

Endings

Mark 16:1-8

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A preacher friend of mine, who is also an accomplished writer, recently reminded me that with stories, endings always matter.¹ With that in mind, she stated that if Mark's version of the Easter story had been screen tested with a live audience, the director would have been sent back to the drawing board. After all, the way Mark leaves things in verse 8 doesn't exactly get us up on our feet, inspire us to clap our hands at home, or prompt us to break out and sing the Easter alleluias on our couches. Nothing about Mark's ending even slightly resembles a warm and fuzzy finish.

That is why if you keep reading past verse 8, you notice that a few sly copy editors actually inserted their own endings to Mark's version of the Easter story. Apparently, they just couldn't help themselves. They felt pressure to create a more palatable conclusion. As Rev. Dr. Brian Blount once wrote, "They added some good to Mark's rather ambiguous news."²

And yet, I rather appreciate where Mark left off because many of our lives are often filled with unclear or ambiguous endings, are they not? For example, some of us desperately want our loved ones to beat back the menace of cancer, so we cheer them on as they go through treatment after treatment, meet with specialist after specialist, deal with side-effect after side-effect. And sometimes, all those medical interventions do the job, and months or years are added to their lifespan.

But in other heartbreaking cases, the one with the cancer arrives at a conclusion that the treatment itself is worse than the damage done by the disease. So hospice is called in and everyone tries to shift their perspective to living just one day at a time, trying to get comfortable with not being sure what happens next, confused as to what or when the end will be. They just know it will. And comfort with that truth rarely arrives, especially if you are not the one with the disease. The ending feels unclear, ambiguous, exhausting.

Or perhaps the emotional stress of living for over a year in a pandemic has taken its toll on your marriage or another close relationship. It is not that something monumental happened to finally break the bond, but you look back over these never-ending Covid days and realize you've drifted apart. You don't take the time to speak of important things because you are too distracted by fighting over whose turn it is to do the dishes for the third time that day. After a year of being in the same space almost 24/7, you observe you feel more like a roommate than a partner, sharing logistics but not intimacy. "Is this the end of us?" you might wonder. "What will be next in our story? Do we still have a story?" Everything feels unclear, ambiguous, exhausting.

Those are just two examples. I am sure you have your own. For yes, like Mark's ending to the Easter story, many of our lives are filled with unclear or ambiguous endings. And much of the time, we do not like it—all messy and unfinished, difficult to pin down and to control.

The women headed to the tomb that day were not going to like it either. But when they first began the journey, that trinity of women logically assumed there was noth-

ing unclear or ambiguous about what had happened to Jesus on that Friday before. Nothing at all. No, they had followed him all along the way. They had heard or seen the whole thing. They had heard about the betrayal. They had listened to the stories of his suffering. They had watched with their own eyes as he was hoisted upon that ragged cross, his hands nailed, the crown of thorns thrust down onto his head. They listened as the passersby mocked him and taunted him. And finally, after three excruciating hours, they heard Jesus himself cry out a desperate prayer of God-forsakenness before he breathed his last.

And though the women's eyes were clouded with tears and their hearts were pierced with grief, they stood guard over his body, eventually following his corpse when Joseph of Arimathea took it and sealed it in the tomb. No, there was nothing unclear or ambiguous about what they saw happen to Jesus. He had been executed by the Roman state. His end had come.

In many ways, that meant their end had come too. For the women, for all his disciples, Jesus had been so much more than a friend or a teacher. He had been the living, breathing embodiment of what could be, God's promise made flesh. As Barbara Brown Taylor has preached, Jesus was "their best hope for a new kind of life on earth. [For] when Jesus was alive, it had been possible for them to imagine a world in which poor people were blessed, sick people were healed, and old people did not have to worry about who would care for them when they could no longer care for themselves. When Jesus spoke, [they] could imagine a world in which children led the way, lepers [leapt with joy from their healing], and people with nothing to eat in the middle of nowhere could find themselves at a picnic for five thousand, with twelve baskets to spare."³

Yes, when Jesus was alive, the women and the others who followed him could even imagine a time when a different kind of politics was practiced. For as philosopher John Caputo wrote, Jesus was always pushing "a politics of mercy and compassion, of lifting up the weakest and most defenseless people at home; a politics of welcoming the stranger and of loving one's enemies abroad...; a politics not of sovereignty or of top-down power, but one that builds from the bottom up..."⁴

Sidenote: Can you imagine if that were our kind of politics today? Our national life would be so radically different, disarmed by love. Yes, everything seemed possible when Jesus was alive. He always told them that in him, the reign of God had drawn near and sometimes it was so close the women felt like they could taste it.

But now it was over. It was all over. His life was over. What could have been was over. Their hope was over. Dead. Buried. Gone. The only thing to do now was to go and perform their religious duties and go back home to a life marked more by apathy than compassion, more cynicism than hope, more frustration than possibility. We just need to go and do what we need to do and get on with it, the women might have concluded.

Yet when they arrived at the tomb on that early morning, any conclusions they might have come to along the way quickly disappeared. And fear and ambiguity took their place. The stone was rolled away. And instead of a body resting on the slab, they saw some messenger dressed in white. And that stranger had the nerve to tell them they did not need to be afraid, and yet the Lord was no longer there. He had been raised and he had moved on, the stranger declared, no, not to heaven—resurrection is not just about what happens after death. The risen Jesus had gone to Galilee, to

the place his ministry had begun, to the place of busy, messy, complicated, unclear, ambiguous life. They would see him there, the stranger stated, “So go tell the disciples and Peter that it is not over.”

But here is where the story gets even stranger, even more complicated, even more ambiguous and unclear. Mark purposefully ends his Gospel in a very unfinished way. I realize our translation 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.” And that’s fine. That is an unsatisfying ending in its own way, one that might get the director sent back to the drawing board.

But when we look only at Mark’s struggling Greek and translate the words without smoothing them out, here is what we actually find: “they said nothing to anyone”; it reads, “*They were scared, you see, for...*”⁵ And that is how it ends. It ends with the phrase “*they were scared, you see, for...*” As Taylor asks: “They were scared for what?! Mark doesn’t say, but [I guess] he thinks we [know].” Mark thinks we know in our gut why they would be scared. Do we?

What about this: *They were scared, you see*, for even if Jesus’ ending came far too soon for their liking, even if their journey as his followers had screeched to a halt, even if his death meant their hopes and dreams died too, the reality was that if he stayed in that tomb, their lives became simpler again. If Jesus is dead and stays in that tomb, then they can just go back to business as usual. They don’t have to pay attention to the poor and those without housing. They don’t have to wrestle with hard things like racism or the rise in hate crimes and white supremacist groups.

If Jesus is dead and *stays* in that tomb, then they can keep their money and energy for themselves without constantly wondering how they could contribute to the *common* good and not just to their own good. If Jesus is dead and stays in that tomb, then it is back into the rat race without a care in the world about becoming one of the rats. *They were scared, you see*, but also a little relieved. For if Jesus is dead and stays in that tomb, then they are off the hook of living as disciples.

Yet, if this stranger is right, if Jesus is alive like he told them he would be, if he has actually been raised like he promised would happen, if he has indeed gone back to the place where his ministry started and was again set loose into their world, then ... *well how do you finish that sentence?*

If the power of the risen Jesus is still loose in our world, then that means *our* stories are nowhere near done. That means that the justice of God is stronger and more powerful than the injustice of Rome. That means that we cannot escape the call and the demand that we learn how to love our neighbor, that we learn how to love ourselves.

If the power of the risen Jesus is still loose in our world, that means we must double-down on seeing our politics through the lens of the Gospel which compels us to put Jesus’ kind of compassion-driven and justice-insisting politics into practice, that we work on disarming one another with tough, merciful, resilient love.

If Jesus is alive, like he told us he would be, if he was actually raised by the power of the living God like he promised would happen, if the risen Jesus is still loose in our world, then that means that, as the *Wall Street Journal* wrote a few years ago, we live with the Easter Effect.⁶ And those who are shaped by the Easter Effect “[are] people who [know] how history [is] going to turn out. Because of that, [we can] live

differently... The Easter Effect impel[s] [us] to bring a new standard of equality into the world.”

It’s why we continually try to live out a faith that is wildly inclusive, with an open-arm embrace of all people—just as they are—beloved and claimed, bound and determined to work against any power that would try to keep us apart, that would try to divide this family of faith that God, God’s self, has called together.

See, if Jesus is alive, like he told us he would be, if he was actually raised by the power of the living God like he promised would happen, if the risen Jesus is still at loose in our world, then that also means that though our unclear and ambiguous endings are still going to feel both unclear and ambiguous, we can now see them in Easter’s light. And when we do that, we realize we are not alone in moving through them, in wrestling with them, in just enduring them, for Jesus lived that kind of ending himself and has infused all of it with his holy presence, reminding us we are never alone.

Yes, the women were scared, you see, for God’s resurrection promise meant they would never get back to normal again. And that was terrifying at first. But as they ran from that tomb, perhaps choosing along the way to just skip telling the male disciples and go on to Galilee instead, that initial fear they felt soon gave way to inexplicable energy, renewed imagination, bubbling joy, and breathtaking love.

For if the risen Jesus was indeed loose in their world, in our world, well, then death had lost its sting. Normal is never going to be the old normal again. Even ambiguous and unclear endings can sparkle a bit. For the Lord had risen. He had risen indeed.

Notes

1 The wonderful and brilliant Rev. Dr. Heather Shortlidge. Part of a paper and Well discussion in 2015 here in Chicago.

2 Brian Blount, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices* (Louisville: WJKP, 2003), 257.

3 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Always a Guest* (Louisville: WJKP, 2020), 165-166.

4 John Caputo, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/opinion/2015/04/01/jesus-radical-politics/txdjkQSMn3BWPBgciEbgZP/story.html>.

5 Taylor.

6 *Wall Street Journal*, March 30, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-easter-effect-and-how-it-changed-the-world-1522418701>.