

The Weirdly Real Ending of Mark

Mark 16: 1-20

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We have spent our one-hundred-fiftieth year as a congregation spending a year with Jesus, doing a year-long sermon series working our way through the gospel of Mark, and now we come to its ending, an ending so abrupt, so disturbing, so seemingly unfitting, that in the second century, they added another ending to make the story make more sense.

But the passage you heard this morning, those words are really how the gospel ends. The ending goes like this: Three women come to the tomb, and there they find it empty. Instead of finding Jesus' dead body, they find a man dressed in white who gives them this extraordinary information: "Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross, has raised up; he's here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now—on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You'll see him there, exactly as he said."

Well that part of the story, we are all familiar with. When we picture the Easter story, we picture this moment of revelation. But what do you remember next? Rushing to tell the good news, a grand celebration, eventually a chance for the disciples to see Jesus once again in his resurrected body? Sure that all happens in the other three gospels, but not this one. In this one, after getting the good news, it says that the women "got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone." The end.

Stunned, they said nothing to anyone? The end? Are you kidding me? If that's the end, how did we get two thousand years of Christian history? You can see why after just about a hundred years of Christianity, the folks reading this gospel and comparing it to the other three began to suspect that perhaps the original scroll it has been written down on had become frayed and damaged at the end. You can see how they came to suspect that there had been more lines to the story that had been lost. And so in the second century, they decided to tidy things up, and added eleven more verses, anything to erase that dreadfully anticlimactic ending in which the women are frightened rather than joyful, silent rather than ready to spread the good news. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone. It can't end there.

If you look in your Bibles at home, those extra verses 9-20 often get noted with a footnote, explaining that scholars know they were added much later, but many people don't notice the footnote. They buy the false ending where Jesus has a few important conversations with the disciples about who is saved and who is damned, and makes some comments about who can cast out demons and who can not, and right before ascending to heaven, tells the disciples to go out and baptize everybody, but all that was added on in the second century.

The real ending, the one that was written when the gospel stories were finally and for the first time written down, around the year 70, about thirty-seven years after the events actually happened, the real and earliest ending goes like this: "Stunned, the women said nothing to anyone." The end.

I like this ending. I love all the questions it leaves unanswered. I like Jesus better before he gives the marching orders to get everyone baptized so that they can be saved. I don't think he really said that. I don't think he was thinking about the future sacraments of the church in his resurrected days. I believe the other gospel stories of those resurrection days, when he showed up and asked his friends, "Do you have anything to eat?" That's more like it. Returning from the dead, he wanted to see and reassure the people he loved, and that happened days later.

I also like it that the women in this story don't have the answers. It makes sense to me that they would be afraid. We have two thousand years of church teaching and Easter services to make all this seem like good news. But to the women, it wouldn't necessarily be.

If the body was gone, their first thought would have probably been the most plausible explanation, that it had been stolen. They wouldn't have assumed the man in white was an angel, as we do now when we read it. They would have more likely assumed he was a grave robber, a hater of Jesus, a member of the wealthy religious establishment that hated Jesus, and hated his hoodie wearing followers. Why would they believe this stranger?

But let's say they did believe him. What then? That would also be a legitimate reason to be afraid. After Jesus' crucifixion, Peter betrayed him, and we can assume the rest of them may have as well. They probably scattered off into hiding. If Jesus has been raised, what mood was he going to be in. Would he be glad to see them or angry with them for their faithlessness? Would he be there with open arms or ready to bang some heads? That image of an angry Jesus seems weird to us because we've experienced the joy of Easter love, the promise of eternal life all wrapped up in an Easter basket with a chocolate bunny on top.

But the news that Jesus was still alive, was once again alive, after being killed, that could be scary news. No wonder the women were stunned and told no one. And the original writers of the gospel, the earliest gospel to be written down, many decades before the rest, had the wisdom to let that strange, unexpected ending be the ending. Stunned, the women told no one.

No heroics, no last minute instructions from Jesus to baptize everyone, just some frightened tongue-tied people. Three women who were obviously Congregationalists, obviously members of this church. They knew Jesus and loved him; they just sure as heck weren't going to tell anybody about it. Congregationalists to the core.

Jesus is risen. Ok, now let's go home and watch PBS. Heaven forbid we talk about it. That would be scary. Why is it scary to some people to proclaim the good news that Christ is risen? Well, one reason it is scary is that so many people do it badly, and we don't want to join them. Rather than making that sound like good news, it comes out as judgment. Christ has risen. So get on board or burn in hell. Well, if that's the good news, I'll take the bad news. Reminds me why one wise preacher said, "I like Jesus. I just don't like most of his friends."

So in the real ending, the women are afraid to talk about it. They get to be imperfect; they don't have to have all the answers. They get to be like us, uneasy, frightened, unsure of what to say. They have questions, doubts, reservations. And those get to have the last word.

Later generations add all the answers, put words in their mouths and into Jesus', but the amazing fact remains that the earliest ending of the earliest gospel ends with

mystery and silence. It is one reason why I love the gospel of Mark and wanted to study it together as a church in our one-hundredth-fiftieth year. It is the shortest, the simplest and the earliest one, the closest to the ground gospel, the no frills version. A year with Jesus, the condensed version.

So what did we learn about Jesus in this year? He cared about two things passionately. Healing. Healing of bodies, of minds and of spirits. In reading nothing but Mark all year long, we had to face the fact that Jesus was a bit of a one note johnny. One healing story after another. As a preacher there were times this year when I wanted to throw in the towel. Not another healing story, not another person with a disease interrupting Jesus just when he is about to say something important. Can't I dip into another part of the Bible for something else? One healing story after another. Jesus cared about people, about healing, about how they were doing in the most ordinary aspects of their lives.

But what else was revealed was a distinct personality for Jesus in the gospel of Mark. In this early gospel, Jesus was not nice. Mark's Jesus is a distinctly hot tempered guy. He asks sarcastic questions, he spends a lot of time angry, and even when he's healing people, you can feel his impatience. He is not nice. He is good, he is brave, he is compassionate and deeply feeling, but he would never pass the small talk test at a cocktail party in the suburbs.

After a year spent with Mark's Jesus can you imagine him standing on a back deck making chit chat at a neighborhood mixer? "So Jesus how long have you lived in the Western suburbs?" "You have turned my house into a den of thieves! You are a lazy dog. My betrayer has arrived." "Ok then, but you gotta love the school system out here, right?" To which Jesus responds, "It's going to be brother killing brother, father killing child, children killing parents. There's no telling who will hate you because of me." "Right, so Jesus are you a golfer?"

No wonder Mark ends with fear on the part of the women. They didn't know what he would do next. It is the church and the culture in cahoots that have domesticated Jesus and dressed him up in an Easter bonnet. It is scripture, and the serious intellectual study of scripture, that unbinds him from the pastel colored ribbons of a babified sentimental faith.

There is so much that is trivial and superficial in the culture in which we live, culture driven by the relentless obsession with the self, a never-ending stream of words about ourselves texted and tweeted into oblivion, generations who have never had a thought they did not press "send" on, a world in which our personal tastes and preferences are given divine status, and God reduced to personal preference in a made up your own religion kind of world. So many want to reduce Jesus to that, to the lowest common denominator, a wish granter, question answering, order barking genie who wants you to think about spring time.

Yet, that must always be held in tension with the old quip of the 19th century Anglican Dean William Inge: "Whoever marries the spirit of this age will find himself a widower in the next." If each age invents Jesus, he will shrink to the limitations of the age.

Left to our own devices, we will merely be left to all our own vices.

The Jesus of scripture is so much more interesting than anything we could invent for ourselves. There's the passionate Jesus who cared about justice, an angry Jesus who cared about the 99%, a critical Jesus who cared nothing for social status

or genealogy, a quick tempered Jesus who was impatient with hypocrites, a compassionate Jesus who couldn't stand to walk by a person in pain without trying to help, a resurrected Jesus who left us with more questions than answers, an articulate Jesus whose followers didn't know what to say and were allowed to end the story with their uncertainty, by a community that was perhaps more comfortable with mystery than we are.

This was my hope and vision for our church in its 150th year and our year with Jesus, that in the end we would simply get to know him better, as he was as he was described by the people who knew him earliest and knew him best. To get to know Jesus.

It is for that reason that church matters, that we willingly place ourselves and our questions into a tradition that is bigger than we are, a cloud of witnesses not 150 years old, but thousands and thousands, going back to the Jewish forebears and those who came before them, ending with the God who set all of creation in motion. It is here that in the middle we acknowledge, here that, no, it is not all about you.

In the spiritual but not religious shallows of American culture, we dare to dive into this sliver of truth called the church and dive deeply, committing to depth in a culture that says you can do it all yourself, committing to study scripture seriously in a culture that says, "Why not write your own cute little book?"

In the fundamentalist shallows of American Christianity, we dare to be a beacon of light to open-minded people of faith, getting to know Jesus as he really was by actually sticking with and studying a gospel rather than having him spoon fed to you. This is the depth I aspire to for our church for our next one hundred and fifty Easters. To be able to picture a real and complex Jesus when together we say, "Christ is risen." He is risen indeed.