

“EASTER UNFINISHED”

Isaiah 25:6-9; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

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Rev. Janet Robertson Duggins
Westminster Presbyterian Church

I know what you're thinking: you're wondering what happened to the rest of the story! What about the women meeting Jesus on the way as they're running to tell the rest of the disciples the exciting news? What happened to Peter, hurrying to see for himself after he hears? Where is Mary, weeping in the garden, wondering where Jesus is until she recognizes him when he says her name? Well, those parts of the story are in the other gospels. But this is Mark's version, and Mark tells it in his own way, ending not just the Easter story but his whole gospel right there. The ending is kind of abrupt, enigmatic, ... and not quite as upbeat as we expect the Easter story to be. We're looking for a beautiful sunrise, listening for alleluias, waiting for the joy to break out. But Mark's story leaves us with the women's terror, amazement, and silence.

It feels unfinished, like a story in search of an ending. No wonder, then, that there have been at least a couple of attempts to provide one. Most Bibles give you both of them, for a kind of choose-your-own-ending experience, but there's pretty much a scholarly consensus that those endings were written later, by someone else, and neither was originally part of this gospel. If the writer of Mark wrote more of the story, it's long lost. But maybe – probably – this ending-that's-not-quite-an-ending is exactly what Mark intended.

And it's also, I think, an Easter story telling that can speak profoundly to us in our time, even if it challenges our expectations a bit more than a version that ends with rejoicing and the loose ends nicely tied up. Bear with me a bit; maybe I can convince you!

Picture the scene the story invites us into.

It's early in the morning – still dark. The women are making their way to the tomb, carrying the supplies they need, determined to do what must be done – that is, anoint the body of Jesus. This is their custom, a way of paying respect to the dead. A way of dealing with grief, which is what all funeral customs are. We know they are grieving, still in shock, probably, after what they have witnessed in the past couple of days. They came to Jerusalem, like many other Jews from the surrounding areas, to celebrate the festival of Passover. They came with so many hopes pinned on Jesus, who seemed to them the one sent from God to lead their people into a new future. All those hopes died when he was arrested and sent to his death on a cross.

Now there isn't anything more for them to do except carry out the rituals of grieving. Are they afraid as they make their way through the early morning, as the sun is rising? Perhaps it's occurred to them that people like them who followed Jesus might also become targets of the religious and secular authorities who conspired to put Jesus to death. That fear might be what's keeping Jesus other disciples away. Maybe the women focus on practical concerns as they're walking, to keep the fear at bay. “How will we get the stone moved?”

But when they get there, all is not as they expect it to be. And the fear rushes in. The stone is already moved, the tomb is open, and a young man is sitting where they thought Jesus' body would be. He knows why they are there. But he tells them that *Jesus is not there because he has been raised*. "Go and tell his disciples," he says. "Jesus will meet you, back home in Galilee."

They go, but they don't tell anybody anything, at least not right then.

They are just too bewildered and terrified to take it all in. It's not just that it seems unbelievable, not just that it upends their understanding of how things work in the world - it's that no good news can quite penetrate their fear and shock.

Consider that Mark's gospel was written for Christians in a time when there was real risk in belonging to Jesus and telling his story. In those early years, believers had no way of knowing what was going to happen, what issues they'd face or what they'd have to do. There was no telling what the future of the Christian movement would be. The early Christians lived with the kind of fear and uncertainty that the women in Mark's Easter story embody.

Mark's strange and unsettled ending invites us to consider how the news of Jesus' resurrection is spoken into a world of fear, upheaval, deep divisions – how it comes to people who have seen terrible things – how it comes up against the disappointments and expectations and skepticism of hurting people. These were the realities of the earliest Christians and they are our realities, too.

The good news of Easter isn't easy news to accept, even if we concede that God can certainly do some things we can't understand. I like what feels like an acknowledgement of that in Mark's telling. I also appreciate that in Mark, we don't move too quickly, too automatically to joy and celebration. As a preacher, I have to say that it can be hard to talk about Easter; most people today fall into one of two camps in their attitude toward Easter. Either they harbor a deep skepticism if not outright disbelief or they embrace an easy and happy celebration that doesn't look too closely at the cross. Mark's Easter story steers us away from both of those attitudes; he gives us the Easter good news as something we need to wrestle with a little bit.

What does it mean? How does it change things? What difference does it make when the world – or my life – is still such a mess? What is it that makes me slow to open my mind and heart to good news, to healing and new life, to the power and love of God?

If I allow that there might be some truth in it, what next?

The power of Mark's "unfinished" ending is precisely that it leaves us asking, "what next?" It invites us to wonder where the women went, what they thought, how they coped, what they did. It leaves us with their fear and bewilderment and silence ...

And yet we know, because Mark's gospel exists, because the church exists, because the good news has endured through the ups and downs of 2000 years of Christian

history, because *we are here today* singing alleluias ... that somehow, eventually, the fear was overcome and the silence was broken. The good news was told.

And when they left the tomb these women and other disciples encountered the risen Jesus. Something transformative happened to them, bringing them from fear to faith, from despair to radical hope, from running and hiding to telling and living the news. Faith took hold in their lives and gave the first witnesses to the resurrection the confidence to *become* witnesses. And the church was born.

How did this happen? How has it *always* happened? Fearful, broken people hear that Jesus is alive, and, yes, it's hard to believe. But the seed of the good news has been planted. And they go out into the world and somewhere, somehow they encounter the presence of Christ. They experience the love of God. And it changes them. "He's not here," says the messenger at the tomb. "Go," he says. Look for him. He'll meet you.

Mark leaves us with the unfinished ending of the Easter story because... the story is still unfinished, and in its unfinished-ness, it is challenge and invitation to us. It asks, "What's next?" It asks, "how will you live the rest of the story?" It says, ""Go." Jesus isn't shut up in a tomb, or even inside a church. Go out. He's out there, he'll meet you there – where you live ... where you work, play, go to school, cope with a troubling and frightening world, struggle to be faithful.

It's not for us to *finish* the story – it's God's story, not ours. But the story continues with us, if we let it. That's another thing God does that we can't quite understand: God trusts a part of the story to us.

So go out go out trusting that God will take care of our fears and doubts and bewilderment, and that Jesus will be wherever we are.

Go out and tell the good news that death is not the last word and that the power of hate is no match for the power of love.

Go out ready to see Jesus' presence in your life and in the faces of the people around you every day. Go out to live differently because Jesus is alive.

Go out to continue his ministry – speaking words of hope, feeding people, loving children, welcoming strangers, making peace, building community, caring for the needy, bringing grace into the world's brokenness, ... doing all the things we learned from Jesus.

Easter isn't the end of the story of Jesus' love in the world. It's just a new beginning. Let it begin again today, in us.
Christ is risen!

Resources:

Michael Coffee, "Renounce, Resist, Rejoice: Easter Preaching in the Age of Trump"; Joanna M. Adams, "Ahead of Us"; Robert E. Dunham, "Unfinished – A Sermon for Easter" – all in *Journal for Preachers*, vol xli, no. 3, Easter 2018.