

## **Open-Ended Gospel – April 5, 2015 – Easter Sunday**

### **Mark 16:1-8**

**Rev. Rachel A. Wann**

As a true Presbyterian, I like things done “decently and in order. I don’t like loose ends, and I am not a fan of ambiguity. But it seems like I am confronted with ambiguity quite often. Have you ever gone to the movies and sat through an entire film, and then all of a sudden, the screen goes dark and the credits begin to role. Somehow the story does not seem quite complete. And I sit there thinking, “Did I miss something? What kind of ending is that? Does the character survive the ordeal? Does the family live happily ever after? What comes next? I’ve invested two hours in this movie, and I am left with unanswered questions.”

Reminds me of the first time I felt uncomfortable with ambiguity. In high school literature class we read a short story entitled, “The Lady or the Tiger?” An unfortunate man fell in love with a princess. Her father considered him a worthless commoner and had him arrested. The king’s practice of handing out justice was to place the accused in a stadium facing two doors. Behind one door was a tiger, just waiting to pounce. Behind the other door, was a beautiful woman. The accused had to make a choice, and that determined his guilt or innocence. If he chose the door with the tiger, he’d be mauled to death and was ruled guilty. If he chose the door with the woman, he’d be wed to her on the spot, no matter his current marital or relational status.

The princess knew what was behind each door, but she was torn. She was a jealous woman and could not bear the thought of losing her lover to another woman, but the thought of him being ripped apart by a hungry tiger was equally painful. While the accused man stood in the stadium facing the two doors, he glanced up at the princess. She gestured toward the right. He chose the door on the right. The story ended there. Did she send him to his death, or did she forfeit him to another woman. We’ll never know.

Of course the ending was left unresolved to encourage the reader to contemplate the various possibilities. Was the woman ruled by her jealousy or her compassion? It was left open-ended to inspire thoughtful consideration in the reader. But as a high school student, I didn’t like this ending. I didn’t want to speculate. I wanted the writer to answer the difficult questions. Not be left with ambiguity.

Apparently the later editors of Mark’s Gospel felt like me. Did you notice the way our gospel lesson ended this morning? Listen to it again. “So the women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” And so ends Mark’s gospel. Mark includes no appearances of the resurrected Jesus to his disciples, no grand or tearful reunions, no shouts for joy, no feelings of exultation, no great commissions. Just three terrified women, who come face to face with a heavenly messenger at an empty tomb and who run off, fearful and silent. What a strange way to end a gospel.

So strange that later scribes decided to tidy things up a bit. If you flip open your pew Bible to the end of Mark's Gospel, you'll notice two additions: the shorter ending of Mark and the longer ending of Mark. These two different endings came later, in an attempt to make Mark's gospel more like the other gospels. It was as if some early editor came along and said, "We can't have this type of ending. We need a solid conclusion. Something strong. We need to wrap this up in such a way that when the closing music starts and the credits begin to roll on screen, our audience will walk away feeling satisfied and confident. We simply cannot have 'they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. The End.'"

Yet Mark ended his gospel there for a reason, and our task is to come to terms with it as it stands. In some ways, Mark certainly got it right. **We** come to church on Easter Sunday knowing the rest of the story. We are here today to celebrate the greatest day in our Christian calendar, to sing for joy about the defining moment in our faith story, to experience all the wonder and excitement of the very first Easter morning.

But if we look at the event from the perspective of the women, perhaps we can understand their fear. These three women had witnessed the crucifixion. They had watched the agonizing betrayal and death of the man full of love and compassion. Jesus had changed their understandings in ways they never thought possible.

Mark began his gospel with the words, "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." In rapid fire storytelling, Mark highlights the significant points of the ministry of Jesus. Telling about a preacher who speaks about God in ways that challenge people to believe; about a man whose compassionate touch healed the sick and calmed the mentally ill; a man who ignored societal boundaries by including women in his inner circle and who took meals with those who were marginalized and ostracized.

Mark then tells of the events leading up to the horrible death of Jesus. He shows how Jesus attempted to prepare his followers, by explaining that death could only be conquered if God's Messiah faced and experienced death himself. Mark shows the conflicts between Jesus and the religious leaders, who thought they had a monopoly on the ways of God. Mark tells of a meal of bread and wine taking on a whole new meaning. He tells of agony and fear. And finally Mark writes about absolute abandonment

These three women had watched in horror as the man they loved, admired and respected was subjected to a barbaric form of execution. Two of them had observed Joseph of Arimathea taking the body of Jesus and placing it in a tomb and covering the entrance with a large stone. Because it was nearly the Sabbath, there had been no time to properly prepare the body. And so, in their grief and despair, these women came early on the morning following the Sabbath to anoint his body with spices, wanting to perform one final act of service for their master. One obstacle however, caused

them great concern. How would they possibly have the strength to roll away the stone? They didn't know, but still they came.

We understand these moments of utter despair. Have we not ourselves faced them? Moments of shock, grief, disappointment, loss, betrayal? Three A.M. in a hospital emergency room. The phone call that comes from the State Trooper telling of a deadly accident. The voice of the doctor telling you it's not operable. The callous note left on the kitchen table proclaiming the relationship is over. The blank face of a boss handing over the envelope containing the pink slip. Oh yes, we understand these moments.

And so, in their great distress, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came early to the tomb, and they discovered that the stone had already been rolled away. This added to their distress. Who was here, who moved the stone, what was happening?

They entered the tomb and were greeted by what appeared to be a young man dressed in a white robe. He was a heavenly messenger, and they were alarmed at the sight of him sitting there. The angel recognized their fear and attempted to calm them. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." The angel went on, giving them three specific messages – one about the past, one about the present, and one about the future.

He tells them the first message, what has already happened. "He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him." The women are told, you're looking in the wrong place. You are looking for him among the dead, but death could not hold onto him. This spot where they laid him, it's empty. The tomb is empty. This is the key statement of our faith as Christians. The reality of human sin resulted in death, but Jesus changed all that. He conquered death, and we no longer need to fear it. Death does not have the last word. Jesus does.

So if Jesus is not here, where is he? The women wonder, we wonder. And the angel gives the second message, the message about the present, what is happening now. He speaks, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee." Jesus is going ahead of you. His work is not done, it did not end at the cross, it did not end at the tomb, it did not even end at the resurrection. Jesus still has work to do in the world, and he is going on ahead, paving the way for all those who would follow him.

Then the angel tells the third message – a message about the future. He says, "There you will see him." This is a message of hope and assurance. Whenever we see justice realized, wherever oppression is overturned, each time poverty is conquered, or when the marginalized have finally found their voice – on those occasions we will see Jesus at work in this world. "There you will see him."

The message from the empty tomb this morning encompasses past, present, and future. He has been raised, he is going ahead of you to Galilee, and you will see him. What we have found here today is there is no end to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The women hear the words of the angel, but still they run away, terrified, and they keep silent about what they heard. But in light of their grief of having watched Jesus die, their confusion at arriving at an empty tomb, and their encounter with a heavenly being who gives them a strange message, is it so surprising they react as they do?

And so I think that perhaps the way Mark chooses to close his gospel is not so strange after all. It is a story that has no end. Instead it's a story that demands a response. What seems to be ambiguity on the part of the gospel writer is really a question to us. What do we do in light of what we have heard? Does it matter that Mark doesn't tell us what the women do later on? Of course not. They didn't remain silent. We know that. If they had, there would be no church, and you and I would not be in this place this morning or on any morning.

Mark gives us a gospel with an open ending, an ending that requires us to fill in the blanks. And we are faced with a dilemma similar to what I experienced in high school literature class. The lady or the tiger? Did the princess succumb to jealousy and point her lover to the tiger, or did she give him up to another lady to save him? Later I discovered that the point of the story wasn't about the choice the princess made; it is about the choices we make. Because as much as you and I might dislike ambiguity, isn't that what faces us so often in our lives? Life is full of uncertainty. Full of choices that are difficult to make. Full of choices that don't always lead to happy endings.

But the promise that we have this Easter morning is, Christ has been raised and he goes ahead of us, preparing the way for us. Whatever difficulties lie ahead, he is already there, and if we go to where he is, we will see him.

Mark's gospel closes with a choice, but not an ending, because there is no end to the good news of Jesus Christ. It's not about what these three women will do. It's about more than that. It's about what we will do. Each one of us has been given this same message by the angel there at the tomb. Jesus is not there. He has been raised. He is going ahead of us to work in the world and we will see him if we follow him. And that's the choice. We have been given the message, what are we going to do about it?