

Mark 16:1-8

It's not a great ending, so I can understand the urge to fix it. The ending to Mark's Gospel, I mean. You know as I do that almost all scholars believe Mark ends at 16:8a, where the Easter reading traditionally breaks off. While most of our Bibles contain two more endings, they were most likely added later, perhaps centuries later, as none of the earliest manuscripts contain them.

But I can understand why they were added. Because while Mark starts out in the usual fashion -- it's early Sunday morning, it's still dark, the women are going to the tomb to tend Jesus body, the stone is rolled away, they hear word that Jesus has been raised, they're sent back to tell -- he seems to botch the ending completely: "So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Do you see what I mean? First, it's the only resurrection story in the Bible where Jesus never actually makes an appearance. That's a problem!

Second, the two women disciples utterly fail. Which seems a little surprising. After all, the young man in white has met them with the classic greeting that always signals good news: "Do not be afraid." If that sounds familiar, it should. Throughout the Bible -- from the prophets of old to Gabriel greeting Mary -- every time someone starts a speech with "Do not be afraid," you know what's coming is going to be good news. So the young man greets Mary with the signal that what's coming is good news and then offers the best news these women could have

imagined: "Jesus, who was crucified, has been raised. Here is not here." Then he gives them clear and simple instructions: "Go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee ... just as he told you." And yet after all this they fail -- miserably -- fleeing the tomb and saying absolutely nothing to anyone.

And so there you have it: a resurrection scene without Jesus that ends in failure. Looked at this way, I can totally understand how a well-intentioned monk, after reading this ending in dismay, suddenly thinks, "I can fix that!" and adds a short, sweet ending, that while it sounds like nothing else in Mark, at least brings things to a better end.

So what gives with Mark? To be honest, for the longest time I thought that he just wasn't very good with endings. After all, he's not that good with beginnings, either. You know what I mean? Matthew, after all, gives us this long genealogy, tracing Jesus' birth back to Abraham. Luke tells this tender story of Mary, shepherds, and angels. And John offers this profound theological hymn to the Word. And then there's Mark: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). That's it. No drama, no poetry, no verbs even, just thirteen little words that sound more like a title than an introduction and then he's off to the races with John the Baptist.

So for a long time I figured Mark was great with the middle but not too hot with beginnings and endings. Until one day, (in our Gospel of Mark class at Seminary, actually,) that maybe I shouldn't be too surprised about his ending after all. Because this ending actually fits into a two-part pattern that permeates the whole of Mark's account. The first part goes like this: the people

who should know what's going on, like the disciples, don't. Jesus predicts his passion three different times and yet they still don't understand, are surprised by what happens, and don't believe what he said. Again and again, the disciples disappoint, and so perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that these women who, let's remember, had the courage to stay with Jesus to the end and then ventured to his tomb to tend him, nevertheless fail like the other disciples.

The second part of the pattern goes like this: the people who do realize who Jesus is can't be trusted to tell. Take, for instance, the demon who possesses a young man at Garazene. He recognizes Jesus, asking, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?" (Mark 5:7). The demon knows who Jesus is, but can you count on a demon for a testimony?! Probably not. And then there's the Roman centurion, who immediately after watching Jesus dies states, "Truly, this man was God's son" (Mark 15:39). But can you count on a Roman centurion for a testimony?

So there we are. All the people who should know, don't. And those who do, can't be counted on. So it appears we're in a bind. Except ... except there's one other person who has seen and heard everything Jesus has said and done. One other who heard Jesus' predictions and then watched as they came true. One other who listened to the amazing news at the empty tomb and heard the order to go and tell. Do you know who that other person is? It's you. And me. And all the readers of Mark's gospel, including all those who have come to church this Sunday to hear the good news of Jesus' resurrection.

Mark writes this open-ended gospel that threatens to end in failure, you see, precisely to place the burden of responsibility for telling the good news squarely on our shoulders. Mark isn't terrible at endings, it turns out, he's brilliant, and by ending his account in this way, he invites us into the story, to pick up where these women left off and, go and tell that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised, and is going ahead to meet us, just as he promised.

Well, once we see that Mark's better at endings than we thought, it seems worthwhile to look again at that beginning. And that's where things get really interesting, as you realize that when Mark says, "This is the beginning of the good news," he doesn't mean just this one verse, Mark 1:1; **he's talking about his whole gospel.** All sixteen chapters, that is, are just the beginning of the good news **because the story doesn't end with Jesus' resurrection but continues, moving forward all the way up to our own day and time.**

So here's the thing, I think our life together is something like this, too. We're often tempted to fix "bad endings" -- that's understandable, even reasonable, but it's not always our call. Because we worship the God who meets us precisely at the point where things seem the worst, not merely to fix things, but to redeem them -- and us! -- turning what looks like an ending into a new beginning and taking what looks like a failure and offering it back to us an opportunity.

Can we say that this Easter Sunday? That God will meet us at the point of brokenness and not just be with us but also do something amazing? We may not always see it, may not always understand it, but God will be there. And can we proclaim that

this story doesn't end, not where Mark left off or any of the others, but continues into our own lives? And can we invite people into this story, now, to take up their parts and carry on with the witness to the crucified God? And can we tell people that we still live -- and love and struggle and die and hope -- by faith alone? That sometimes all we get is the word -- the difficult, challenging, yet hope and faith creating word -- that Jesus is risen, and even though we may find it hard to believe, yet when we come together each Sunday we will hear this Word and be drawn to faith, and pulled into the story, once again? What do you think? Can we say these things?

Or maybe I should ask, if we don't, who will?

Amen