

“Cliffhanger Gospel” – Mark 16:1-8 – April 4, 2021

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The ending of Mark’s Gospel is a bit of a letdown. It’s sort of like, when you’re reading a really good book, and you’re getting close to the end – you note that there are fewer and fewer pages, and you wonder how on earth the author is going to be able to tie everything up. It seems impossible, really. There are way too many loose ends. Then with a growing dread, you come to the last page, the last paragraph, and the story is not finished. You’re left with a cliffhanger ending and the realization that you must wait until the author writes a sequel to know what comes next. In the meantime, you’re stuck with ambiguity.

So we come to the end of Mark’s Gospel and read the last line – here it is 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.” Wait. What? That’s it?

Later editors of the Mark’s gospel found the lack of closure unsatisfying and tacked on two different endings to the gospel. If you grab your bible, turn to the end of Mark, and read them, it’s clear those two endings were not written by original author.

When we come to Easter Sunday, we expect to see appearances of the resurrected Jesus, tear-filled reunions, and amazed shouts of Joy. Instead, Mark leaves us with three terrified women, a rather odd messenger, and an empty tomb. We know the end of the story so it’s not hard to fill in the blanks. After all, we are here to celebrate the defining moment in our faith story, to experience the thrill of that very first Easter day.

But suppose we didn’t know the end of the story – what if we experienced it from the perspective of the women in our story? They had every reason to run away from the tomb terrified and confused. These three women had watched in horror as the man they loved, admired and respected was subjected to a barbaric form of execution, his body placed in a tomb just before the Sabbath. And so, in their grief, these women came early on the morning following the Sabbath, having purchased spices for the anointing of his body. Facing loss head on.

We can relate to moments like this. In fact, this entire past year has been a series of moments like this. It seems like the never-ending moment. Just over a year ago, Covid-19 brought an upheaval to our lives that we never imagined. And on a global scale. We have faced a myriad of challenges head on. We have experienced emotions of fear, frustration, uncertainty, anger, and grief. Worldwide there have been over 2.8 million deaths related to Covid-19. And while vaccines are finally available, the pandemic is far from over.

Additionally, our country continues to be divided over multiple issues. The need for justice is glaringly obvious for those who are willing to see it. Voices for positive change struggle to be heard over the din of those who violently clutch their ill-gotten wealth and power. Violence, hate crimes, inequality, and inequity show up in the headlines daily.

Yes, we understand moments of distress.

Facing their great pain, the women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome came early to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, except for a strange messenger dressed in a white robe. Understandably shocked, the women did not know what to do.

Attempting to calm their fear, the strange messenger gave them information that would change their lives forever. Anticipating their questions, the messenger said, “He has been raised. He is not here.

Look, there is the place they laid him." The women were 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. Death no longer has the final word. In Christ we may experience eternal life.

At this point I imagine that women are wondering where Jesus is. Again, anticipating their question, the messenger told them, "Go, tell his disciples 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.

Perhaps their final question would have been, so now what? And the messenger said, "There you will see him." This is a word of hope and assurance. Whenever we see justice realized, wherever oppression is overturned, each time poverty is conquered, or when the marginalized have finally been seen and heard – 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. Jesus has been raised, he is going ahead of you to Galilee, and you will see him. I think what we have discovered here today is there is no end to the Good News of Jesus Christ.

The women heard the words of the messenger, but still they ran away, terrified, and they kept 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 strange messenger, 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 cliffhanger 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.

Mark gives us a gospel with an open ending, an ending that requires us to fill in the blanks. As much as we may dislike ambiguity, isn't that what we are faced with so often in our lives? Our lives are full of uncertainty. Full of choices which are often difficult to make. Full of choices where there are no simple answers. 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. Will they remain silent? Or will they tell the disciples and Peter? 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 messenger 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.

So what comes next? Well, that is up to us to determine. We have been given the gospel in the form of a cliffhanger. As we live out the Good News of Jesus Christ in our own lives and with one another, we decide what comes next. What will you do?