

**New Beginnings**  
Mark 16: 1-8  
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I want to commend the Gospel of Mark to you this morning. Not the old Mark, the second-string Mark, playing behind Matthew and Luke. Poor Mark! No birth stories of Jesus, no post-resurrection appearances, and in our text this morning just the two Marys, who run away and tell no one anything about the empty tomb because they are so afraid. Poorly written Mark, bad Greek, lightly regarded Mark, until very recently in the history of Biblical scholarship.

In most Bibles, Mark ends at chapter 16:20. If you use the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, you'll find a notation after the eighth verse that says, "the shorter ending of Mark." In this two-sentence ending, the Marys are reported to tell everything to Peter and the others, and Jesus makes a brief appearance.

Then there is a second called the "longer ending of Mark" that has several appearances of Jesus and a short proclamation in which Jesus says, "believers will speak in tongues, pick up snakes, and drink poison without harm." No thank you! Jesus is then taken up into heaven, as now this third ending comes to a close.

You might be surprised to learn that Mark's original account of the resurrection--through verse eight--is a story without an ending. An incomplete text quite unlike the other gospels, leaving us at the edge of our chairs beckoning for a conclusion.

Three women awake from their sleep to visit the tomb where Jesus' body was laid to anoint it with spices. They had no vague illusions when they approached the tomb, for they had stood at the foot of the cross.

Perhaps they were not surprised to find the large stone rolled back, or that the tomb was empty. If Jesus was as unpopular with the crowds as Mark leads us to believe, the desecration of his grave might have been expected.

What was unnerving was their discovery of a stranger at the tomb, dressed in white, who noticed their consternation and spoke to them: "Don't be alarmed. I know you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He is not here. He has been raised. Look, see the spot where he was placed." The women, we gather, were completely bewildered by this stranger at the tomb. They found his words incomprehensible—beyond the realm of what was possible.

Unlike the resurrection accounts in the other gospels, in Mark, Jesus is nowhere in sight. No resurrected Christ to see, to touch, to talk with. Just three women, an empty tomb, and a stranger who says, "He has been raised."

If that isn't perplexing enough, the man in white also gives them a charge: "Now go, give this message to his disciples, including Peter," he says, "Jesus is going to Galilee ahead of you. There you will see him, just as he told you." The women must now tell the others what they themselves aren't sure of, then go to Galilee to find out if the stranger at the tomb is right. To see if Jesus is truly risen.

But instead of calming their alarm, the stranger's words turn their distress into terror. Instead of telling others what the strangers had said to them, they decide to tell no one. Instead of going to Galilee excited and expectant, they flee from the tomb in fear.

No wonder Mark's story ends on such an ambiguous note: The last sentence reads literally: "So they went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified. The women said nothing to anyone because they were afraid of ..." And that's the end of Mark's account.

The early church was so bothered by this unfinished story that years later it tacked on those two different endings of its own, the shorter and longer endings I've already mentioned, which we now treat as appendices of this gospel. Most translations resolve the ambiguity by rewriting the last sentence. The real ending remains an incomplete sentence: "The women said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid of ..."

T. S. Eliot, at the conclusion of one of his poems, "East Coker" writes: "In my end is my beginning." I keep thinking about those words every time I read this resurrection account because that's pretty much what the Gospel of Mark says about Easter.

An unlikely stranger at the tomb. His incomprehensible message. No conclusive proof. A charge to tell others and go to Galilee. Three frightened women who disobey it. And a story without an ending. Not exactly a triumphant Easter message!

But Mark is a master storyteller, the best of any gospel writer, I believe. He wouldn't leave us hanging on to an unfinished story without a reason.

I have a theory. The story isn't finished because Mark wants us to finish it. Maybe we can imagine that as Mark penned that incomplete sentence, he left some blank space, maybe even a page or two, because everyone who reads this story must write their own ending.

Unfinished stories are always hard to deal with. Every novel or play has an ending--usually the climax. Only when the writer or playwright dies with an incomplete text in hand, do we ponder the ambiguity of no closure for the story. The script remains open-ended, and we are the ones who are left to finish it.

For you see, the three women aren't the only ones who meet the stranger at the tomb. You and I who read this story are also there, and also hear his words: "Jesus is not here ...He has been raised ...Go, tell the others, including Peter ...Jesus is going to Galilee ahead of you ... there you will see him." We now know how the women respond. They run in fear, telling no one what has happened.

But we, the readers, still can decide what we will do: whether or not we will heed the words of the stranger; whether or not we will deliver the message of a fresh start for weary disciples chastened by failure and despair; whether or not we will be the channels of forgiveness and restitution for the denying Peters of our day. Unlike the women, we can still decide whether we will allow this stranger to direct us away from a dead man's tomb towards the Galilees of our own lives, our home, our school, our community, and to journey into an unknown future with a resurrection faith, trusting that in that future we do not now know, there we will see him.

What has always been compelling to me in the Easter story is the transformation of Jesus' disciples, from cowering in fear behind a locked door somewhere in Jerusalem, into fearless and fierce followers and advocates and martyrs as we learn later.

What is being addressed to us at Easter is that deep place in our souls where we decide who we will be, how we will live, whom we will trust. What transformed cowards into brave disciples was the conviction that Jesus Christ was alive and therefore there was absolutely no reason to be afraid of anything anymore. "Do not be afraid" were the first words spoken to the women at the tomb. Fear not, fear nothing, fear not even that ultimate threat that everyone is afraid of, namely death.

What transformed them is the same truth that raises up brave men and women to live and witness in the face of danger—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Joan of Arc, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Jr.—the same truth that raises up millions upon millions of men and women to live on with courage and conviction in the face of illness, depression, injustice, failure, and, of course, death: namely, the conviction that Jesus Christ is risen today, our bedrock trust that Love is stronger

than death.

“In my end is my beginning.”

The year before I came to Westminster, I spent the good part of an afternoon at the Dane County jail. It was my second visit there in as many weeks to see a young man who had been convicted of drunk driving for the third time and also for having violated his parole. The next day he was to be transferred to begin a one-year term in state prison. His father, a Presbyterian minister who lives out of state—someone I have known for many years--called and asked if I would go and see him as he had no other family nearby.

A couple of months after he had been transferred to a state prison, I drove to see him again and expected to meet a man filled with doom and gloom, but I was wrong. He had gone through detox and was now sober for the first time since he entered college, he told me. He attended AA meetings every night of the week. He joined a Bible study group led by the prison chaplain. He was running three miles every day. Bubbly, hopeful, excited, and frightened all at the same time, this did not seem like someone facing a year in prison.

His mother called me a few weeks later. She had spoken with her son several times and she said she had never heard him so optimistic and hopeful. She asked if I would go and see him one more time.

I went, and on that visit, I asked him what the reason for his excitement and optimism was. And he said, "I now know that my future can be different than my past."

If the gospel writer Mark wants us to finish his Easter story, that sure would make a great ending. Because in resurrection terms, any great ending is really a new beginning.

But all of us could take the blank pages of this unfinished story and write our own conclusion. The question is, how will yours read?

Amen.