

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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God Goes Ahead of Us

Mark 16:1-8

As far as the two Marys and Salome can tell, the world goes on as usual. Suffering and death continue, and the bodies of the deceased need to be cared for. The spices the women are carrying tell us everything we need to know about what they expect to see when they reach the cemetery. Jesus was buried, and the stone that seals the grave will still be in place. The old age of oppression and evil hasn't budged a bit. Or has it?

"But when they looked up. . . ." You see, that's what Easter can do. It can take heads bowed in sorrow, staring at the ground in grief, and lift them up to witness what God has done. The stone has been rolled away, and a heavenly messenger is there to announce what it all means. Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He has risen! He's not here. See, that's where he used to be. But now he's alive and on the move. Go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee. That's where you'll see him, just as he told you.

Now to us, this may sound like the kind of Easter announcement that we would expect. Good news about how the grave is open and Jesus is free. But according to Mark's version of the story, those who first arrived at the cemetery didn't experience this as "tidings of comfort and joy," to borrow an expression from Christmas. According to the last verse of our text, "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (v. 8). Fear. Alarm. Bewilderment. Silence. This is how they first responded to the news that Jesus was alive. Now, what kind of way is that to end a Gospel?

I say end because most scholars agree that the original Gospel of Mark ended at chapter 16, verse 8. In other words, the earliest, most reliable manuscripts of Mark don't include verses 9-20. Depending on which translation or edition of the Bible you're using, there may even be a note indicating this. Verses 9-20 were probably added later by scribes who, drawing upon various traditions, wanted to complete or round out the story. In the other three Gospels, Jesus appears to his disciples, talks to Mary Magdalene, meets a couple of followers on the road to Emmaus, shares a breakfast of fish on the beach. But here in Mark, things end rather abruptly. Words fail. Panic sets in. They're overcome with fear. The last image we have is of the women grabbing the bottom of their dresses so they don't trip over them as they run from the tomb. Then the credits roll.

Preacher Thomas Long tells about a student in a seminary class who had memorized the entire Gospel of Mark in order to do a dramatic, Broadway-style reading before a live audience. He decided to go with the scholarly consensus regarding the end of Mark. According to Long,

At his first performance, however, after he spoke that ambiguous last verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other, the audience waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for a proper ending. Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, "Amen!" and made his exit. The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively. Upon

reflection, though, the student realized that by providing the audience a satisfying conclusion, his "Amen!" had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the text. So at the next performance, when he reached the final verse he simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence.¹

For the second audience, there was lots of anxiety and uncertainty. As people exited, their conversation was dominated by their sense that what they had experienced was a nonending.

This is similar to a story that preacher William Willimon tells about how he was greeting people as they left his church one Easter Sunday. After experiencing the glory and majesty of Easter worship, especially the music, folks shook his hand and commented on how beautiful everything was, how good the sermon was, and how great it was to be there. But then there was a young man who filed by, shook Willimon's hand, and said, "I don't know. I just don't know." Compared to all the other worshipers, who had tied things up neatly and put a bow on their Easter experience, here was someone who left the service with his experience of the resurrection feeling like it was sort of dangling and incomplete, more like the end of Mark's Gospel.

So what are we supposed to do with an ending, or nonending, like this? Well, we're certainly not supposed to just sit back and analyze it from a strictly theoretical or academic standpoint. Mark aims to engage more than just our intellectual curiosity. He aims to get us in motion, so that we too go forward and meet Jesus, trusting that he can take us, in all our weaknesses and failings, and restore us to his mission. In other words, Mark doesn't give us a nice, clean conclusion to the story because we ourselves are supposed to continue the story through our worship, our work, and our witness.

And continuing the story requires that we go forward. According to Mark, those who want to park themselves in the present and spend most of their time hanging out at the empty tomb will miss the fullness and depth of Easter. That's because Jesus is already out front, occupying the future. He isn't locked way back there in the past, hoping you'll come and meet him on the dusty roads of first century Palestine. He isn't hovering over and around us in the here and now, peeking in on us from time to time. No, if we are to meet Jesus and know Jesus, then we'll have to get up and go forward. Go forward as individuals and go forward as a church.

That's the way it has been throughout Mark's Gospel. In many ways, Mark's telling of the the story of Jesus is a fast-paced Gospel. One of the terms Mark uses most frequently is the word "immediately." In Mark, Jesus doesn't waste any time as he goes about preaching and enacting the reign of God. He moves quickly from place to place. He's a man of action. There's no time to squander getting engaged in frivolous or trivial activities. So when Jesus calls disciples to follow him, you can bet that Jesus will stay out front, ensuring that there will always be the next town, the next miracle, the next message, the next manifestation of the kingdom.

One person tells the story about a five year old who asks his mother, "Is God everywhere?" "Yes," said the mother. "Well, is he here in this room?" asks the child. "Yeah, sure he is." "Is he here on the table?" "Well, uh, yeah, in a sense I suppose he is. I can go with that," replied the mother. The child slowly picks up an open box and slams it shut, "Got him!"²

The God revealed in the risen Jesus is unboxable. His grace and love make him uncontainable. This God is gloriously free. Jesus is glorious freely. This is the Jesus of Easter. The Jesus who refuses to stay put. The Jesus who won't be confined to anyone's

particular agenda. The Jesus whom death can't hold. The Jesus who isn't simply waiting for you to invite him into your life, but who is also calling you to come into his life. That's because he's not just here. He's also out ahead of where we are. He's summoning us to come and meet him and be part of the future that he already occupies.

Sometimes we misunderstand the resurrection primarily as God's most stupendous miracle, an otherworldly wonder that God pulls off right in the midst of history, in order to prove his power and divinity. Now it's true, the resurrection does certainly reveal God's life-giving power. But the resurrection is more than just a one-time wonder that happened way back in the past, a piece of ancient history that we remember and celebrate once a year. The resurrection of Jesus is actually the future, where all things are reconciled to God in Christ, brought forward into the present. It's the launch of God's reign of righteousness, justice, and peace. It's both an already and a not yet.

That's why the Jesus we meet in Mark's story of the resurrection is Jesus ahead of us not behind us. He's calling us to keep following him, to keep attending to his words, to keep bearing the cross. Remember that he's not calling you and me to go anywhere that he hasn't already been. Jesus has already lived through the experience of this present earthly life, with all its struggles and sufferings, for you. Jesus has already bore your sins and secured your forgiveness, for you. Jesus has already gone into the grave and died your death, for you. Jesus has already been raised from the dead, for you. So from where he is, ahead of us not behind us, Jesus calls you and me, with all our sins and failures, to receive and live into the reconciliation we have through him and with him, reconciliation with God himself.

That kind of faith, the faith required to follow Jesus into the future, involves risk. But sadly, our familiarity with Easter can actually dull our sense of risk. I received an email this week from a church insurance company, reminding congregations to review their safety and risk management procedures, what with all the extra activities and increased attendance anticipated this weekend. Pay attention to the condition of parking lots and walking surfaces. Make sure volunteer parking lot attendants are wearing bright and reflective clothing. Check to see that first aid kits are well stocked. Inspect children's areas for any dangers, such as unprotected electrical outlets. And please, be careful using lit candles in church. From an insurance standpoint, Easter is something to be carefully managed so as to reduce the risks.

But from a Scriptural standpoint, Easter is full of risks. Though the women showed up at the empty tomb, spices in hand, ready to cooperate with the reality of death, they ended up getting a much more risky and unsafe Easter than they expected. They learned that when Jesus is alive and out front and on the move, things can get unmanageable and scary. But he has promised not to leave us to ourselves and our own resources. He has promised to be with us and to help us.

Most of all, remember that the path Jesus summons us to follow is one that he has already covered, a route that he himself has already completed. I like the way one commentator puts it when he says, "Leaps of faith are easier when someone else tests the landing site for us." That's what Jesus, in his life, death, and resurrection, has done. Now he's ahead of us not behind us, calling us forward into the future.

¹ Thomas G. Long, "Dangling Gospel." *The Christian Century* (April 4, 2006) 19.

² Jeremy Begbie, "What's Mysterious About Worship?" Lecture delivered at Regent College (Vancouver, BC) on May 26, 2014.