

What Do You Think?
Mark 16:1-8
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
June 27, 2010
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When is an ending not an ending?

The Gospel of Mark is puzzling, to say the least. It's confusing, at best. Here we are, coming to the end of our year-long study of the Gospel of Mark, what so far as we know is the first attempt at a written record of the life of Jesus, and it ends in the middle of a sentence. Mark's account of the life of Jesus ends with the word "for" – in Greek, it's γαρ. "They didn't say anything to anyone, they were afraid for..." Who ends a story with the word "for"? It's crazy talk, that's what that is. It can't be right.

And for centuries, people agreed with my assessment. Obviously, there's a problem. So if you look in your pew Bibles, you'll see that the gospel of Mark goes all the way to verse 20. But there's a footnote saying that "most ancient authorities conclude the Gospel at the end of verse 8." People have argued for centuries – what happened here? Did the original ending get lost? You have all had old books laying around the house and pages just sort of fall out after a while...Is that the story? Or did Mark somehow mean to walk out on the story so abruptly?

Most recent scholars, and your pastor, believe that Mark knew exactly what he was doing – and he cut the story short. After all, if you remember the beginning of the Gospel, you'll recall that Jesus' entry was pretty abrupt – there's no infancy, no childhood – he just shows up. Well, here, he just leaves. It's a mystery.

What do we know? Well, last week, we read a pretty significant account of the death and burial of Jesus. We can know for sure that he was dead – the executioner, the women, even Pilate's personal intelligence officer all agree that Jesus had died. There was a corpse. And we know that he was buried. A leader of the council put him in his own tomb. The women followed and saw him buried. There are witnesses to these things.

And then, a few days later, the women go back to do things right – they had been too rushed, and perhaps too afraid, on Friday. So Sunday they stop by to visit the grave and take care of things. All of a sudden, things look a little different. The tomb is open. And there's a young man inside. Matthew tells us that he's an angel. Luke and John say that he had a friend with him. It doesn't seem to matter to Mark. The young man gives a message to the women.

Now I want you to pay attention here, because you're seeing something in the Gospel of Mark that you haven't seen before. All through the Gospel, the people who follow Jesus seem to bounce around in their ability to be faithful. They're anything but consistent. Sometimes they are able to hold onto the faith, other times they leave it. Even Peter denies Jesus. In the garden, everyone, including the young man we think was Mark, flees. But so far, there has been one group of people who have managed to do, more or less, what they are told: the women. No matter how much the other disciples screw things up, the faithful women seem to be there for Jesus. They don't always ask the right questions, as when the mother of James and John asked if they could sit next to Jesus in the kingdom – but they are consistent.

But what does this young man say to them? "Go, and tell the disciples..." And what do they do? "They fled...they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Finally, it comes to this. Even the women bail out. They can't get their heads around the idea of resurrection. It's just too crazy, even for them. Even for God. And so they run away, silent and scared.

In Mark's telling, the first Easter was characterized by confusion. By people running around in the half-light of dawn, sure that something has happened, but not sure what. Someone is lying – is it the Roman Guards, who are accusing the disciples of having stolen the body? Or is it the the disciples themselves? What's going on here?

Remember when we began this study, I mentioned that we think that Mark is the first Gospel to have been written. Think about that, and then think about the ways that the other Gospels end. Matthew has the angel I've already mentioned, and then Jesus himself is there. There's an incredible ending where the risen Christ

is worshipped by his disciples, and then he gives them their final orders, and then he is taken into heaven as they watch. And Luke, probably written about the same time as Matthew, ends with the risen Christ showing up on the road to Emmaus, spending quality time with his disciples, engaged in contemplative conversation and even having devotions over dinner with them, for crying out loud. John, writing even later, can't say enough about the resurrection. We see the empty grave clothes; we walk around inside the empty tomb. John shows us Jesus and Mary in the garden, Thomas and Jesus meeting in the upper room; Jesus is having lunch with Peter and the fellas on the beach...

But Mark? In Mark, we've got "a young man" – was he an angel? Maybe? – who says, "Yes, I know, you're looking for Jesus. Well, good news. He's not dead anymore. He's been raised."

That's it, Mark? That's the best you've got? An unidentified male of indeterminate ethnicity telling us that Jesus has been raised? Where's Jesus? Where's the Lord?

Mark doesn't show us the risen Christ – he shows us a witness telling us that Jesus is risen...and then he says, "And what do you think? Can you believe this?"

And Mark doesn't seem particularly eager to convince us himself...because as we've said, the women were afraid. Our last hope for faithful witness has apparently failed. They are told to go and tell people, and Mark says that they didn't say anything.

But of course, eventually, they did, right? I mean, if the only witnesses never said anything, then we'd never know anything about the resurrection, right? Obviously, eventually, they said something to someone. Mark just stops telling his story before the women start telling theirs. Because Mark *knew* the story of the resurrection. Mark's community in Rome knew the story of the resurrection.

So that means – follow me here – that somehow, sometime, somewhere, after the women failed to tell, they eventually came around and said something. They testified. In spite of their fear, in spite of their confusion, the first witnesses to the resurrection were

able to come through and point to the best thing that has ever happened.

And that best thing was great news for Mark's community. Because they were in fear. They were unsure what was going to happen to them. They were afraid of what their faith might cost them...and they, no less than the women, were able to hear the voice of a witness who said, "He has been raised from the dead. Go and tell people about it. And better yet, he is going before you. You will see him – just like he promised."

Mark's readers didn't have the luxury of walking around inside the empty tomb, or having dinner with Jesus, or getting all poetic about the good news of resurrection. They were being eaten alive by wild animals or being burnt by the government as they tried to hold onto their faith. And they hear the promise that Jesus will be ahead of them? That they will see him? Isn't that good news?

And if they fail to witness – if they slip up – there's hope for them, just like all the other followers of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. This ending is great news for Mark's friends.

And to be honest, it's my favorite Easter story, too. The other Gospels all end with the disciples having figured it out, at least a little bit. Look at Matthew, John, or Luke, and you'll see that the disciples have found the resurrected Jesus, they have begun to understand something of what resurrection is about. They've gotten it together, at least a bit.

My life is not usually like that. I can't usually identify with Jesus' disciple, Thomas, who touches Jesus' hands and side and falls down crying, "My Lord and my God!" I mean, it looks swell in the painting and everything, but I've never touched him.

But Mark's ending? Grief? Fear? Amazement? I mean, I spend half my life asking, "What am I going to do NOW?" Disciples that are running around scared and confused and unsure? These are guys that I can relate to!

Today, we welcome Pastor Melissa to this ministry. We lay hands on Aviva and baptize her and announce her membership in the family of faith. We are preparing to say farewell to each other as the

Carvers get ready for a season of Sabbatical. I don't know about you, but this time away that seemed so inviting six months ago scares me now. What am I going to do when I'm NOT Pastor Dave? Who will I be?

The Good News from Mark is that we don't have to have all the answers. We move forward in the sure and certain knowledge that we don't have much sure and certain knowledge...only that he is going ahead of us. In the confused and scary places. In the celebratory places. And we will see him. And that will be enough.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.