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First Presbyterian Church  
April 4, 2021  
Easter Sunday  
Mark 16:1-8

### “Unwritten Endings”

Have you ever finished a book and been really unhappy with how the story ended? Or thought at the conclusion of a movie, “What? That’s it? That’s a lousy way to end a movie.”

Well, that’s what some people think about Mark’s account of the resurrection . . . that it’s a lousy ending. And in many ways it is. There’s no earthquake or blinding light (like there is in Matthew’s version of the resurrection). No happy reunion in the garden or fish fry on the beach (like in John’s version). No running ahead to Galilee and meeting Jesus there; no walk to Emmaus. There’s not even a resurrected Jesus! As someone once said, in Mark the resurrection is the greatest story never told! The main character himself doesn’t even make an appearance! Nope. In Mark there’s only a man dressed in white, women running scared, and a promise.

Where’s the nice neat bow to tie it all together?

The late Donald Juel, a scholar who wrote extensively about Mark’s Gospel, told the story about how one of his students did a dramatic reading of Mark’s gospel before a live audience. After carefully studying the gospel, the student decided to end the reading at verse 8, where we did today and scholars believe Mark ended the story. But at the first performance when he came to the end and spoke that ambiguous last verse (and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid . . .), the student stood there awkwardly shifting from one foot to the other, the audience waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for the proper ending. Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, "Amen!" and made his exit. The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively. But upon reflection, the student realized that by providing the audience with a satisfying conclusion, his "Amen!" had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the story. So at the next performance, when he reached the final verse he simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence. Juel said, "The discomfort and uncertainty within the

audience were obvious, and as people exited the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the non-ending."

The non-ending . . .

But is that any way to end a gospel?

Christ is risen . . . he is risen . . . indeed? Question mark?

Before you answer that question, let's think about what has happened up to this point in Mark's gospel.

On Thursday night, after Jesus and the disciples celebrated Passover, they went to Gethsemane, and while Jesus was praying, the disciples fell asleep. They were supposed to be praying for strength and stamina to endure the days ahead, but instead they nodded off. This is not a good sign of things to come.

In the midst of Jesus trying to rouse them from their slumber *for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time*, Judas shows up with his cronies who are brandishing swords and clubs; a fight breaks out, someone's ear is cut off, Jesus is arrested, and the disciples flee from the scene. They will never be mentioned again in Mark's gospel. Except for Peter, of course, who follows Jesus and his interrogators from a distance -- but when asked directly whether he knows Jesus, will deny him 3 times.

This is how the disciples' story ends in Mark, with betrayal, failure, a lack of nerve and courage, and desertion. After 3 years of following Jesus, and being told by Jesus that this is how the story would end, what do they do? They run scared.

Now it's Friday, and Jesus is before Pilate. The crowds are relentless, shouting all sorts of obscenities, and demanding Jesus' crucifixion. Pilate, knowing full well Jesus was there on false charges, releases Barabbas – *a known murderer* – instead of Jesus because he wanted to satisfy the crowds.

Oh, but we're not done with this sorry tale of human behavior at its worst quite yet. Because at the crucifixion the crowds mock Jesus, spit on him, barter for his clothes, and even the bandits who are hanging on crosses next to him taunt him. Ironically, the only people who show any sort of remorse are a Roman centurion and Joseph of Arimathea, both of whom are members of groups that had sentenced Jesus to death.

That gets us to Easter morning, where our story for today opened.

The women are at the tomb. They're there with their spices to anoint Jesus' body and give him a proper burial. Perhaps now we'll have some reason to hope that Jesus will be well served by his followers.

Maybe someone is finally going to do the right thing, right?

Unfortunately that's not the case. Even the women fail at their duties. Like the disciples before them, they run off in fear after hearing the angel's pronouncement. And they say nothing to anyone because they are afraid.

I don't know about you, but ending the gospel on such a resounding note of failure upsets me. And it apparently upset a bunch of monks nearly 2000 years ago, too, because they tacked onto Mark's gospel 12 more verses in order to make it more palatable.

But any scholar worth his or her degree knows that Mark intended to end it at verse 8 – with his “followers” running scared, a man dressed in white, and a promise.

That's all. That's it. Nothing more, nothing less.

But why? Why would Mark end his story like that?

Well, the answer is really quite simple, though its execution is harder.

You see, ancient stories were intended to make people act or believe or change their behavior, not just entertain people with a suitable conclusion. Mark didn't write his Gospel just to give us a good story. He wrote it to move us to action. If the women don't carry the message forward, is there anyone who can? If the disciples can't be counted on, who can?

Is there anyone else who has heard Jesus' preaching, seen his healings, watched his crucifixion and burial, and listened to the incredible announcement of his resurrection? Is there?

Well, you have. And I have.

Could it be that we're the ones who are called to go and proclaim the wondrous news that Christ is risen, he is risen indeed.

Or will we choose to act like all the others, and flee the scene when the chips are down?

Will it be Christ is risen, he is risen indeed!

Or will it be, Christ is risen, he is risen . . .indeed? Question mark?

I'll admit there are days when I live my life like there's a question mark at the end of the story, but I'm not proud of it. There are days when I listen to the news, and say "Well, what did you expect?" Another scandal; another death; another denial; another shooting – will it be a black man or a mass shooting? Will another officer be killed in the line of duty? Some days, those are the only questions I have.

And I'm not proud of it. Not proud at all.

But then there are days when I think no, no no NO!

This is not how the world is supposed to be. This is not the end of the story. The end of the story ended with a promise – A PROMISE – "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

In the resurrection we have God's promise that life is stronger than death, that love is greater than hate, that mercy overcomes judgment, and that all the sufferings and difficulties of this life are transient – real and palpable and sometimes painful, for sure, but they do not have the last word. Instead, the life changing message that the God who created us loves us and loves this world – that has the last word. And by God that word demands that we go and do something with it so that the story doesn't end in failure.

We are the ones to finish the story.

We are the writers of its ending.

We are the ones called to roll away the stone.

"Go and tell his disciples," the young man said. Who are his disciples? Peter, James, John and Andrew . . .yes – but also you and me. We are disciples, too. Where is Galilee? North of Jerusalem . . .yes – but also here. And there. Galilee is Minneapolis and Washington DC; Atlanta, and Boulder and Fort Wayne.

And going to Galilee means going to the margins where Jesus ministered. Going to Galilee means feeding the hungry, driving out the demons that torment people, preaching words of hope to the broken-hearted, healing those in distress, and breaking down the barriers that separate people.

If we're going to go Galilee, we're promising to proclaim the resurrection with our lips, our hands, and our feet. By going to Galilee, we're promising to take the resurrection seriously by making a way for others to be resurrected of their current and certain deaths. If we're going to go to Galilee, our lives better show it. Because the resurrection means nothing if it has little to do with how we live.

Friends, the resurrection was never the end of the story. It's only the beginning. It's our story to keep living out. The late Clarence Jordan, who was instrumental in founding Habitat for Humanity, once wrote:

"The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church." I am less concerned about what people say they believe happened 2,000 years ago as I am with whether we are living as if the resurrection matters. The question is "How are we partnering with God today in transforming despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life?" What are we doing about that?

We all know it has been a horrific 12 months; there has been too much death and destruction. But we cannot allow it to have the last word and believe me, you know as well as I do that there are always other storytellers on the loose. But on Easter Jesus was raised, and said loudly and clearly to those other storytellers: no! You will not have the last word.

Easter is God's great re-writing of all human history, and we're called to take up our pens with our whole selves and be a part of the re-write so that there is a better ending for everyone. And we need the re-write.

Mark's gospel may end with the men too afraid to come, and the women leaving terrified but one thing they knew: the world was not the same anymore. It was a new world. They just didn't know what to do with it yet. "He has been raised. He

isn't here. Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee."

So go. Tell. And do.

Because Christ is risen – He is risen indeed!

Amen.

### **Mark 16:-8**

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. 3 They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) 5 Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. 6 But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.[\[a\]](#) He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. 7 Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." 8 Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.[\[b\]](#)