

“THE EASTER ADVENTURE”

Mark 16:1-8

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Wait a minute! Where’s the rest of the story? It can’t end with confusion, terror, running away, silence! Can it? Yet that’s where Mark’s gospel leaves the story. It feels... unfinished, not the triumphant happy ending we were expecting.

Others before us have had the same reaction, which is why at least two different people (or groups) supplied endings to “complete” Mark’s gospel. Most Bibles include both alternatives, referred to, not very creatively, as “the shorter ending,” which more or less says that the women *did* tell the news to some of the disciples, and “the longer ending,” which incorporates some elements from each of the other gospels. But both those endings are widely understood as later additions; neither is part of the earliest existing manuscripts of Mark, and they don’t fit the rest of the gospel in terms of language, style, or flow.

We have no way of knowing whether Mark originally had another ending that was lost, but this abrupt conclusion is what we have. It does fit with the rest of Mark’s gospel, though, in that it seems to speak to people living with fear of persecution and uncertainty about their future. And I have to confess that I kind of like it. I feel like this take on the news of Easter resonates powerfully with us today, too.

The mood of Mark’s gospel is immediacy. We are meant to feel that the action is “right now,” that we are there. And it’s not too hard to put ourselves in the place of the women coming to the tomb, is it?

We have no trouble imagining the confusing mix of emotions they must be carrying: still-stunned grief, the fresh trauma of witnessing Jesus’ painful death, the shattering of hopes, ... but also a certain acceptance of the situation, along with a stubborn determination to do what was right according to their customs of caring for and honoring the body of a loved one. They aren’t sure exactly how they’re going to accomplish this – “who will move the stone for us?” they wonder – and they must have had some fear for their personal safety. But they come anyway.

We can relate because we’ve been there; we know these feelings

It may be that on this Easter morning, we’ve come grateful and filled with joy, to celebrate the conviction at the heart of our faith and our living all year long: that Christ is risen.

Christ is risen, indeed.

But I know that many of us have come on this Easter morning carrying grief, trying to find our way through the dark, trying to rid ourselves of baggage from the past, fearful about the future,

or just struggling with our lives. For some of us, it just seems like the thing to do, come to church on Easter, and so here we are, determined, but not sure what we will find.

They weren't sure how they'd manage to accomplish it, but when the women came to the tomb they knew what they were there for; they had a task, a responsibility to fulfil. They'd probably done this before, and they knew about death. They expected a stone-covered tomb and a body. What they were unprepared for was the empty tomb and a mysterious stranger telling them that Jesus had risen from the dead and was alive; how could that be true? if it is, it shakes the ground of everything they thought they knew about life and death.

Mark's Easter story always seems to me a little like those "choose your own adventure" books that were popular when our kids were young. In those books, the reader is the protagonist, and at certain points in the story, has to make choices about what to do next. How the plot unfolds depends on which storyline you choose.

Mark doesn't tell us what the women do after they run, terrified, from the tomb, too frightened to say a word to anyone about what they had seen and heard; maybe they didn't know *how* to explain it. We don't know how long they hid, what they said to each other, whether they believed what they'd been told or not. We surmise that they must have eventually spoken about their experience – word did get out, we have their story. But how did they get from terrified silence to telling the story? Did they meet up with Jesus? Did they go out and look for him? Did they hear the things some of Jesus' other disciples had to say about meeting him, seeing his scars, hearing his words? Did they discover, as so many people have discovered, the living presence of Jesus in the world, in their community, in themselves? How did this change their lives? How did they participate with the other disciples in the remaking of the community, in the beginnings of the church? Mark doesn't say.

We only know that the ending of Mark's story is one of those points where the next part of the story is open-ended. As we identify with them, coming in the dark with their burden of grief and responsibility, we're also meant to identify with the women as they are confronted with the unexpected, unbelievable, disorienting news... and have to figure out what to do with it.

Will we stay in our fear and silence? Will we open our minds to the possibility that Jesus is alive? Can we even begin to think about what that means? Will we connect with a community with whom we can try to make sense of our experience? Will we gather up our courage and walk out into the world to look for Jesus? Are we ready to encounter the risen, living Jesus? to follow where he leads us? Are we going to keep the message to ourselves, or share? How will our lives be different? How will *we* be different?

What I like about Mark's ending is precisely that it *isn't* an ending. In a way, it's more of a new beginning, to a story that isn't yet written. Mark invites us, his readers, to decide how we'll participate in the unfolding of the story. Easter then isn't just one day a year, nor a thing that happened 2000 years ago; it's an adventure of discovery. We begin to welcome the presence of the living Christ in our lives. Together we learn to attend to the presence of Jesus in our community of faith. We walk around in the world with our eyes and ears open, ready to notice where new life and hope are springing up, where Jesus-like compassion is at work, where

transformation is taking place. We become willing to let Jesus' love live in us, in what we say and do.

Resurrection – Easter – isn't primarily about remembering something that happened or about being able to say "yes, I believe" in a fact or a doctrine. Easter is a reality we *live* and breathe.

Easter isn't just today; it's also tomorrow and the next day and everyday: Easter is whenever unconditional love allows someone who felt unseen to blossom. When we ask for forgiveness, and make amends. When we admit a need, and ask for help. When we give up our attachment to a lie, and embrace the truth. When we give up pretense, to be our real selves. When we start over. When we mess up, and discover that we are still loved. When some full-of-life miracle or beauty makes our hearts soar in praise. When we put down our weapons, our busyness, our defenses to be still in God's healing presence. When self-interest gives way to concern for the common good. When bridges of trust are built. When the needs of the most vulnerable are lifted up. When a community of believers pursues new ways of being faithful. When we find courage to speak up and resist wrongs. When we face difficult things, even death, knowing that we belong to God.

This Easter adventure is filled with so many possibilities – so many ways to receive and give grace, so many ways to heal and to love, so many ways to rise up into the life Jesus beckons you to.

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

I said that Mark's resurrection story is kind of like a "choose your own adventure" story. In a way it is. Our response matters; our participation is part of the story. But in another way it isn't. Because part of the Easter adventure is the recognition that we are *not* in control of everything that happens. We are not the life-giving power that set this story in motion.

I wonder, even, if it isn't part of Mark's intention to emphasize that the adventure before us involves a stepping out into the unknown.

The story unfolds in ways we could never expect, because this is God's story we're part of. Sometimes God surprises us with opportunities we didn't see coming, people we never imagined would be part of our lives, wondrous gifts and insights, experiences that change us. Sometimes what feels like an ending turns out to be a new beginning. Sometimes we have to learn stuff we didn't want to learn. Sometimes we're asked to do something hard. We may witness miracles; we may witness suffering. We might discover abilities and strengths we didn't know we had. We might face a lonely path, or be surprised by the way a supportive community rallies round. Or we might find the living presence of Jesus beside us and holding us up when life takes us through painful stuff, as it inevitably does for all of us. We might find that we are the ones bringing the life-giving presence of Jesus into a situation of heartbreak or hopelessness.

However the story unfolds, for sure, it will be an adventure. It will be transformative. It will draw you into deeper awareness of Christ's living presence. It will draw you closer to your

neighbor who needs to be loved. It will make you a bearer of good news. It will be a new beginning, every day. It will be Easter. Every day.

This morning you are invited – whether you are a joyful believer, a hesitant seeker, or a skeptic - to embrace the Easter experience and its possibilities of hope, transformation, and new life. (Friedrich) To go out from the tomb into a new reality in which Jesus is alive – in the world, in the faith community, in your neighbor, in you. Can you be open to the open-ended story? Who knows where the adventure might take you.

Friends, Christ is risen! *Christ is risen, indeed.*

Amen.

Resources:

“Preaching on Easter Sunday Isn’t About Convincing People,” by Jim Friedrich, in *The Christian Century*, April 2019

“March 31, Resurrection of the Lord,” by Timothy Adkins-Jones, in *The Christian Century*, March 2024