

From Death to Life: By Way of Galilee

Easter Sunday

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Texts: Acts 10.34-43;
Psalm 118;
1 Corinthians 15.1-11;
Mark 16.1-8

As endings go, this one we have read from Mark's gospel today, at least on first reading, is absolutely awful. You can why someone would want to write a better ending. And people did. You may have noticed the notes suggesting alternate endings to Mark's gospel. Over time, some well meaning scholars took it upon themselves to clean up Mark's ending. In Mark's gospel, the women go to anoint Jesus' body and they worry about moving the stone away. When they arrive it is already moved. They enter and see a man dressed in white and they are alarmed. He tells them that Jesus has been raised and he tells them that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee and they will see him there. They flee in terror and amazement and they are so afraid that they say nothing to anyone.

It's not that I don't understand their reaction. The whole idea of a resurrection is eerie even a little creepy. For dead people to be anything other than dead is rather terrifying. The women show good common sense by keeping this unnerving experience to themselves. I'm not sure that I would do anything differently. No, their reaction isn't puzzling at all.

What's puzzling is that Mark ends his story there. He doesn't talk about how the women finally told what happened or what it was like to see Jesus again. He doesn't give us the inside look at doubts turning into faith like John does. He doesn't end his story with Jesus making a final speech to his now faithful disciples as Matthew does. We are left with these terrified women who flee in silence. The thing about stories that end in bizarre and unsatisfying ways is you either throw the thing across the room in frustration or you go back into the story, intrigued to probe the story

further to try to figure it out and make some sense out of what you have just been told.

I suspect Mark was going for the latter. He writes to a church community that was marginal at best. They were struggling, they were threatened, and they were persecuted. It's strange on the one hand that Mark doesn't give to that community a gospel that ends on a high note of inspiration and resolution. Wouldn't these Christians in Mark's community want to hear that kind of happy ending to encourage them in the midst of their struggle? That's why we're all here today; to hear that right wins over wrong, that life conquers death, that even after devastating loss all is well in the end. After all, the gospel of Mark opens claiming that this is "The beginning of the good news."

So where's the good news in such a convoluted ending? Patrick Wilson, writing of Mark's ending, sees some "pastoral wisdom" in this ambiguous ending. The realism of the text speaks to where we live. Wilson writes: "(Mark gives us) no enchanted world of thinly fabricated happily-ever-afters, but a world in which we hold tightly to the promise and fearfully tread our way through a tangle of doubts and amazements."¹ That's what I've come to like about Mark's telling of this event. It honors our experience of trying to find hope in the promise of the gospel while at the same time living in a world that doesn't always deliver "happily ever after."

Every year, I find myself wrestling with the meaning of Easter and this talk of resurrection. What we proclaim and sing and preach and say is that resurrection is about new life. It is about the power of life over death. It is about the victory of God over evil. It is about breaking the hold that sin has on our life. That is what Jesus did and that is what is available to us who trust in him. What haunts me in all this talk of victory and freedom is the images of bondage and defeat that just won't leave my mind. How can we speak of the power of God over evil with a war still raging in Afghanistan, with tensions running higher than ever in the Middle East? How can we claim that God has broken the bondage of sin when we live in a country that marked the anniversary of Martin Luther King's assassination this

¹ Patrick Wilson, "Ending Without End," *Christian Century*, March 16, 1994.

week and racial prejudice not only exists but is still deadly 45 years later? How can we say that death is conquered while you watch disease slowly take away the people you love? In the face of human suffering, what can it possibly mean for our life to say that Jesus is risen?

The only clue we have from Mark is the reminder of a strange man standing in an empty tomb that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. To the amazed and confused and frightened women, he essentially offers this advice: the only way you can move from death to life is by way of Galilee. To end the gospel there is to leave the story open-ended. Mark does not resolve the tension. He does not spell it out. And like those novels that end in obscurity it pulls you back into the story. Meet Jesus in Galilee.... why Galilee? So you go back, you turn to chapter one and the words just jump off the page: "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee..." It's an invitation to read it all again – to listen again to his message – to watch again his life – and not just in the pages of the gospel but in the pages of your *own* life. Go after him, keep looking, you may see him as did the disciples in the face of a gardener, a foreigner, a stranger on the road. You may find the power of resurrection turning up in the strangest of places when you least expect it and just when you are at the end of your rope. It's a marvelous adventure when you think of it: always looking for Jesus and always watching for the tell-tale signs of resurrection.

I recently discovered the name for phenomena I suspect we all know. It's called *perceptual vigilance*: it's when you notice something somewhere and then begin to see it everywhere. It's like when you buy a car you never heard of before and then after buying it you see one on every corner. Once you take that leap of faith and trust that what God has said is true; that life is eternal, death is not the final word, and hope is not lost. You will be amazed at how creatively God begins drawing you into the power of resurrection.

I was talking with someone in recent weeks who has endured a long season of struggle. All of a sudden very recently something happened that made them feel like they were finally turning the corner. As we talked, the language that came to mind was that the person could feel the promise of Easter opening up in their life. I thought to myself, isn't it amazing? When

you engage regularly in worship, when you immerse yourself in the stories of the scriptures, the teachings of Jesus and the promises of God - they have a way of playing out in your life. They make their mark. When you go back to Galilee and re-read the story of the Gospel you can see the way that Jesus meets you again and again as each piece of the story opens in new ways in light of the changes and challenges of life. And all of a sudden this talk of resurrection is not just talk. It becomes real as the Spirit of the Risen Christ meets us where we live and comes alive among us.

That's another way to interpret the message of the man at the tomb when he tells the women that Jesus goes ahead of them to Galilee. Galilee is where they are from. He essentially sends them home back to resume their daily life.² That is where Jesus will meet them. And it's ok if today you find yourself with those women seized by amazement or caught up in fear or shaking your head in disbelief. And it's ok if you are celebrating this day what you know to be true. The message to all of us is the same: to go into Galilee, into the place where you live, and to keep your eyes open. For the Spirit of the Risen Christ has indeed gone before us and will meet us there.

Alleluia!

Amen.

² Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 285.