

April 16, 2006
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Isaiah 25:6-9, Mark 16:1-8

"The End is Our Beginning"

Did you really hear the way Mark ends the story of Easter morning? "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." The Scottish dialect of Glasgow has a word that perfectly describes the feeling: they are "gob-smacked" - hit in the chops by what they see and hear. Or, more precisely, they are "gob-smacked" by what they do not see. In Mark's account of Easter morning, they find the tomb empty. They do not see Jesus - dead or alive. Instead, they encounter an angelic figure who tells the astonished and terrified women that Jesus who was crucified has been raised from the dead. He is not here! He has gone ahead of them to Galilee where they will see him. In Mark's original account that ends at verse eight, we are not given any encounter with the Risen Lord as in the other gospels. This ending is rough and raw.

The church has always been uncomfortable with the abrupt way in which Mark's gospel ends. So, the church added other endings to smooth out the end of Mark, to make the resurrection more "joyful and triumphant." These alternate endings answer the question about what happened to these women and to the other disciples. These endings sound like bits and pieces cobbled together from other traditions and from other gospels. The earliest and most reliable manuscripts of Mark end at verse eight. Biblical scholars, from the fourth century to the present, generally agree that Mark ends with this troubling scene of terrified, silent women at the empty tomb of Jesus. Let the other gospels have their say on other days and on other Easter mornings. Today, in this frightened, fragmented and war-torn world, let us hear Mark's witness to the resurrection.

The way Mark ends the gospel is consistent with the way Mark has told the story from the beginning. It is fast-paced, confrontational, bold, stark, rough-hewn and full of irony. The gospel is about Jesus Christ, the Messiah and Son of God, who reveals God's way in the world in his death on the cross. It is about faith and fear and following. Above all else, it is the gospel about discipleship. Throughout the story, the disciples have their minds stretched and they do not understand; they have their faith tested and they fail the test. Now, at the most critical moment, in the light of Easter morning with the empty tomb staring them in the face, what will they do?

Dr. Tom Long has written, "Mark is not a script for a Miss America contestant, who wants to 'just light one candle in the darkness and leave the world a better place.' It is about a God who will not let human deceit, stubbornness, hardness, greed and shallowness thwart the divine will to bring life to a world where all the candles have been blown out ... It is about a kingdom that arrives like a storm, a break-in, a revolution and places upon us all the urgent task of finding ourselves in the new reality. Mark is not about promising human prospects; it is about a promising God, a God who makes and keeps promises on the tattered edge of human failing." (*Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2003, p. 11) Here we are at

"the tattered edge of human failing." We may not have brought spices to the tomb this Easter morning, but we have brought our fear of death and our even greater fear of life. The damp smell of the moist soil where we have buried all our hopes and dreams clings to our Easter clothing. We cannot shake the chill that runs up and down our spine that all our best effort and hard work will come to nothing and that death has swallowed up forever those we love. We come to the empty tomb - fearful, forlorn and yet, strangely hopeful.

Here at the empty tomb, there remain two questions. First, where, then, is Jesus? The young man says to the gob-smacked women that Jesus is raised from the dead. The resurrection is not in doubt. The tomb is empty. God has done what Jesus said God would do. Death cannot hold the force of God's creative and redemptive power. Where is Jesus? The young man says that Jesus has gone ahead of the disciples to Galilee, just as he said he would. They will see him in Galilee. The ministry of Jesus began in Galilee. In Galilee, he preached the word, healed the sick, defeated the power of demons, fed the hungry and taught about the kingdom. In Galilee, he called the disciples to faith and taught them what it means to follow him. The disciples are to return to the places they have been, to the work they have done and to the people they have known. Only this time, they will see Jesus as he truly is. This time, they will let go of the spices of death and shake the smell of death from their Easter clothes, for He is the risen. The Lord will meet them in the most ordinary places of life, in the most common duties and even in the face of the stranger. The end of the gospel story is their beginning. The resurrection is the beginning of a new life for them.

The second question is, where are we? Mark's rough ending leaves us with questions that we can only answer by how we live our lives and by the choices we make. In his book, *Binding the Strong Man*, Ched Myers has noted that Mark refuses to resolve the tension of the ending because he wants us to struggle not only with what the women did, but with what we shall do.

We cannot remain passive. "The power of Mark's Gospel ultimately lies not in what it tells the disciples/readers, but what it asks of them." (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 403). The end is our beginning. Will we follow the Risen Lord to Galilee where we will meet him in our daily living and dying? Or, will we flee in fear and hide our faces in times that require courage, in situations that call for sacrifice and in wrongs that demand forgiveness?

The gospel tells us to go to Galilee. P.C. Ennis has noted that we don't need travel guides to find Galilee "because Galilee is not a place. Galilee is a moment in time. Galilee is a metaphor..." (*Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2003, 36) Galilee is all the places where we live. More than that, Galilee is all the places where Jesus lives. The angel says that he is there ahead of us. There is no place we can go that Jesus is not present. We go back to Galilee, that is, to our own lives. We discover, perhaps for the first time, the presence of Jesus. We go back in the power of the resurrection. We go back with fresh eyes and a new faith to see the one who was always there, but we never could see clearly.

I suspect that the angel's news leads the women at the tomb to rake through the discarded bits of their lives and to see things about their life with Jesus they had had not seen before.

I suspect that when the women remember his teaching, healing, loving and giving, they have a lot of "ah ha!" moments. We read our lives in the light of the gospel. The resurrection teaches us that Jesus is in every moment of life. He is always ahead of us - greeting us in every new experience and every person we meet.

The resurrected Lord shines forth in the faithful witness of believers. We see him when members of the community work together to feed the hungry, house the homeless, give sacrificially, teach the children, welcome the stranger and serve as a role model for youth. We see him when folks practice hospitality to strangers, visit the lonely, overcome prejudice and stand for justice. The Risen Lord is among us - in our homes, our prisons, our schools and our hospitals - wherever Christ's people dare to be faithful and to follow Jesus.

Over the last three years, we have prayed for peace and for those whose lives are disrupted by war. We have prayed for our leaders, our soldiers and our families with loved ones who are deployed. We have prayed for the people of Iraq. We have faced the terrible moral ambiguity and destructive power of war. We have wondered where is Jesus in the fear, the terror and the violence. One image in the desert, that was caught by a photographer, remains in my mind as a picture of hope and of the power of life. It is the image of an Iraqi prisoner on his knees beside an American soldier. The soldier is pouring water from his canteen into the parched open mouth of the prisoner. The soldier's hand is on the prisoner's shoulder. It is an image of life in a world of death, of peace in a time of war and of Jesus in a simple act of kindness between two enemies.

There is something startling, frightening and daring about Mark's telling of the Easter story. As a preacher, I am tempted to smooth out the rough edges and take away the danger of getting caught by one of its sharp splinters. Then, I would not be telling the truth. I would not be telling the gospel. The Easter message is a beautiful promise. Easter proclaims that God is faithful to God's promise. God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus is always ahead of us in this complex and confusing world.

Easter is also a hard demand. Easter asks that we see the ordinary, everyday world through the eyes of faith and see the risen Lord around us and within us. Jesus is right here in the midst of this sometimes messy business we call life. Easter asks that we give the best of ourselves for the life of the world. Even as Jesus asks this of us, he gives us the Holy Spirit to open our dim eyes to see him as he is. The beautiful promise becomes a hard demand. The end of Jesus' story is the beginning of our own.