

The Beginning

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
April 4, 2021

Easter Sunday – Year B

Mark 16:1-8



Today's is an Easter story fit for 2021. Like 2021, it is a story about a rumor of newness, cloaked in mystery, unfinished, but saturated with hope. And like 2021, it is a story that forces us to look ahead while at the same time remembering what came before, what came in the beginning.

Last week, we had a going-away party for our exceptional Bookkeeper, Sarah Cochran. Initially it was supposed to be outside, but because of the rain, we moved indoors to Wilson Hall with appropriate distancing. Because we were eating lunch, we took off our masks at our tables to eat. Looking around, I was overcome with a strange feeling. There we were, the full staff and some volunteers, eating inside together, and we could see each other's faces. I think I looked over at Linzi and said how wonderful it was to see her face not through a screen.

It was suddenly a little more like it was before. I suspect we will for a while mark time with a new "BC," Before COVID. And it felt like, sitting there, we were on the verge of after. Not fully after, of course. There is no doubt much more ground to cover, but it feels like, on this Easter Sunday, like we are on the verge of newness.

And that's why Mark's Easter story is so appropriate today. It is shrouded in mystery and it inspires both amazement and terror. It also forces those of us on this side of the empty tomb to remember what came before, starting at the very beginning.

The oldest and most reliable manuscripts we have of Mark's Gospel end as we did today, "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The literal translation of the Greek reads, "They said nothing to anyone; afraid they were for."

Whenever I read a book, I measure its quality by the ending. I remember old writing teachers who told us to write with the ending in mind. So, I love a book that has a satisfying ending, where conflicts resolve and characters reach fulfillment and all the pieces come together nicely into a full literary picture. When I read a book like that, I

close it with finality, linger over the back flap, writing in my mind one of the blurbs I see on it, "This is a good and satisfying book, worthy of your time, Dear Reader."

However, there are some books that end in such a way that I don't close them with a satisfied, "That was a good book," but stare at the words and wonder, "Wait...what?" Inevitably, the ending sends me thumbing back through the book, looking for clues that give away that ending, maybe something I missed along the way, some pattern I didn't spot. On rare occasions, the ending is so mysterious that I go back to the beginning and read it again.

Mark's ending is like that, and in fact the early church did go back through it, looking for patterns or things that they may have missed. Some of the attempts to fill in those blanks can be seen in our Bibles. They tried to clean up the ending based on what they read both in Mark and in the other gospels, and two of those attempts, those alternate endings, are included in our Bible. They seemed to think that maybe Mark didn't want to end his Gospel that way, maybe he got sick or died, maybe he was captured, maybe a terminal case of writer's block. Anything but this dangling "for," "They said nothing to anyone, afraid they were for..."

But what if Mark *did* intend to end his Gospel in exactly this way, as most scholars seem to think? What then? Then if you go back looking for clues you might focus on the unnamed woman who, during Holy Week, entered the house where Jesus was and poured an expensive bottle of perfume on his head. Jesus himself gives up the plot line. "She has anointed my body for burial," he says, and then says further, "Wherever the gospel is preached what she has done will be told in memory of her." In this gospel where no one gets it, not Peter or James or John or any of the disciples, for Jesus to say this about an unnamed woman is a big flashing light of a clue.

And sure enough, three women are heading to the tomb to do what? Anoint his body for burial. The astute reader remembers that this has already been done by the mystery woman, and just as you are wondering why they are there to do what has already been done, you see along with them the stone rolled away and the young man saying the unthinkable. "He is not here. He has risen. He has gone before you into Galilee. Now go and tell the disciples he will meet them there."

And then that ending, the fleeing in terror and amazement, saying "nothing to anyone, afraid they were for..."

I'm afraid that I have been guilty, along with many other readers of Mark, of looking back for clues to this ending, but not quite back far enough. I think the only way you understand this ending is to recognize it not as an ending, but the beginning.

You've got to go back to the very first verse of this Gospel. He doesn't say, "Once upon a time." He doesn't say, "Grace to you, and peace." He doesn't start with a birth or a genealogy. He says, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." He doesn't mean the beginning of my account of the gospel, I believe. I think he means to say that his account, right up to the ending, is the *beginning* of the good news, and you, Dear Reader, are still inhabiting this unfinished story.

We still inhabit the story. We stand with the women at the empty tomb, looking behind and looking ahead. Whether you are looking back to Before COVID, or before the diagnosis, before the divorce, before the accident, before the birth, before the death, before the move, before college - the before can loom large. Everything that happens after that before is colored by it. We have experienced over the past twelve months a collective event that will mark our lives going forward in the same way they were marked by war or terrorist attacks or economic catastrophes.

And the gospel is this – all of those “befores” are taken up into a larger beginning, narrated for us by our brother Mark, the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And we stand today with those three women not at the end, but at the beginning of our journey to Galilee, where we will see him, just as he promised.

If Mark's story has done its job, it has invited us to faith, to trust in the one who goes before us, trust that his message of God's love has triumphed over hate, and that we have been given eyes to see God's work in the world in Christ.

And this, in the end, is the gift of this gospel and of the gospel, from the beginning until the end of the beginning – hope. Esau McCaulley wrote recently in the New York Times, “The women did not go to the tomb looking for hope. They were searching for a place to grieve. They wanted to be left alone in despair. The terrifying prospect of Easter is that God called these women to return to the same world that crucified Jesus with a very dangerous gift: hope in the power of God, the unending reservoir of forgiveness and an abundance of love.”

As we leave quarantine, we return to a world “desperately in need of healing.” We return, in other words, to Galilee. Jesus is there, you know, inviting us to begin again. Let us follow him with deep hope. He is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.