



Easter
April 11, 2004

Mark 16:1-8
The Unfinished Story
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Earlier this week Jesus of Nazareth was crucified on a cross. In the end his disciples, his mother, and a few women were left alone with their grief. They had all hoped for more. They had hoped he was the Messiah, that he would establish a new kingdom and would change the way it is. But all of that hope died with Jesus last Friday when they had come to the end of the story.

Earlier this week some more soldiers and some more civilians were killed in Iraq. We have now grown accustomed to reading of these deaths, but if it were your loved who was just killed, you would be in great crisis. The families of the dead now know that their loved ones will not return. They have come to end of hope.

Earlier this week someone lost a job they had fought to keep. Someone lost a marriage. Someone lost a battle to cancer. The story is over. It didn't end the way they wanted.

It is the pastor's great privilege to listen to those who grieve these losses. One of the things that amazes me is that if the struggle is long, they are almost relieved in the end. As bad as it is to lose something we cherished, the thing that really drives us just crazy is not knowing how the story will end. We can't stand that. Happy or sad endings, we can handle. But stories without endings are impossible.

Earlier this morning, after the ending, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome went to the cemetery to grieve the death of Jesus. Perhaps they had been up half the night talking and crying like friends and family do when they come to the end. Maybe they remembered better days back in Galilee. How far away that seemed from them now. They went to the tomb to annoint Jesus' dead body, but when they got there they saw that the stone covering had been rolled back from the door, and Jesus was not inside.

A man in a white robe, possibly an angel, was sitting inside. He said, "You're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Go and tell the disciples he has gone on ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." The next sentence, the last sentence of Mark's gospel states, "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 end.

That's it? What kind of ending is that? Tell us more, Mark. Resolve the issues. Explain the significance. Depict some of the experiences of those who saw the risen Savior: the woman who thought he was a gardner, the man who thought he was a stranger on the road, the disciple who

had so many doubts he had to put his hand in Jesus' wounds, the other disciple who had to be forgiven for his denials. Finish the story as Matthew does with the great commissioning of the disciples, or as Luke does with the details about Jesus' ascension to heaven. Happy or sad, we can take it either way - just finish the story!

We are not the first to be bothered by Mark's unfinished story. The early church shared our anxiety. Even conservative Bible scholars now agree that the most reliable oldest copies of Mark's gospel end here at verse eight with the women being afraid. But by the 2nd century some copies of the gospel started to include longer endings that added the parts of the story given by the other gospel writers. That's because from the beginning we couldn't stand what Mark has done to us.

Every story has to resolve its ending: Does she survive the cancer or not? Do they stay married or get divorced? Does he make it home safely from the war or not? But Mark refuses to do that for us. All he says is that the end is not the end. "He is not here..." the angel said, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them."

This is the element of Easter that is so often missing from our celebrations. We think of Easter as a time for bunnies and chicks, colorful eggs and little girls in cute new dresses. But we ought to be thinking about grown women with their dresses hiked up to their knees running with terror out of a cemetery. Easter was not a happy-ever-after ending pasted onto the otherwise frightening ending of Jesus on the cross. The way Mark tells the story it is Easter that is the frightening part.

Along with Joseph of Arimathea we had put Jesus into a tomb - wrapped, signed, sealed, and delivered. And when we get a good look into the tomb this morning, everything is unwrapped, unsealed, unbound. Nothing is as we expected, or as it should be. Now, we cannot even count on death. We don't know the ending anymore, and that is why Easter is frightening.

As long as you know the story of your life ends with death, you know your mission. You will just collect all the things or experiences you can before your time is up. Or maybe you will hold your loved ones as close as you can before their time is up. Or you may even be capable of doing a few heroic things before you turn back to dust. But if death is not the end, you are going to have to find a whole new mission in life. The only help the angel will give you with this new mission is to claim that you will see the risen Savior who is waiting up ahead. Ah, but that is all the help you need. Your mission is to see, or to witness this risen Savior who is working just ahead of you.

Some today say that the Resurrection simply means that the teachings of Jesus live on in his disciples. They want to treat it like a metaphor for the tenacity of the human spirit to survive. But to reduce this event to that vague sentimental assurance is to roll the stone back over the tomb. Frankly, the human spirit doesn't impress me that much. If that is all Easter is about, I would join Pilate in washing my hands of the whole thing.

If we are going to make it, we have to see that the Savior still involved down here. Still

saving. Still breaking through the end of our stories. The real question of Easter, is not do you believe that it happened? It is really not too hard for most of us to believe that the resurrection did happen. The harder question is have you seen this risen Jesus?

If you are having trouble knowing where you will see this risen Jesus, remember that the angel has given you an important clue. "He has gone on ahead to Galilee, there you will see him." Galilee was home for the women and disciples. There was nothing too special about it. It was a place of daily routines, fishing nets, farms, markets, old people and children, weddings and funerals.

That's where the Easter story gets finished. It gets finished where we live, work, and worship. The Easter story gets finished when ordinary people stop to do the most extraordinary things, when the hungry are fed, the homeless are given shelter, and the sinner is forgiven. The Easter story gets finished when the lonely are made part of a church family, when the sick are visited, and those in grief are comforted by a hope that will not die. The Easter story gets finished when parents give up their dreams for their children and pray God's dreams upon them, when business people decide to do what is right regardless of cost, and when we stop complaining about petty issues and devote our energies to things that make a world of difference. The Easter story gets finished when leaders lead us toward the kingdom of God, and when warring nations come to the still waters of peace.

To be clear, the story comes to this wonderful conclusion not because we will do the right things but because a Risen Savior is not done with his work in this world. He will continue to intervene through his favorite means which is to use your life in ways that far exceed your imagination until with the Apostle Paul you claim, "it is not I who live but Christ who lives in me."

"He is not here. He has risen from the dead, and has gone on ahead of you." Do you see? Mark could not give you the end of the story. Because if a tomb cannot hold Jesus the Savior, then there is no telling where he might turn up again. *Amen.*