

SECOND SCRIPTURE READING: Mark 16:1-8

1When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” 4When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” 8So 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.

FIRST SCRIPTURE READING: Acts 10:34-43

34Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

CHOIR ANTHEM: “Christ is Risen Today: Alleluia!

Words & Music: Patricia Mock; Arr by Faye Lopez; ©2020 Lorenz Publishing; CCLI
11307856; CSPL157794

“In the End is our Beginning”

“Easter morning is THE defining place and moment of Christian space and time,”¹ says Rev. Samuel Wells. “It is the beginning, the Christian Genesis: a garden, new life, darkness becoming light. The first day. It is also the end, the Christian Nemesis: death and despair displaced by life and hope. The last day.” As Christians, we come to church on Easter morning to celebrate amid flowers, wonderful music and bright colors, to rejoice, to sing our “Alleluias” and to experience again the story, the story of wonder, relief and hope that was given us on that first Easter morning.

But this year, we are reading the story from the Gospel of Mark. And while Mark is otherwise a wonderful book for its brief and to-the-point narrative, it is true that, contrary to the other gospels, it does not give us a very satisfying Easter story....at least, not a satisfying Easter story ending. And for this reason, during the early church centuries, well-meaning scribes have written alternative endings to make it a little more pleasing. There have actually been two endings written and included in most of our Bibles. However, all scholars now agree that the writer of Mark originally ended the story at vs 8. Three women went to the tomb in the early morning to anoint the body. They worried about rolling the stone away, but when they arrived, it had been rolled away already, and a mysterious young man was there, pointing to Jesus’ empty tomb, announcing the resurrection. *“You seek Jesus who was crucified. He has been raised.”* He directed them to *“Go tell the disciples and to return to Galilee for there, you will see him.”* The story then tersely ends with the women fleeing. *“For terror and amazement had seized them...and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”*

Ok, so not only does this ending fail to provide a proper narrative closure and some confusion, because we all know that of course, the women must have told someone or else we wouldn’t have the account, but in addition, *“the ending,”* Rev. Tom Long says, *“also lurches readers to an awkward grammatical stop because the literal translation in the Greek reads, “to no one anything they said; afraid they were because...”* *“It is almost,”* Long says, *“as if the author had suddenly been dragged from his writing desk in midsentence. They were afraid and*

¹Samuel Wells. “He is Risen (Mark 16:1-8)” <https://www.religion-online.org/article/he-is-risen-mark-16-1-8/>. (accessed 3-29-24).

told no one. End of story. Really?”² Fred Craddock is quoted as saying, “Is this any way to run a resurrection? Is this enough to persuade, to stir new life in the followers of Jesus?”³

Ok. But you know, recent scholarship (Tom Long, Donald Juel and others) has come to recognize the writer of Mark’s gospel as a highly skilled one, one who has actually offered a clever framing technique as he wrote the brief and maybe most honest account.⁴ They’ve suggested the following: that he intended this dramatic, if rather blunt ending in order to impart a different kind of Easter joy for readers. He did so in order to reveal another dimension of the Easter faith. It’s a fascinating premise and worth considering so I might suggest that you take the pew Bible in front of you and turn to the beginning of Mark, to pg 34 in the NT, to Mk 1:14, and put your finger there. Now turn to the end of Mark, to pg 55, to Mk 16:7. Do you see in verse 7, the young man’s direction, “Go tell his disciples, He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him”? Who are the disciples? Peter, James, John and Andrew...yes, but also you and me. We are disciples too. Where is Galilee? North of Jerusalem...yes, but also the location in the opening chapter of Mark, in the beginning, where the kingdom of God was at hand. Go back to where your finger is saving place, to page 34. It says there that “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” In other words... reader, readers, disciples, all of us: THE STORY ISN’T OVER. We’re being told to leave the empty tomb now and read it again. We did not fully understand the story the first time. Now that we have been to the cross and to the tomb, to the end, we can reread the story again, from the beginning.⁵ The end is our beginning.

Wow. Do you see? That’s pretty insightful. We can look upon all of the narrative again in light of the cross and empty tomb, through post-resurrection eyes. We can hear Jesus’ parables afresh, see the miracles anew, the healing and tenderness in his touch, the wisdom in his teaching, his compassion for the weak, the lost, the suffering, and his forgiving mercy for the sinful world for which he humbled himself to be in union with, to die and be raised for. We can

² Thomas Long. “Dangling Gospel (Mark 16:1-8)”. <https://www.religion-online.org/article/dangling-gospel-mark-16:1-8/> (accessed 3-29-24).

³ Mary Gordon. Quoted in: John Buchanan. *The End Is the Beginning*. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2006/041606.html> . (accessed 3-29-24).

⁴ Scott Hoezee. *Sermon Commentary. Mark 16:1-8*. <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2018-03-26/mark-161-8/> (accessed 3-29-24).

⁵ Thomas Long.

notice him to be ushering the future into our present, awakening a hope in those who will receive it...a certain hope that love is stronger than hate, that justice will roll down like the waters, that every tear will be washed away, and that life will prevail over death. We can get a glimpse of God's eternal plan to bring his kingdom to earth and gather us all unto himself! But while noticing all of this, we unfortunately can also see that he will always be misunderstood. Always will the saving action of God in the world be ambiguous, sealed off by so many. From this post-resurrection perspective, from this Easter perspective, we will consequently be in the place to decide in that deep place in our souls who we will be, how we will live and whom we will trust.⁶

Brothers and sisters, just in the time I was writing this sermon, the news reports were coming in of the worrisome and deteriorating tensions between the US and China, Russian forces continuing their headway against Ukraine, the number of tornadoes being up by a factor of 2 due to climate change, over 13,000 just children dead in Gaza and humanitarian aid not touching the magnitude of the crisis, a voice generator being considered by AI experts as a real risk for elections, and on and on. The weight of the world's troubles, the weight of its sin, its greed, its cruelty, its violence and pervasive disregard for life, this, in addition to our own experiences of illness, depression and despair...sometimes it feels like it suffocates us. It makes us feel weak and fragile and powerless. Doesn't it?

However, the post-resurrection perspective of the Gospel that we have, that puts us in a place to decide who we will be, how we will live and whom we will trust, that standing both in the last and the first day at the same time, has power...it has power to change us. It allows us to "Go" to Galilee, for we know there we will see him. And we go knowing the ENDING... the terrifying, awesome, mysterious....and most importantly, revealed truth of death reversed. We go to begin, to begin a new life, with him, trusting that he has already gone into whatever darkness we might otherwise dread and has already shone his light there. He has EVEN gone into our future death and that of our loved ones. **AND HE HAS CONQUERED IT!**

⁶John Buchanan. *The End Is the Beginning*. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2006/041606.html> . (accessed 3-29-24).

Some of you may know who William Sloane Coffin Jr was. He held many positions in his life, but probably he was best known as being the Senior Minister of Riverside Church in NYC. He was a very out-spoken activist for many civil rights issues of his day and on several occasions was jailed for his participation in peace demonstrations. John Buchanan relays the testimony of the man who once was in the next cell to his. His name was James Carrol, an ex-priest and author. He remembers how dark it was in the jail and how depressed and afraid he was. He writes, "I have no idea what prompted him to do so, but at some point in the night, the man in the next cell began to sing, softly at first. His resolute baritone gradually filled the air as he moved easily into what anyone recognized as Handel's Messiah: "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people." And then I recognized the voice as that of William Sloane Coffin...Others in the cell block joined their voices too. "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," we sang. So many men singing. In the dark, but yet feeling a light to be piercing through it, lifting our spirits to the heavens. All of us claiming in song what we knew, what we had to know, deep in their souls, to be true, that is, that "Our Redeemer had stood upon the earth with us" and more than that, that our "Redeemer Liveth".⁷

Friends, our Redeemer, has gone ahead of us and he is there beckoning us to join him, to do his divine work, because those fearful things which otherwise would squeeze the air out of us, which darken our world view, no longer have power. Jesus says, "*Come out, there is no tragedy you may experience that is so great that I cannot redeem it; there is no loss so profound that I cannot overcome it, there is no wrongdoing that I cannot forgive, there is no pain so deep that I cannot bear it with you. As I bring my kingdom to this world, there isn't a cause, even in a world with terrorists, bombs, refugees, and starving children, that is so big that you and I cannot devote ourselves to conquering.*"⁸ Brothers and sisters of FPC-CC, Jesus is out there. He is loose in the world. He is there today, will be there tomorrow and the next day and every

⁷ Quoted in John Buchanan. *The End Is the Beginning*. <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2006/041606.html> . (accessed 3-29-24).

⁸ Anon.

day up to and including the last day and beyond.⁹ In the end is our beginning, the end of death, the beginning of new life. Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah. Amen.

⁹ John Buchanan.