

When the Ending is Not the End

Mark 16: 1-8

Last week I began the sermon saying it was unclear why some people want to know the ending of a story before they read the story. I even said some people read the last chapter in a book before they read the book. What a waste of time and money!

Well, this week guess what: what do you do when the ending of the story is not the end? How does one make sense out of a story when the end is not the end? Talk about frustration! Talk about disappointment! Talk about feeling cheated! Talk about the Easter Message in Mark 16!

Stay with me and I'll try to make my point and the advantage we have when the ending is not the end!

We begin with our Gospel Lesson from Mark 16: 1-8. On the screen before worship, I invited you to read the entire chapter 16 of Mark's Gospel. You see there are several endings to Mark's version of the resurrection. Scholars have debated the two endings for centuries. And the reason for the debate is how the two endings really do not fit.

Why are there two endings? Because Mark's Gospel in verse 8 ends with the word "for" which in Greek is 'gar.'

Some people, of course, thought it needed some kind of ending. The shorter ending talks about Jesus sending out the disciples and through them the eternal message of salvation. However, Jesus was not even there in the previous verses. He had risen and was gone. So it was an ending which did not connect with the story.

The longer version talks about Jesus rising on the first day of the week and appearing to Mary Magdalene from whom he had cast out demons. It also talks about Jesus appearing to the eleven and handling snakes and drinking poison and not dying. Some extreme Christian groups justify their snake handling and drinking strychnine poisoning based on this ending. There has been little evidence of the authenticity of this ending.

But Mark's Gospel in verse 8 ends up in the air..." for they were afraid!" The story ends in silence. What is next? What is going to happen? What are we to do?

The response of the three women in verse 8 is interesting: "They were trembling and astonished." They had two opposite feelings: scared to death because we do not know what this means. Yet, ecstatic because of the hope of what it could mean.

We are told in many places in scripture where fear overcomes people in their encounter with God. The angels at Jesus' birth declared, "Fear not for we bring you good tidings of great joy. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

Abraham and Sarah were afraid when told of having a baby at age 90. To the point that Sarah's response was laughter - - probably out of nervousness. You got to be kidding me she thought - - at my age?

Yet is not that often our experience of the holy - - afraid, fearful, hard to comprehend. At the same time, wondering if it could really be true. Would someone love me so much that they would...

-give me a new lease on life?

-remove the cancer from my body?

-heal the broken relationship between me and a friend?

-answer my question of what I am to do with my life?

-surprise me with being accepted just as I am?

-love me in spite of all my problems and hang-ups?

-invite me into a personal relationship with the Creator of the Universe? Just like the women - - scared because we never experienced anything like this before. Ecstatic just thinking of what it could mean to us and for us.

But the message in Mark's Gospel has an incredible word of hope and assurance. In the middle of the women trembling and being ecstatic comes this word from the young man in a white robe: "He has risen. He is not here. He is going before you to Galilee."

Part of the great news about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is that he goes before us. Just like he said. He leads the way. He blazes the trail. He is already waiting for us before we even get there.

Before we know we have an illness, Jesus is there.

Before we realize we are in a major battle in our marriage, Jesus is there.

Before we uncover our spouse being unfaithful, Jesus is there.

Before we learn of some inappropriate actions of our children, Jesus is there.

Before we learn of our financial problems, Jesus is there.

Before we get that pink slip at work, Jesus is there.

Before we have an emotional breakdown, Jesus is there.

Before we even vote on the calling of a new pastor in a week, Jesus is there.

Before we make decisions about the use of the Kirk Hall for the community, Jesus is there.

He goes before us. And therefore we do not have to travel alone. We are not flying solo. We do not venture out blindfolded. Jesus is there.

His resurrection has given us life, even life eternal, and that life begins right now. Beginning in the middle of our messy lives. Beginning in the middle of our heartaches. Beginning in the middle of our ecstasy over that new grandchild or great grandchild.

We are assured and we are sure. So having feelings of fear and ecstasy go hand in hand because Jesus is helping us create the new life that unfolds before us. It is an incredible beginning.

Several years ago a woman told that her great-grandson asked why she had so many wrinkles on her hands. "I'm old," she told him. "Do you know

what happens when you get old,” he asked. “You die and they bury you in the ground.” Before she could say anything he added, “But that’s ok; God comes and unburies you.”

What more is there to say? He’s just told the Easter story. It’s that simple. We get buried by the circumstances of life and God unburies us. Over and over God comes to the tombs of our lives and unburies us. That’s Easter. That is the power and love of God. It is as true as it is simple.

God in Christ unburies us when we get buried by all the issues that we confront in life. Our unburial, our resurrection is because God loves us so much he wants us to have the true life we are called to have.

So, what about the story’s ending that does not end? I think that is really the genius of Mark’s Gospel. I share this story to clarify the enigma:

But by all accounts, she seemed much older — some even said she seemed like future presidential material. Naomi was born in Ethiopia; her father is Black and her mother white. While attending school in Alexandria, Virginia, a community where the majority are white, she would ask her parents questions — such as why the news identified the race of Black people but not white people. With questions like this on her mind, she appeared on the big stage to speak at the rally in D.C. “I am here today,” she said, “to acknowledge and represent the African American girls whose stories don’t make the front page of every national newspaper, whose stories don’t lead the evening news. ... I represent the African American women who are victims of gun violence, who are simply statistics instead of vibrant, beautiful girls that fill a potential.” Naomi then honored the words of Toni Morrison: “ ‘If there’s a book that you want to read but it hasn’t been written yet, you must be the one to write it.’ ...

She went on to urge everyone there and everyone who hears my voice to join me in telling the stories that aren’t told.

That’s it! The ending is not there because you are here. And it is you and I who have to provide the ending. The end of the resurrection of Christ comes through the chapters of our book which only we can write.

Mark’s Gospel is brilliant: if the resurrection of Christ is real, then the rest of our story will reflect that resurrection. The rest of our life will be a response to the great news of the resurrection!

For no longer does sin claim us or control us. No longer do we live enslaved to the ways of this world. No longer do we live out of fear but out of a joy that life for us is real. We live in gratitude to God for what God did in Christ and does in us!

How shall you end the greatest story of all time? You have the pen and the power of God’s Spirit. Write the rest of your story! That is what the resurrection enables us to do!