

*The Beginning of the Good News*  
Mark 16:1-8  
Rev. Dr. Anne-Marie Hislop  
April 5, 2015, Easter Sunday – 11:00 AM Service

‘And they lived happily ever after.’ Even as a child, I found that proverbial ending to fairy tales unsatisfactory. I wanted to know more. What happened next? Ok, so the prince found Cinderella. Did they have children? How many did they have? By my early teens I had a bit of a reputation in my family for being startled and a bit disappointed when a movie came to an end. I always wanted to know what was over the next hill or happened the next day. It seemed that for me the story was never quite finished enough.

We human beings are most comfortable with stories that come to a neat and tidy end. Some kinds of stories, mysteries for example, are judged as good or not partly based upon how well they tie up all the loose ends. Who would read a mystery author who always left some clues unexplained? Who would watch CSI or Law & Order if those shows did not clear up all of the unanswered questions at the end of the hour? Whether in fiction or in real life, there is something unsettling about an unfinished story. We want to know what happened.

Our text on this Easter morning is a classic of an uncomfortably unfinished story. Mark leaves us hanging. The gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John all follow the Easter resurrection scene with excitement mixed with the fear. Jesus appears. Jesus reunites with the grieving disciples, who can then rejoice. The risen Christ forgives those who abandoned him. The risen Christ teaches some final lessons. Lots of appearances to round off the story. Lots of appearances to offer more ‘proof’ of the resurrection. Not Mark. Mark offers no real ending. Mark offers only a hanging, disturbingly open ended story. “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” What kind of an ending is THAT for what has been called “The Greatest Story Ever Told”?

Our first inclination is to want to argue with the text. Surely, we say, they told someone. Obviously they told someone, we say, how else would we all know about it? Certainly we all ‘know about it.’ Word got around. But that is not the point. The point is that Mark left the ‘greatest story ever told’ hanging. No Jesus sightings. No rejoicing. No male disciples rushing to the tomb to see for themselves. Just the women, Mary Magdalene and the others, fleeing in sheer terror. How’s that for unsettling?

The unsettling, uncomfortable nature of this text was there right from the beginning. Those of you who looked at the text just now probably noticed that our version of the gospel of Mark does not end there. Yet there is good textual evidence that Mark did end it right there at verse 8. However, Christians in the first century were just as uncomfortable with the abrupt ending as we are. Some suggested that some smoother, more complete ending surely must have been lost somewhere – a piece of the manuscript must be missing. So some early Christians,

trying to tidy things up a bit, added what scholars call the shorter and the longer endings. Someone added a few lines saying that the women did in fact tell people. Someone else still feeling that the story was unfinished added some appearances by the resurrected Jesus. They just couldn't leave Mark's abrupt ending alone. Too bad.

If we assume that Mark ended his gospel just the way he intended with the women in full flight in terror, the question is why did the gospel writer leave us with an unfinished story? Why did he not give us some proof of the resurrection – some stories about Jesus' appearances, a little hint of the celebration? After those difficult flogging and crucifixion scenes surely we deserve something uplifting. But, nothing. Zip, zilch, nada. Just they fled “for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” What was Mark thinking?

The clue to what Mark intended is both in the fact that his story is unfinished and in what the text tells us at the end. The story is unfinished because the gospel of Jesus Christ is an unfinished story. Jesus came proclaiming that the kingdom of God had drawn near. Jesus' ministry is the opening of the story. Jesus is God's new beginning in the salvation of the world, in the in-breaking of the kingdom of God on earth. The gospel story is, in essence, volume one of the Christian story. Our clue to how this story is to continue unfolding is in the text itself. Mark does not just tell us that Jesus is “not here” in the tomb, but also that Jesus is going ahead of us. Jesus has completed his mission and gone on ahead of us. In the very beginning of the gospels, when Jesus calls the disciples, he says to them “come behind me,” follow me. Our story, volume one, ends with Jesus having gone on ahead, beckoning the rest of us to follow.

The other clue in the text that tells us something about why Mark's story is an unfinished story is that the women were ‘terrified, amazed’ and ‘afraid.’ Up until this point, the disciples did not really understand who Jesus really was. They thought of him more in the line of a king like the great King David. What they did not understand was that Jesus was God in the flesh. Jesus was God in human form. No wonder they were terrified when it began to dawn upon them just who it was that they had been chatting with and chowing down with and hosting in their homes! Jesus was God.

Mark's story is unfinished because the story is ongoing. Each generation creates a new volume. Each one of us has a role. Each of us writes a chapter in the story that started with “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” The question is what kind of story will each of our chapters be? How will our piece of the story look? What part will each of us play?

How our part of the story looks, how our individual roles unfold in this great story of God's salvation history, depends to a large extent upon how well we understand that Jesus of Nazareth was God in the flesh. Do we really get that? Jesus was God. Most, if not all, of us certainly nod agreement to that. That's why we're here, isn't it? Certainly the Christian church teaches that Jesus was God. But we are not talking here about whether or not we believe it in

some intellectual way in the same manner that we believe a whole list of doctrines. In a way, we are talking about the WOW factor. Jesus was God. That was God walking around on those dusty roads in those sandals. The things we have in the gospel, the instructions and admonitions, the commands and modeled behavior – that’s God speaking to us and showing us how to be. WOW! If we can really grasp that, what will our story look like?

When we are able to really know that Jesus was God, we can experience ourselves as forgiven sinners. Period. If we really understand that it is God who tells us that our sins are forgiven, if we feel in our heart of hearts that it was God who hung on that cross out of love for us, we might finally be able to let go of the worry that some of our sins are unforgivable. We might start to believe that nothing we could possibly do is out of the range of forgiveness of a God who would suffer out of love for us.

If we really know in our heart that Jesus was God, we might come to understand that there is no hurt or slight or offense done to us that is worth our holding onto. We will find a way to heal and forgive because the fact that our God has walked among us will so take our breath away that we will see our human wounds as but temporary pain in God’s grand story in which we participate.

If we really know in our hearts that Jesus was God among us, we will crave with every fiber of our beings to be fed on his words. We Christians are surprisingly good at treating the gospels like a book that we’ve already read – a book that’s a little too familiar and therefore not all that interesting. Yet God speaks here. God really speaks. Scholars can debate whether the bible as a whole was dictated by God or inspired by God or of human origin, but the truth is that we Christians know that we have the words of God emanating from the mouth of Jesus Christ. When we can really get that, then our part of the story will be filled with joyous feeding on the words of our Lord and Savior found in the text.

When we really come to know in our hearts that Jesus was God in human form, we might finally be able to put in perspective the stuff of this world. On this resurrection day we proclaim that death has been vanquished, that this life is but the first stage of our journey. This is the first chapter for each of us. Eternal chapters will be written in our life eternal. Knowing who Jesus was, how can our chapters in this brief earthly volume of God’s story not be filled with faithful living out of Jesus’ call to stand for justice and equality and to stand with the poor, marginalized, and forgotten in our society? If we are following our Lord and Savior, this need not be drudgery. Jesus enjoyed life. He dined with friends. He celebrated with a bride and groom. He surrounded himself with loving relationships. He took time for solitude, reflection and prayer. God in Jesus made very plain that joy and relaxation and love and laughter are good things. But Jesus also made very plain that those who truly know him do not ultimately rest while others of God’s children go hungry, or suffer as outcasts, or try to survive on a dollar or less a day.

Mark left his story uncomfortably unfinished because the story of God's salvation history is an ongoing saga. Mark left his story unfinished because in every age and place, each of us is called upon to furnish our own little piece of the story. We too will leave our story unfinished and open ended calling to those who come after to follow Jesus as we have tried to follow Jesus.

The story continues, but the end has already been written. He has been raised! Because he lives, we too shall live. Thanks be to God.