"Burial." In *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. Edited by Paul J. Achtemeier, et al. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996.

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