

What Comes Next?

Mark 16: 1-8

Here we are at Easter morning -- the happiest of high holy days for Christians. One of our Easter hymns puts it this way:

The day of resurrection / Earth tell it out abroad. / The Passover of gladness; / the Passover of God.

But that's not what we get from Mark's Gospel, is it? There is no gladness here, in the women's response to the empty tomb. Instead they are seized by terror and amazement. And according to Mark, there is no telling it abroad or anywhere else, for he informs us that "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (v. 8)

What a strange ending that is for a gospel that opens with the bold claim that it is "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Does that beginning fail to fulfill its promise? Does it end here at a tomb where grieving women who expect to find the broken body of their beloved teacher and friend, find instead only an unfamiliar young man dressed in white who utters a strange and incomprehensible -- an amazing and terrifying -- message?

We know that the good news does not end there at that tomb -- because here we are on this Easter morning two millennia later, gathered to celebrate again the momentous news which the angel shared: *You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here.*

So clearly, at some point, the women did say something to someone, but it is intriguing, is it not, that Mark would choose to end his Gospel this way? You perhaps know that if you turn in your Bible to the last page of Mark, you will find additional verses beyond those which we have read this morning. They are often labeled as "The Shorter and Longer Endings of Mark" or as "Endings Added Later"; sometimes they are just printed with the rest of Mark as if they have always been there. But Biblical scholars, who don't agree on much, agree that Mark did not write either of those endings. Some scholars, N.T. Wright among them, do believe that Mark wrote more than we have and that somehow "a very, very early copy of Mark was mutilated," leaving the Gospel incomplete. Wright speculates that, "As with many other scrolls and books in the ancient world, the last page, or the last column of the scroll, was torn off, presumably by accident."¹ Others are convinced that Mark intended this enigmatic ending. Whichever explanation is correct, what we have from reliable early manuscripts ends at verse 8: *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.*

¹ N. T. Wright; *Mark for Everyone*; p. 222
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This is a surprising, tantalizing non-conclusion that raises more questions than it answers.

Rowan Williams suggests that “the *reader* is the lost ending of Mark.” Williams claims that “We have to discover for ourselves what difference is made by this life, this death, and this disorienting mystery after the crucifixion.”²

Discovering that difference, living within that difference, is the continual task of our discipleship. As we pursue that journey of discovery this Easter morning, what guidance can we find in these verses from Mark, odd and enigmatic as they are? Perhaps it will be helpful to imagine ourselves alongside Mary and Mary and Salome as they walk toward the tomb in the early dawn of that first Easter morning.

This is not a good moment to be a follower of Jesus. His ministry of teaching and healing has been cruelly and decisively ended by his arrest, trial, and execution. The disciples who were his closest companions during that public ministry have gone into hiding. Peter, so often the most ardent and outspoken of his followers, has gone so far as to deny ever having known the man. It is no longer desirable to be publicly associated with this Jesus, who has now been exposed as just another pretender to the title of “Messiah”. The movement he was leading, the new way of life he was teaching: all that is over -- crushed and destroyed by political and religious figures who will brook no challenge to their power; who will resist and oppose any change to the structures that support and perpetuate their comfort and authority. These worldly powers have acted to remove a growing threat. Jesus, whose words and deeds had promised the coming of the Kingdom of God, now lies broken and still in the kingdom of death.

But not everyone has abandoned him. Three faithful women -- named by Mark as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome -- have risen early on the first day of the week to perform a last loving service for this one they have followed for so long. Mark tells us that these same women “looked on from a distance “ as Jesus was crucified and then followed as his body as carried to a borrowed tomb, so that they would know where to come for the sad task of anointing his body.

What an important, impossible task. It was the burial practice of the time for those close to the deceased to treat recently dead bodies with aromatic herbs and spices. We can imagine how difficult this particular task would have been for these women. They have been a part of Jesus’ inner circle, the group of disciples and followers who have traveled together throughout the region, bound to Jesus and to one another by their shared conviction that this extraordinary man is the promised Messiah the people of Israel have awaited for so long.

² Rowan Williams; *Christ on Trial*; p. 17
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Messiah, of course, means “Anointed One”, but we can be sure these women did not expect that the anointment Jesus would undergo would be the spices of death instead of the perfumed oil of enthronement.

What took these three women to the tomb that morning? Was it simply duty? A numb fulfillment of a final obligation to their beloved, lost friend? Perhaps.

Or perhaps as they walked toward the tomb, they held deep within them a faint echo of the claim Jesus had made that death would not be his destiny. Jesus had told his companions -- three times, according to Mark’s gospel -- that he would be killed and “after three days rise again”. (8:31; 9:31; 10:34)

Could Mary and Mary and Salome have filed those words away in their memories, not understanding them at the time, not knowing *how* to understand them? But now, the first part of his prediction has come true -- he has indeed been arrested and killed. Can we imagine that they walked toward the tomb that Sunday morning wondering if they dared to hope that perhaps Jesus’ other prediction were also true? That he would indeed -- somehow -- rise again?

Mary Gordon claims that “Mark, the harshest, sparest of the Gospel writers, gives us an unhopeful Easter”³ but that is perhaps an unfair assessment if we will read these final verses through the lens of his whole Gospel account of who Jesus is and what Jesus means to the world.

Tom Long suggests that the ending of Mark should send us straight back to the beginning. Long asks: “What do we see when we read the Gospel of Mark again, this time with post-resurrection eyes? We see Jesus healing and teaching and casting out demons, but always misunderstood, even by those closest to him. In other words, Mark is telling us that the saving action of God in the world is always hidden, ambiguous, sealed off from obvious explanation. Reading Mark a second time, we see Jesus breaking through into human life as one who is powerful, but also as one who will suffer and die. In other words, we see a God whose power is a strange, suffering power. We go back to Galilee, and the second time around every story in the Gospel of Mark is a post-resurrection appearance. What we see is a God who surprises us at every turn in the road.”⁴

Mary, Mary, and Salome are surprised when they arrive at a borrowed tomb on a Sunday morning, thinking it the burial place of their beloved friend. Instead of a broken body awaiting the final loving act of anointment with funeral spices, they find an angel who makes the astonishing announcement that Jesus is no longer there because he has been raised from death and has gone ahead of them to Galilee. It was in Galilee that Jesus first proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God. It was in Galilee that Jesus began the work of bringing sight to the

³ Mary Gordon; *Incarnation: Contemporary Writers on the New Testament*; p. 24

⁴ Thomas G. Long; “Middle East Peace: Mark 16: 1-8”; *Christian Century*; 4-4-2006.

blind, release to the captive, hope to the poor, freedom to the oppressed. It is in Galilee that the risen Jesus begins anew, now beckoning to his disciples to join him in this holy work, for the kingdom he proclaims has not, after all, been ended, but has been led into the new and eternal life of the resurrected Christ.

What are we to do with this Easter story? Mark gives us a Gospel that claims to be the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and then ends that Gospel with an odd, awkward, unsatisfactory tale of empty tomb where we are given news of a risen Jesus, but no glimpse of him.

If we, the readers, are, as Rowan Williams suggests, the lost ending to Mark's Gospel -- what comes next? How do we continue the story which Mark begins? How do we overcome our terror and amazement at the empty tomb to share a message of new life? How do we speak and act and live that message so that it helps the world discover what difference the risen Christ makes to each of us, to all of us, to all of creation?

Here we are at Easter morning -- the happiest of high holy days for Christians. Mark gives us an open-ended story that points us toward the Risen Christ and calls us into the new life he brings.

Poet Lucille Clifton continues the Easter story Mark begins in her poem "Spring Song":

the green of Jesus
is breaking the ground
and the sweet
smell of delicious Jesus
is opening the house and
the dance of Jesus music
has hold of the air and
the world is turning
in the body of Jesus and
the future is possible.

Amen.