

Easter Sunday B: Mark 16:1-8  
Church of the Good Shepherd  
The Rev. W. Terry Miller  
March 31, 2024

### Ending with a Cliffhanger

About this time last year I received some very sad news. I still get a little choked up when I talk about it. The news was that the cable channel TNT did not renew the show *Snowpiercer* for a fourth season. I know, I know, I still can't believe it either. It was a sad day for me and the other hundred or so fans, when after following the story for three seasons, we learned that the show would be no more. This happens a lot to me actually. I get involved in a show, get attached to the story and the characters, and then inevitably it gets canceled. *Stargate: Universe*, *Flashforward*, *Journeyman*, *the 4400*, *Revolution*, *Quantum Leap*—all science fiction shows and all canceled. What is it about science fiction shows getting canceled? This would be sad enough, but they always end with a cliffhanger: in the case of *Snowpiercer*, the passengers and crew of the perpetual motion train are now divided into two trains on their own paths, literally, following divergent railways towards different destinations. Now I'll never know what will happen, whether or not the passengers survive the frozen wasteland, or if they'll escape the missiles launched in the last minutes of the season finale! I know, the suspense! You don't have to have been a fan of the show to appreciate how frustrating it is to have a story you've been following for years end abruptly without any resolution. It's exasperating. The story is left hanging, and we are left waiting, anticipating, hoping for that gaping hole to be filled.

Such confusion and frustration can arise for us when we get to the ending of Mark's Gospel. As we just heard, the story Mark tells ends with a bit of a cliffhanger. Jesus has been betrayed, crucified, executed and his body placed in a tomb. When the women come to prepare the body for burial, they are startled to find not Jesus' body but a young man—likely an angel—who tells them that Jesus has been raised. "Oh! Jesus? You just missed him." Then the angel instructs them to go and tell the other disciples that Jesus is on the move, that he is going ahead of them to Galilee. The scene—and the gospel—ends, not with the faithful carrying out of the commission, or with the appearance of the resurrected Jesus, but with the hasty exit of the women, who, Mark tells us, told no one, because they were afraid. If this was an old-timey TV show, you'd be hearing right now a voiceover, "Is this the end of our steadfast heroes? Tune in next week to find out." Only there is no next week. Mark leaves us hanging. So what happened next?, we wonder. Did they tell the disciples? Did they ever catch up to Jesus? How does the story end? Was there a happily-ever-after or not?

Mark doesn't say. Mark's gospel says simply: "The women went out from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; they said nothing to anyone. They were afraid *for* ..." That's actually how it reads in Greek, ending the sentence and the Gospel with a preposition, with an *incomplete clause*. "They were afraid *because*..." The most important story of the Christian faith just stops, and the end just hangs out there. It's like if you told a long joke but left off before the punch line. We are left waiting, expectant.

Apparently we aren't the first to have a problem with the Easter story ending this way. Several ancient versions of the Gospel attempted to solve this problem by adding another ending, by tacking on "the rest of the story!" You will see this printed in your Bibles as verses 9 through 20. Those verses weren't there originally. In fact, if you were to read the whole gospel in one sitting, you'd probably notice that the style of writing in this epilogue is so different that you can tell, even in English, that these were added by another hand, by someone who wanted to make Mark's Gospel sound like the others, by someone who wanted a better ending. Even back then, it seems, there was some editor who was saying: "We can't have this. We need a conclusion! We need to wrap this up so that we can bring up the background music, roll the credits and let people leave satisfied. We can't have: "they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid!" The gospel can't end in silence, *in fear*.

And yet, the shorter version of Mark is probably quite right. *Of course* these followers of Jesus were afraid. Death is awful, especially a horrible execution like Jesus suffered, but at least we know what death is. Death leaves us in deep pain, but at least we know what to do next. Death is tragic, but at least we can understand that someone we loved is gone.

But this...this is something else entirely. Three grieving women come to the grave to finish preparing the body for its burial; they come to do what you do next when someone has died. But, at the tomb, they meet a young man in a white robe who tells them that their *dead* friend is *alive* and is going ahead of them back to Galilee. Now, there are three possibilities here—the women are hallucinating, or this young man is part of a conspiracy and has stolen the body, or—and this is the craziest option—this really is a divine messenger and something truly amazing has just happened: life and death are turned on their head! Any way you look at it, the women were bound to be terrified.

It wouldn't be surprising if they didn't say nothing to nobody. And yet obviously, they did. They told someone, who told someone, who told someone else, who told a lot of people, because some 30-40 years later Mark is writing this Gospel and includes the women's first encounter with the news of the resurrection. And nearly 2,000 years later, here we are, believing and sharing it. So how do we get from a handful of women scared speechless to us proclaiming Jesus' resurrection here today?

Pondering this question, I wonder if there's not more to Mark's conclusion than we give him credit for. You may recall how, some months ago, we started reading Mark's gospel, how Mark opens his account with the headline: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." After this introduction, Mark goes on to tell a great story about a holy man who talks about God in a way that made people want to believe; and how he made sick people feel better and crazy people sane; how he ate with traitors and cheats and touched the unclean; how he challenged self-righteous religious leaders; how he died a terrible death at the hands of jealous critics. When the women come, we think the story is going to pick up and turn around, but they run away in fear. Nothing more. What we end up with then is a gospel with a clear beginning and middle but no end, no definite conclusion. The so-what. The where to next.

But maybe that's the whole point. Maybe this story has no end, at least not yet. Perhaps this awkward sentence with its preposition at the end is Mark's way of saying: "This story isn't

over...because now it's *your* story." This is something like one of those plays where the audience gets to vote on how the play ends after a break in the action. Only in this case, it's the audience themselves, us, who get to act out the rest of the drama.

Mark's gospel then doesn't have an end, because it's still going on and we are a part of it. You see, when we were baptized, we became not simply part of the church but a part of a drama, part of a story. This story goes back all the way to the beginning, when out of abundant love God decided to share himself, and so created the world and everything in it. The story has its first dramatic crisis when Adam and Eve, our primordial ancestors, decided *their* way was better than God's and turned away from him. But that wasn't the end. The story has ever since been one of God reaching out again and again, trying to bring us wayward people back to him. God called Abraham to father a new nation and new people, then God rescued those people, the people Israel, from slavery and invited them into a covenant relationship with him. When they let God down, God sent the prophets to call them back. Finally God sends his Son, to teach us God's ways, to give his life for our sins, and to open the way to new life for all who would follow him. And this story will not end, we are told, until Jesus returns and ties up all the dramatic loose ends. The dead will then be raised, the earth and heaven will be made new, and the chasm between the two, between us and God, will be no more and we shall all see God face to face. This is the story that we are a part of, that we are living out.

That is why, I think, Mark doesn't have an ending to his gospel—*because it isn't over!* In fact, it is just getting started! So, when Mark says in Chapter 1, verse 1, "This is the beginning of the good news," he doesn't mean just this is the start of his account of Jesus; he's talking about his *whole* gospel. Mark's whole Gospel is itself just "The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ." It is now up to his readers...up to all the Christians who have read his gospel and believed it, from the first hearers to us here today...up to us to say how the story unfolds, up to us to determine what happens next.

Having heard the amazing, astounding, frightening news of Easter, will we run away like the women at the tomb, scared speechless at the very thought of Jesus being raised? Will we yawn and sit back and say we've seen this one before, it's a rerun? Or will we go forth this morning, in fear *and* in joy, having heard that Jesus is on the move in the world, and then go to find out what he is up to? Will we go out and tell others about what has happened, about how this man Jesus, who was anointed by God, lived, taught, and died for us, and how he was resurrected and is alive today? Will we who are caught up in this story have the courage to invite others to take up their parts and carry on with the witness to the crucified God?

With Easter we come not to the climatic end of the story of Jesus and his disciples, but to a new beginning. Mark concludes his account of that beginning with an invitation to us to be a part of how the next chapter unfolds. One thing we can be sure of, even if the world thinks they've heard this story before, that it needs to be cancelled because it just isn't getting the ratings anymore, the story of God and us will never end with a cliffhanger. Indeed this story of God with us will never end. It is the *never-ending* story. It will continue until...