

The Beginning of the Good News
Mark 16:1-8
Rev. Dr. Anne-Marie Hislop
April 5, 2015, Easter Sunday – 9:00 AM Service

The videos are favorites on the ABC show, America’s Funniest Home Videos, but they can also be found on U-Tube. Some show a child on Christmas morning. When the child opens that big gift box to discover a puppy, she begins screaming “Oh my God, Oh my God, a puppy. I got a pup-pppy.” Then inexplicably that child will begin to shriek or fall to the floor sobbing uncontrollably catching the adults, who had expected unbridled joy, totally off guard. In other versions, a grandmother to be (sometimes a future grandpa, but it’s usually the grandma) is given a card or shown a baby shirt or offered some other subtle or cutesie message that the little one is on the way. The reaction is screeches and tears and demands to know that this is real and not a trick – often the family has to rush grandma-to-be into a chair before she falls to the floor. There are endless variations on the themes of these videos, but they share one element in common. Upon getting something that they have desperately wanted and hoped for, each of the recipients is so overwhelmed that he or she cannot take it in and more or less collapses in a heap.

Our text on the Easter morning is the resurrection story as told in the gospel of Mark. The text starts out predictably enough. Mark tells us that three women, Mary Magdalene, Salomé, and Mary the mother of James, who had stood at a distance to watch where Jesus was buried, bought spices with which to finish preparing his body for burial. Likely they bought the spices after sundown on Saturday for Mark goes on to say that they went to the tomb very early the first day of the week, Sunday. There’s a wonderful little ironic twist in the English text, for it says that went to the tomb “after the sun had risen” (that’s s-u-n). Like Mark the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John all tell of women going to the tomb, though which women they name varies a bit. Mary Magdalene is the only one mentioned in all four gospels. Sure that they would find the body exactly where they had seen it put, Mark tells us that the women worried only about how the large stone across the entrance would be moved. They need not have worried. The stone had been rolled back. Do you suppose that that gave them pause? I know that I would be wondering who did that and then worrying about who might be inside the tomb. Was it safe to go in? The women, though, entered the tomb to find only a young man dressed in a white robe. Although Mark neither describes the robe as dazzling nor identifies the man as an angel as Luke and Matthew do, the white robe is suggestive of a heavenly messenger. The note that the young man was sitting “on the right side” also reminds us of Jesus’ statement that he would be seated on the right hand of the one he called “the Father” in the kingdom. For the women, the young man’s message is stunning, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Generally when the Bible says ‘do not be alarmed’ or ‘do not be afraid,’ the news

which is coming next is good news. Certainly that is true here. “He has been raised” is certainly amazingly good news. The young man gives the women only a moment to verify this for themselves – look, here is where the body was – now go and tell Peter and the others. Surely they are to tell that he has been raised, but the young man specifically instructs them to say that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee – “there you will see him, just as he told you.” Indeed, if we looked back in the gospel of Mark we would find that Jesus had said just that to the gathered disciples at the Last Supper just after he warned them that they would all desert him, “after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” The women, though, despite all this, “went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Well, that’s a heck of a way to end a gospel! They must have told someone. We all know they told someone. What does Mark mean ending on that note? They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid! First all the male disciples, including Peter, deserted Jesus in his hour of suffering and death. Then the women, who had stood by him as he suffered and died, ran away from that empty tomb as if it contained the plague. Where is our nice wrap up? The other gospels go on with resurrection appearances by Jesus. We get to see that all is forgiven. In the gospel of John’s telling of the story the disciples go back to fishing and Jesus forgives Peter for denying him and loves Peter just as before. So troubling was Mark’s ending right from the very beginning that various ancient Christians added endings to tidy it all up for Mark. If you opened your Bible as we heard the text just now you likely noticed that there actually are more verses. You might have noticed that there is a very, very long footnote at the end of it all. Here’s the thing – there is very good evidence that “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” was truly the end of the original gospel written by Mark. So, what was Mark up to? Why would the women react that way to news that should rightly make them ecstatic?

These women, who were followers of Jesus and also his friends, had been through so much pain; their hopes had been dashed. Just a week or so before as Jesus rode triumphantly into Jerusalem it had seemed as if dreams were coming true; their world was changing; Jesus’ way, the way of justice and love, was coming to rule in their city and in their lives. Then it all came crashing down; their savior was crucified and died; their hope had evaporated. As women have done for millennia, the two Mary’s and Salomé went about carrying out the rituals of death as a final act of love to the one in whom they had placed so much hope. Then in a sudden reversal, when it turned out that their hope was to be fulfilled after all, they like the folks in those modern videos, were overwhelmed, confused, and beyond rational thought – at least temporarily. They ran away. Obviously they told someone, but that is not our point for today. Mark had a very real purpose in ending his gospel story so very abruptly. What Mark does is prevent Christians

throughout the ages, folks like us, from closing the book, thinking what a great story, and moving on. If the ending is tied up in a neat ribbon, we Christians tend to see that story as finished. Isn't that nice, we think. We read the gospel of John and think, 'look how touching it is when Mary recognized her risen Lord in the garden;' 'see how warm and fuzzy it is when Peter recognize Jesus on the beach and Jesus cooking breakfast for his disciples on the beach – what a lovely ending.' We read Matthew or Luke's account of Jesus' resurrection appearances and see his disciples respond with joy – 'what a lovely ending,' we think, 'all is resolved,' and close the book. Such completeness leads far too many of us to believe that all we need do is know the ancient story and believe it –how lovely. Mark says, "Not so fast. It doesn't end there."

Mark means to unsettle us. Mark intends us to get to the end, "they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid" and say, "wait a minute, that can't be all there is." Mark intends us to go back looking at his text again wondering if we missed something in this story. In pointing us back into the text, Mark guides us to take another look at his opening line, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, son of God." What Mark offers us is not the whole story. What Mark offers is only *the beginning* of the story. In a sense, sisters and brothers, the gospel text is only volume one. It is not the complete story. When the young man in the empty tomb tells the women that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, they (and we) are pointed right back to the core of Jesus' ministry which took place in Galilee. We are referred back to his teaching and his mission. Mark sends us back into the story; back to Jesus of Nazareth in Galilee; back to the calls to love our enemy and feed the hungry and to forgive each other endlessly. In the admonition to go looking for Jesus in Galilee, Mark points us back to calls to turn from the temptations of this world and to take up our cross to follow Jesus. With the horrors of crucifixion fresh in our minds having so recently stood at Calvary on Good Friday, that admonition is frightening indeed. But then we remind ourselves that Jesus chose to take up his cross; he chose to give his life for those he loved. Our call to take up our cross is not a call to suffer needlessly nor is it a call to passively accept what the world does to us. Rather that call is to choose to do that which is hard; to choose to do that which sometimes requires sacrifice; to choose to do that which may, on occasion, cause us pain; to choose to do whatever is needed to love God's other children as we ourselves have been loved by Jesus. Mark points us back into the story because the resurrection is only the end of the beginning of God's whole new thing. God began a new thing with that birth in Bethlehem. The world did not know about that beginning. Jesus, when he had grown to adulthood, taught a whole new way of being and caring and relating and serving; Jesus taught about the way God calls us to live with justice and equality for all. Only a relative few in the world got that message during his lifetime. Then God raised this Jesus from the dead. According to the gospel of Matthew, the event was literally earth shaking, yet most of the world went about

its business as usual oblivious to the fact that nothing would ever be the same again. The seeds were planted, but Jesus left it up to his followers to carry out his mission, to spread the good news of God's salvation, and to show the world the ways of the kingdom of God.

By not tying the story in a neat package, Mark reminds us that the gospel text, the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Christ, is far from the whole story. Jesus came out of the tomb to continue going ahead of us as we go about writing our own chapters of this living 'greatest story ever told.' God changed the dynamic of the world by overcoming death and offering a path to abundant life here and life eternal to come, but set Christians the task generation-by-generation of entering into kingdom living, carrying the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ forward until all is fulfilled. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus, the Christ, is our living Lord who goes before us still. Jesus is alive! He has been raised! Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!