

“The Ending is just the Beginning”
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Hickory Neck Church – Toano, VA
Easter Vigil - April 11, 2009
Mark 16:1-8

Wow! What a night, huh? We’ve watched the holy fire being kindled and heard the ancient words of the Exsultet. We’ve listened to the Creation story, the story of the binding of Isaac, the Exodus of the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, and Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones. We’ve renewed our own baptismal vows as we witnessed the baptism of our newest Christian. We’ve sung Alleluia and heard Mark’s version of the resurrection story. What more could there possibly be to say?

Not only have we heard so many stories tonight, but we are also at the end of the three days known as the Triduum: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. We have re-enacted Jesus’ last supper with his disciples and his washing of their feet, we have recited the words of Psalm 22 as we remembered Jesus’ torture and death on the cross – My God, My God, why have you forsaken me, and we have retold the story of salvation that culminates in the resurrection. At the end of all these stories and all these liturgies, what more could there possibly be to say?

In truth, we are not in such a different place tonight as the women who brought the spices to anoint Jesus in his tomb. They had made the same journey we have, though in reality and not remembrance. They were grieving the loss of Jesus, going to him at sunrise, before anyone would be around. Imagine how they must have felt to see the stone rolled away and a young man dressed in white. Imagine the shock when they heard, “He has been raised; he is not here.” The author of

Mark writes, “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.”

Although the reading of Mark’s Gospel that we heard tonight goes on for a few more lines, and if you look in a Bible you’ll see another possible ending that is much longer, scholarly research shows that Mark’s Gospel most likely ended with the line “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” It doesn’t seem like a very good ending for a Gospel, does it? It asks more questions than it answers. We don’t get the satisfaction of resurrection appearances. And even as we point to the women’s courage in staying by Jesus at the cross, we have to wonder why their fear keeps them silent now. Here it is, the night on which we remember that the entire history of salvation culminates with the resurrection, and instead of hearing that the women shouted “Hallelujah!” we hear that they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

It doesn’t seem like an ending at all. And maybe that’s because it’s not. I don’t know how many of you remember the opening sentence of Mark’s Gospel. We heard it way back at the start of Advent. “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The beginning of the good news. Could it be that the author of Mark intended for the entirety of what he wrote to be the beginning of the story? In that case the ending makes sense because it’s still part of the beginning. The women were afraid and kept silent. Well, not such a surprising reaction. As unsettling and disturbing as Jesus’ death and resurrection is for us, think of how it must have been for them. We also can’t forget the time in which they lived. Had they gone running about proclaiming the resurrection in the heart of Jerusalem, they might have found themselves similarly strung up on a cross.

After all, the young man in white tells us everything we need to know. Jesus is no longer in the tomb; he has been raised. As he had said he would be. Go, tell the others that he is going ahead to Galilee. As he had said he would be. You will see him, just as he told you. Of course the women eventually said something. Even if Mark was our only Gospel, we know that's true because otherwise we would not know the story now.

Maybe the Gospel ends where it does because it's up to us to supply the ending. We know that, even though most of the people around Jesus, including his disciples, did not understand him or his teaching during his lifetime, the disciples and their converts spread the stories and teachings of Jesus after his death. We know that the disciples went on to proclaim the good news of Jesus, even though many of them died as a result. Perhaps the silence at the ending of the written Gospel is merely a pause, a time of reflection filled both with terror and amazement, before the women plunged into creating their own ending.

So what could there possibly be to say? Well, the story didn't end with the end of Mark's Gospel. The story didn't end with the lives and teachings and deaths of the disciples. The story began with those first followers of Jesus and continues with us. What will we do? Will we allow the terror and amazement to silence us, or will we proclaim with shouts, "He has been raised; he is not here"? Will the Gospel story end with us, or is it just beginning? What could there possibly be to say? Oh, my friends, there is so very much. Let's begin.

Alleluia, Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.