

## **WHEN THE END IS NOT THE END**

**MARK 16:1-8**

**EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 20, 2003**

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I have a confession to make. The last time the Easter story was taken from the Gospel of Mark, three years ago, I avoided it like the plague. We always have the option of preaching Easter from John's Gospel so that is what I used.

My problem with Mark is his brevity. Some of you may say I have the opposite problem and that I could learn a few things from Mark. You are probably right. But Mark is so sparse. Scholars say both the so-called shorter and longer endings to the gospel – everything after verse 8 – are additions to the original. Apparently, even those early church fathers found Mark's account too brief.

In fact, the last verse, verse 8, ends in the English text with the word "afraid." Not exactly a bold conclusion for future believers. But the Greek original is worse. It just stops in mid-air with the word "gar" – a preposition meaning "for." There are no examples anywhere in the New Testament where a writer ends a sentence with "gar."<sup>i</sup>

You get the feeling Mark was sitting at his writing table, scratching away in his familiar staccato and something happened. Someone called to him or there was a loud noise outside that he went to investigate and never came back.

So all we have is this: "Jesus is risen. He is not here. He has gone ahead of you to Galilee. Go tell the others." Nothing close to what the other gospels provide.

Not only does Mark give us no resurrection appearances like the other writers; the women in this gospel, the backbone of the faith community, do not tell anyone anything for "they were," says Mark, "afraid."

Fred Craddock, the great, home-spun, southern preacher asks, "is this any way to run a resurrection?!"<sup>ii</sup> G-o-l-l-y Mark. We've got trumpets, we've got lilies, we've got the special anthem, we're all here pretty as you please. But Mark invites us to a treasure hunt.

We are like the British people receiving word from Waterloo about the battle between Wellington and Napoleon. A series of smoke signals were arranged from the battlefield back to Winchester Cathedral. But just after the message was sent out a fog settled in. All the people saw were the first words of the message, "Wellington defeated..." Despair engulfed the nation. Only after the fog lifted did they receive the entire message: "Wellington defeated the enemy."<sup>iii</sup>

Expectantly we wait today for good news. But all Mark gives us is an empty tomb, a gaggle of frightened women and an incomplete sentence.

Yet, this time something told me Mark's ending, like an April trout stream, is not empty. Something told me to read deeper, look harder. So accustomed are we in our instant gratification, entertainment culture to have it all now without subtlety or delay.

Patience is a good thing in fishing and in faith. Having discovered silver linings inside my own disappointments I thought better of Mark. Maybe good news was here but like a Wallace Stevens poem you have to read and wrestle with it first.

In fact, none of the Gospels provides a totally unambiguous account of resurrection. There is always a little doubt here, a little fear there usually from the men. This is sacred scripture for goodness sake, not a promotional brochure for the 2004 Buffalo Bills.

Faith is never coerced, even on Easter. If faith is anything it is our free response to divine revelation which *is*, by the way, what Mark does give us.

Not to mention the importance of memory. All those times Jesus told his followers what to expect and exactly what would happen. He said after he was raised to remember the things he told them. Memory is such a wonderful, mysterious gift. 90% of the poetry ever written would be meaningless without memory. Between the lines Mark whispers “remember.”

And Mark is a great artist. If the gospels were paintings and John a big, wild Jackson Pollock; Luke a rich, earthy Van Gogh; and Matthew a meaning-loaded Michelangelo, then Mark would be an ink sketch by Leonardo da Vinci.

Mark doesn't hit us over the head with colors and size. He appeals to our sense of proportion. He is not a car salesman. He is a conservationist. We are not going to get the tomb lighted up like Las Vegas. We get measured, accurate accounting.

And Mark does give us good news doesn't he! “Do not be afraid. You are looking for Jesus. He is not here. He has been raised. He is going ahead of you, just as he told you.”

We are getting close to the treasure now. I come back to that beguiling, incomplete verse 8 – our Leonardo sketch; like a work in progress all the lines are not there.

There is something wonderful here. The power of an artwork is created as much by what isn't there as by what is. Suggestion, contrast, emptiness, silence, in music and painting invite the mind and eye to fill in what is missing. So the eyes of faith must complete Mark's sketch of the resurrection.

He wants us to finish his sentence. He wants us to take the next step. He wants us to add to his story and make it our story. He wants us to become characters even in this drama of resurrection.

Isn't that why we are here today? Isn't that what we want? To figure out our part in this amazing story? Like a great poem at each reading some new gem of insight sparkles.

But we have to give our imagination and heart free-reign. And when we do, the meaning of the verse, the truth of the gospel becomes ours.

So what is our part? What difference does the resurrection make? We get the first glimpse of the difference way back in chapter five when Jesus heals the Gerasene demoniac. The crazy man plagued by death, never able to find his way out of the tombs.

The death of a loved one spelled the death of the rest of this man's life.

If you have experienced the pain of grief, that's not so crazy is it?

Remember how Jesus commands the unclean spirits to come out of him and they enter a herd of swine that straightaway run into the sea. As word spread about this man the people come to see for themselves and find the infamous sufferer now sitting with Jesus, clothed and in his right mind.

Unless I miss my guess some of us today are like that man – paralyzed by deep grief, held back by deep fear, burdened by some deep reticence about life.

Reynolds Price, a southern writer who lost the use of his legs fifteen years ago from spinal cancer received a letter from a young medical student dying of cancer. The student asked Price two questions, does God exist and does God care?

Price wrote back, “I lean on the hope that you will go on to some form of consciousness, what Christians call heaven, the promise of Easter. A place less mysterious than this one, a life in which you’ll comprehend and accomplish what may be dark and closed to you here and now. Such an utterance would seem lunatic to many of my university colleagues,” Price says, “but not, I assure you, to Tolstoy or Mahler or Einstein.”<sup>iv</sup>

What does such good news mean to us? Anatole Broyard in his wonderful story *Intoxicated By My Illness* talks about modern men and women, so afraid of death, of losing everything like the Gerasene, that we end up living colorless, passionless lives.

Broyard extends the call to be heroic. He laments so few of us today are heroic. Timid. Embarrassed. Subdued by our downsized sense of ecstasy or grandeur. Living out our lives incognito, concealing our true selves even from ourselves.<sup>v</sup>

But that’s not what Mark has in mind for us this morning. The good news – that Jesus is risen – changes everything. One colleague, remembering his Baptist upbringing, recalls the day he was baptized at the age of 13 walking home with his wet clothes in a plastic bag. He was wondering what the preacher meant when he referred to St. Paul’s words to those who had been raised with Christ to “set your mind on the things that are above.”<sup>vi</sup>

No longer do we have to play it safe with life. We can take risks, be heroic. The church in Colossae to whom Paul was writing didn’t get it at first. They thought setting your mind on things above meant esoteric things, religious things. What he meant was compassion, kindness, humility, forgiveness, and love. Taking risks.

I heard a woman tell her husband recently she realized every time he said he loved her he added the word ‘but.’ “I need more than that,” she told him. I heard a man confess not long ago to his wife he could see the atmosphere they were creating in their house felt like a cold fish tank.

The resurrection invites you and me to let the risen Christ call out the dark spirits from our hearts and homes and make us whole and well again.

Poet Wendell Berry talks about taking risks: “Every day do something that won’t compute. Love the Lord, love the world, work for nothing, take all you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it. Denounce the government and embrace the flag. Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands. Give your approval to all you cannot understand. Ask questions that have no answers. Plant sequoias.

Expect the end of the world. Laugh—laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful though you have considered all the facts. Swear allegiance to what is highest in your thoughts. As soon as they can predict the motion of your mind, lose it. Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail. Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction. Practice resurrection.”<sup>vii</sup>

A colleague in campus ministry tells the story of one of his students who returned to school last fall. Her father died over the summer. It was especially difficult because he had a stroke and lost his ability to talk. And he loved to talk.

The last day of the man's life the student and her sister and brother were visiting their father in the hospital. "We were feeling the pain of his struggle as he tried to communicate with us," she said. Then he motioned to her brother as if to say, 'Get me a glass of water.' So her brother did as his father asked, filled the glass and brought it to his dad. But he wouldn't drink it. He motioned as if to say, 'You drink it.' So he took a sip. Then she said her father made another motion, 'Give it to your sister.' The boy handed his sister the glass. Then motioned to pass it to me. Suddenly her brother said, 'He's serving us communion.'"<sup>viii</sup>

When is the end not the end? When we take our place in the old, old story. When we pick up where Mark left off. When we are inspired to do great things and perform heroic acts not just play it safe with life. When we set our minds on the things that are above and with eyes of faith finish Mark's sketch of resurrection in the exquisite and painful detail of our living.

So come to the table. Start your life again in the place of brokenness or fear where you thought it had ended. And practice resurrection. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Lamar Williamson, Jr. Interpretation: Mark (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983) 283.

<sup>ii</sup> Fred Craddock, "He is not here," The Christian Century, April 5, 2003, 21.

<sup>iii</sup> David J. McFarlane, Interpretation, newsletter from The Presbyterian Church, Sewickley, PA, 1995.

<sup>iv</sup> Reynolds Price, Letter To A Man In The Fire, (New York: Scribner, 1999) 66.

<sup>v</sup> Anatole Broyard, Intoxicated By My Illness (New York: Fawcett/Columbine, 1992) 69.

<sup>vi</sup> Fred Craddock, Cherry Log Sermons (New York: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2001) 99.

<sup>vii</sup> Wendell Berry, "Practice Resurrection," Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.

<sup>viii</sup> Thomas Long, "Getting Down to the Local Issues," Whispering the Lyrics (Lima, Ohio: CSS Pub. Co., Inc., 1995, p 95-101.