

Unfinished – A Sermon For Easter

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“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.” Mark 16: 1-8 (NRSV)

At the beginning of Ron Rash’s novel *Above the Waterfall*, the county sheriff Les is approaching his retirement day, just a few weeks away. Les might have hoped his last weeks on the job would be routine and uncomplicated, but instead he finds himself dealing with an escalating conflict between the owner of a local fishing resort and a cantankerous elderly neighbor suspected of poaching. Other unfinished business lurks, too, especially out in the backwoods hollers, where crystal *methamphetamine* labs have become as numerous as the moonshine stills of another era. Les has seen the effects of crystal meth—the skin sores, the rotting teeth, the paranoia, and the dissolute social fabric. After one particularly disturbing meth bust that makes him almost physically ill—aware, as he is, that the world he inhabits is getting darker and more difficult—Les gets into his squad car and sits behind the wheel, when all of a sudden he has a flashback to his childhood.

I had been bad to sleepwalk as a kid. There were times, for some reason always in the summer, I’d make my way out of the house and end up in the yard. Folks back then, at least country folks, didn’t see the need for a porch bulb burning all night. I’d open my eyes and there’d be nothing but darkness, like the world had slipped its leash and run away, taking everything with it except me. Then I’d hear a whip-poor-will or a jar fly, or feel the dew dampening my feet, or I’d look up and find the stars tacked to the sky where they always were, only the moon roaming.

I turned onto the main road and drove back toward town, all the while remembering what it had felt like when the world you knew had up and vanished, and you needed to find something to bring that world back, and you weren’t sure you could.¹

The odd ending of Mark’s Gospel, all cloaked in fear and darkness and uncertainty, evokes something of the same ethos. Mark says the women who visited the tomb were startled by the news they encountered there, perhaps feeling as though the world they knew and had begun to count on “had up and vanished,” leaving them looking for anything familiar—some sign from heaven to reorient them.

As readers of Mark, we may long for an ending that strikes a major chord, that ties all the loose ends together and sends us forth with confidence and assurance, full of alleluias. But there is no major chord at the end of Mark. If Mark truly concluded his record of the Gospel of Jesus Christ at verse 8 as the scholarly consensus contends, we are left in an unfinished fog.

The final verses of Mark’s Gospel are reminiscent of some of the well-known musical compositions that were never completed—left unfinished because the composer either ran out of inspiration or died before reaching the conclusion. As with

the gospel, over time other composers have attempted to finish, say, Franz Schubert's *Symphony No. 8 in B minor*, more commonly called *The Unfinished Symphony*, or J.S. Bach's *The Art of the Fugue*, or Gustav Mahler's unfinished *Symphony No. 10*. Some of the attempts have been interesting, but none of them were completely satisfying because, well, they weren't the real deal. Indeed, music critics seem to agree that the most memorable performances of unfinished works have been those in which the orchestra or solo performer simply stopped playing where the composer stopped writing. Such endings were almost always jarring, but they always had the ring of authenticity to them.

I feel the same way about the ending of Mark's Gospel. Scholars largely agree that Mark ended his gospel, for whatever reason, right there at verse 8, and the remaining eleven verses are but unsatisfactory later attempts to give the Gospel a more polished ending. There is no question that verse 8 seems unfinished. A young man in a white robe has just told the women that Jesus is not in the tomb, that he has been raised, and that he has gone before them to Galilee—back to their hometowns and their ordinary lives—and there they will see him. He tells them to go and spread the news to the others. But in Mark's ending, the women run away, for fear and amazement has seized them, and they say nothing to anyone, because they are afraid. It is a jarring end to the story, and we may not know what to do with the lack of resolution. Tom Long notes,

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, the late Donald Juel tells the story of one of his students who had memorized the whole of Mark in order to do a dramatic, Broadway-style reading before a live audience. After careful study, the student had decided to go with the scholarly consensus regarding the ending. At his first performance, however, after he spoke that ambiguous last verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other, the audience waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for a proper ending. Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, "Amen!" and made his exit. The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively. Upon reflection, though, the student realized that by providing the audience a satisfying conclusion, his "Amen!" had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the text. So, at the next performance, when he reached the final verse, he simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence. "The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious," said Juel, "and as people exited...the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the non-ending."²

"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." Of course, that non-ending is not really the last word. We know it's not the way the Easter story ended...in the end. If it had truly ended there, we wouldn't be here surrounded by lilies on this bright Easter morning. But I wonder if perhaps that was not Mark's intention...that others would finish the story he left unfinished. Back in the very first verse of his Gospel, Mark said that what he was presenting was "the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). Quite possibly, verse 8 of chapter 16 was the end of *that beginning*...and the rest of the story was yet to be told. It would be up to

the disciples, and in the long run up to us, to decide how the story ends, even if we know that ultimately the author of this great love story is God.

Remember that Mark's Gospel was written not for the first disciples nor for us, but more likely for the church in Rome that Mark knew around 70 C.E., when telling the good news meant risking one's life, and it wasn't clear at all how the Christian story might end. A pastor friend says, "In the midst of war and rumors of war, [those early Christians] *could not know* how their life or death would play out, how their fidelity or betrayal would play out, how the future or dissolution of the Christian community would play out...any more than we know for ourselves."

Which is why [said Don Juel] the ending of Mark is not an ending at all: it is "the beginning of the good news," the beginning of the Lord's appearances, the beginning of the *kerygma*, the beginning of hope that will not die—not because of our faithfulness, the strongest of which fails in the end—but because of the power of God that cannot be domesticated or buried or fled or contained. We know [that is true] from the epilogue—the epilogue...of our own presence here.³

Decades ago I learned from studying Spanish, and later from Latin and Greek, that other languages have something known as an imperfect tense. Present tense we English speakers understand. What other languages call the aorist we know as past tense. But English lacks an imperfect tense to describe action that has begun and is continuing. And that is a shame, because the Easter liturgy is truly written in imperfect tense—call it "Easter imperfect" if you will—for it tells the ongoing story of how the message of the empty tomb is being lived out in the lives of those who believe. That is the tense that we live in these days, and part of our task is to help finish the story.

We resist that unfinished quality of Easter in our lives, longing, as is natural, for completion and closure. I think of the people with whom I have had conversations in recent months and the glimpses I got of such Easter imperfect in them. There is that young couple I married, who wrote me a decade later to say they had been slogging desperately through the husband's chemotherapy searching for a cure, only to be battered by a compounding progression of bad news. I am in touch with another young couple, soon to be married, who are anguishing over the tension they are experiencing as one of them now discerns a call to serve in a profession that was not previously part of either of their plans. I had lunch with a middle-aged man whose expertise as a scientist has always been valued and wanted, but who finds himself now suddenly adrift and unemployed and full of anxiety following an unexpected force reduction in his workplace. I spoke one afternoon with a young confirmand, eager and anxious all at the same time about the step she is getting ready to take and where it might lead her if she takes her vows seriously. In countless ways on countless days, people have spoken to me in a kind of Easter imperfect tense, voicing their hope in God's good news, but struggling with its unfinished quality and all the questions that remain.

One question that keeps coming back to me is this: How do we live into the unfinished ending, the unfinished Easter, of Mark's Gospel? Christine Chakoian says it is important to realize that the Easter story is a story of calling, open-ended and ongoing. It is the call that came first to the women at the empty tomb, scaring them half to death. It is a call that comes also to us, even all these years later, a call to

go and tell that the tomb is empty, that the power of death has been broken, and that Jesus is out there ahead of us in Galilee, that is, out there where we live, where we go to school, where we make a living, where we struggle to be faithful. He is there. Go and tell. She says:

We don't have any more control over [this call] than the women who first heard it and weren't sure they wanted to deal with it either. If we'd really rather identify with the courageous and loyal pillars of faith, it's really too bad, because these are the best Mark has to offer. And maybe there's grace in being called [along] with those who fail...and maybe it doesn't even matter, because there is work to be done, and this ongoing, [unfinished] call hangs in the air, awaiting a response from anyone who hears. And we, of course, are the ones who hear it now.⁴

What do we hear? That death no longer contains him. That life, not death, has had the final word. That the power of God cannot be domesticated or buried or fled or contained. That he goes before us, and if we seek him, he will meet us there. In light of that good news, our job, Brian Blount contends, is to finish the story. The idea sounds outrageous, I know...that we could dare to finish this story that God has begun; after all, it is *God's* story. But Blount is right in saying that it is part of God's pattern to enlist human agents to enact the divine cause. He says,

God breaks in at [Jesus'] baptism, but then solicits Jesus to act. God breaks through at the transfiguration, speaks to the disciples, but steps away and waits for them to respond. God... whispers a word of instruction to the three women, [knowing all the while] that they'll be too frightened to deliver it. At the end, and beyond the end, when Jesus goes off searching for human representation in Galilee, God establishes yet again the desire to make and use human disciples. [God keeps looking for people who are] willing and able to overcome their fear of this good news and thereby finish the story...Jesus started. That is why Mark writes this Jesus story in the first place: to let would-be disciples know that God is searching for them, to finish it.⁵

That you and I are here on this glad morning, celebrating Christ's resurrection and hearing this story from Mark, is testimony to the faithfulness of God on the one hand and to the faithful efforts of Christians on the other—of men and women who have responded to God's call in all the centuries since that day the stone was rolled back and Christ left his tomb behind and headed for Galilee in search of human help. We are here because of all those who have gone before us, seeking in their time and their place to finish the story Jesus started, not by bringing it to closure—that is God's work!—but by remaining open to God's call in their lives and following Jesus where he led them to go rather than just sleepwalking into the darkness.

And that is how we finish Mark's story, too—by our willingness to meet Christ in the Galilees of our own lives and to continue the ministry he began, by standing boldly in the face of death, speaking good news to the poor, feeding the hungry, binding up the brokenhearted, breaking down the dividing walls of hostility, and doing

all those things we learned from this One who still goes before us and who calls us still — this One whom death could not constrain. We believe this day what we say to one another: “The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed.”

That’s still the good news of this day, even in Mark’s telling of it. It’s more unsettling than satisfying in some ways, more challenging than cheerful, more muted than a satisfying major chord. But maybe that’s how Mark meant it to be. Perhaps he intended to unsettle us so that we would get up and go despite our fears, despite our reservations. In that sense, it’s not the end of the story. It is, in fact, our story’s beginning. The Christ is still searching for others to help compose the ending. We won’t finish the story, I reckon, not completely, which is in and of itself a grace. But the ending we will write, if our faith allows, may just have the ring of authenticity. By God’s grace, it may.

Notes

1 Ron Rash, *Above the Waterfall* (New York, Harper Collins, 2015), 73.

2 Thomas G. Long, “Dangling Gospel (Mark 16:1-8),” *Christian Century*, 123:7 (April 4, 2006): 19.

3 Donald Juel, *A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1994), as cited by Christine Chakoian, unpublished paper, 2003.

4 Chakoian, 2003.

5 Brian K. Blount, “Is the Joke on Us?” in *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel*, Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller, eds. (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 28.