

A New End to the Story

Summerlea U.C.
Rev. Scott A. Patton
April 4, 2021

Acts 10:34-43
Mark 16:1-8
Easter Sunday

Prayer:

O God, for whom there are no barriers,
no stones too big to remove:
roll away all that stands in the way of us meeting
the risen Christ who is alive and here among us.
Let your words fill us with new life
and bring us out from the tomb of indifference,
so that we may be alive again in you.
And now, may the words of my mouth.... Amen.

I'm going to take the liberty of answering a question that I think some of you might have wanted to ask me after the service. You might be wanting to ask, "now Scott, wasn't that a different story about the resurrection of Jesus that we heard today?"

Let me tell you now that it was indeed a different story. Every Easter that I have been here at this church, I've preached on the resurrection story from the Gospel of John, with the exception of one year when I preached on Matthew's version of the resurrection story. The passage that John read for us this morning was the account of the resurrection from Mark's gospel.

And it is, in every sense of the word, a story ABOUT the resurrection. That's why some of you may have noticed that it is different from John's version. In Mark's account, there is no appearance of the risen Christ. Mark tells only of "...a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side (of the stone that had been rolled away from the entrance of the tomb)." This mysterious stranger simply tells the women that Jesus "has been raised," and that they would see him sometime soon in Galilee.

The story ends with no actual appearance by Jesus, and with the women running away in fear. Mark leaves us with the words of 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."

Not much of an Easter story, is it?? If you look in the most up-to-date versions of The Bible, you will notice that, added on to verse 8, we have what is called “The Shorter Ending of Mark.” But following that is another section, verses 9-20. This part has been dubbed “The Longer Ending of Mark.”

In this longer ending, appearances of the risen Christ abound. It says that “he appeared to Mary Magdalene...After this he appeared to two of them in a different form (the text tells us), as they were walking into the country...Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table.”

Most biblical scholars believe, as I myself believe, that Mark didn't write any of it. It is almost universally believed that both the shorter and longer endings were added to Mark's gospel later on. The question is, WHY?

We know that Mark's gospel was the earliest gospel written, and both Matthew and Luke used Mark's material and added more to it. Perhaps we could say that Mark didn't know the whole story, almost as if he were a reporter who was hurrying to get to press, and missed some of the later developments.

But given that Mark's gospel was written some time after the letters of Paul, this explanation doesn't seem plausible. What I think happened was that Mark's original ending, the part that we heard today, simply caused too much angst for some people. They perhaps felt it was not complete the way it was, so they added a new ending to the story.

Of course, I'm just guessing, but all we can do at this point is guess. The evidence seems to suggest that the two different endings were added at a later time, but we don't know for sure, and if the endings WERE added later on, we don't know by whom, and we don't know the specific reasons why they felt they couldn't leave Mark's gospel the way it was.

But since we're guessing about this, I'd like to add my own theory to the mix. With so much controversy raging at that time, as there also is today, about just what happened in the resurrection event, I think that the thought of a resurrection story that did not include an actual sighting of the risen Jesus was just too loosey-goosey for some people, and they needed Mark's gospel to show in no uncertain terms that Jesus was alive once again and back with his friends and followers.

In a way, I can understand fully, because where the original ending of Mark leaves things is NOT the end of the story. But it certainly portrays an accurate picture of what was happening on that first Easter Day.

After the large wooden cross with Jesus hanging on it was raised and planted in the ground, not one of Jesus' followers expected that this would be anything but the end of the line for Jesus. His followers watched him suffer and die, and after he was laid in the grave, not one of them had any hope that they would see him again, despite the number of times when Jesus told them that he was going to die, but in three days would be raised.

When Jesus died, their hopes for the future died with him. Their convictions died; indeed, their faith had died. In response to the events they had just witnessed, they were huddled together in an upper room in fear – fear that the authorities would do to them what they had just seen them do to Jesus.

None of them expected the resurrection. The first visitors to the tomb were not coming with the hope of an encounter with the risen Jesus, but to finish the job of burying him. That is probably why Mark concludes his gospel with the mysterious stranger in white telling them the first news of the resurrection, and tells of their initial reaction.

That is why I am indebted to modern theologians and scholars who remind us that the importance of the resurrection story lies not in how it happened, but in the assertion that God somehow brought Jesus from death to life, and that something powerful and life-changing happened in the lives of his followers.

The resurrection is the defining event for us as Christians, and as God's people. The resurrection is of first importance to us, not because it is a nice ending to the story of Jesus, but because it is the beginning of OUR story: a story in which life triumphs over death, and our lives are made new.

Maybe Mark knew that. Maybe he knew that it wasn't his job to tell the end of the story, and so he only proclaims the news and tells of the initial reaction: fear and disbelief. Maybe he knew that each one of us would have to add a new end to the story ourselves, as the story of resurrection and new life unfolded in each of our lives.

Perhaps later writers felt that Mark didn't finish the job, and tried to provide us with a bit more assurance with accounts of actual experiences of the risen Christ.

But I think that Mark was right all along, because each one of us who gathers today for Easter worship, and each of us who hears again the great news of what God has done, can decide for ourselves how the story will end.

Reactions of disbelief are still prevalent today. So are reactions of walking away and doing or saying nothing. The story of the resurrection, both for those who first heard the news and for those of us who hear the story again today, only came true when people believed that it could have an impact on our lives. We know that something happened that moved the disciples from hiding in fear to boldly living and proclaiming the Gospel in spite of great risk.

What I think that something was was a belief that resurrection and new life are REAL: that the story of our lives has now been changed forever. But whether or not this comes true depends on us. The end of the story changes with each one of us. We either believe in this wonderful news that God has raised Jesus, and us, to new life, and that this has implications for how we live our lives here and now, or we don't believe it.

And again, I tell you, some don't believe it. Some still haven't progressed beyond the original ending of Mark's gospel.

And I'm not talking about people who don't believe in God or who have never been to church. I'm talking about people we can find right in our own midst.

We join together for worship on this day of Easter, this day of celebration; we sing our alleluias and we proclaim, "Christ is risen indeed!", but some of us haven't yet come to really believe that we can experience resurrection in our own lives.

Let me tell you a true story: in Russia a number of years ago, a railway worker accidentally locked himself in a refrigerated railway car. Unable to escape or attract attention, he resigned himself to his fate. As he felt his body becoming numb he took a pencil out of his pocket and recorded the story of his approaching death. He scribbled on the walls of the railway car: "I am becoming colder...still colder...I am slowly freezing...half asleep – these may be my last words."

When the car was opened the man was found dead, but the temperature of the car was only about 56 degrees Fahrenheit. Officials found that the freezing mechanism was out of order and that there was plenty of fresh air available. There was no physical reason that they could find for the man to have died.

It was concluded that he had died because he had believed that he would die.

What we believe to be true affects us to the very core of our being. It shapes us and makes us what we are. It either blesses us because it opens us up to the power of God, or it affects us because it blinds us to what we could be and what God is trying to do for us.

Another story, this time a fable, goes like this: Once upon a time a man found the egg of an eagle. It had been abandoned for some reason by its mother, but as it was still warm the man took it and put it in the nest of one of the chickens in his chicken coop, along with the other eggs that were there being brooded upon.

After a period of time the eaglet was hatched, and along with the other chicks from his nest, he began to go about the barnyard doing what the other chicks did. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled as best he could, and as he grew, he would, like the other chickens, thrash his wings and fly a few feet in the air. Years passed in this way and the eagle grew very old.

One day, he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. It glided majestically among the powerful wind currents, soaring and swooping, scarcely beating its long golden wings.

The old eagle looked at it in awe and asked "what is that?" "That is the eagle, the king of the birds," said one of his neighbours. "He belongs to the sky and to the high places. We belong to the earth, for we are chickens." The old eagle knew this was true, and so it was that he lived and died as a chicken, for that is what he believed he was.

He never knew the joy of taking to flight and the freedom of gliding through the air, held aloft by his great wings, because he never knew that, for him, that was a possibility.

Will the story of the resurrection for us today end the way it did with Mark's gospel, with fear and disbelief? Will it end with a sense that a resurrection experience is POSSIBLE, but not enough belief to make it really happen? Or will we, along with others throughout history, add a new ending to the

story, one that tells of the new life we have received because we believe and trust and have hope that the God of life will transform our lives and make something new out of us and our life situations?

Will despair over tragedies we face in our lives destroy our hope, or will we trust that God can and will bring new life to even our greatest tragedies? Will our grief over the people and things we have loved and lost overwhelm us, or will we trust that the God who brings life out of death will transform even the most seemingly hopeless of our situations? Will we look out into a world in desperate need and throw up our hands in despair, or will we see possibilities for change and growth and new life.?

Easter holds out for us the possibilities for new and abundant life. The story of our lives has been changed forever since God overcame the power of sin and death with the power of love and life. The story of the resurrection is the beginning of OUR story as God's beloved people.

It is the story that God began to write when God created us in love,
when God didn't stop loving us even in our unfaithfulness,
when God came to share our lives with us in and through the person Jesus,
and when God responded to our ultimate rejection of Jesus by raising him from death to life, by
destroying the power of death, and giving us the gift of life in all its fullness.
But the story is not finished. It is up to each one of us to decide what the ending to the story will be.

Thanks be to God. Amen.