

"THE FIRST DAY"  
Mark 16:1-8  
April 4, 2021 Easter  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

Mark 16:8-- *"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? Are you kidding me? This is so NOT what we were expecting.

We have spent the last six weeks- the whole season of Lent- meticulously walking through the final week of Jesus's life. Day by day, as outlined in the Gospel of Mark, we followed in his footsteps. On the first day, Sunday, we watched as he entered the holy city of Jerusalem on the back of a borrowed colt. What he knew and we didn't, was that this was the culmination of his conflicts with the powers that be. He was fed up with the collaboration between the Roman Imperial Empire and the Jewish Religious leaders. In his final week, Jesus takes on the domination system: the political and economic domination of the many by a few and the use of religion to justify it. (Seems like some things never change.)

Monday morning Jesus made his presence known by raising a ruckus in the temple marketplace. On Tuesday we listened as he taught the disciples about prayer and forgiveness and we watched with glee as he won every debate with the Jewish authorities.

We couldn't believe it when he had supper in the home of a leper on Wednesday. We inhaled the strong fragrance of the oil with which the unnamed woman anointed his head, much to the surprise and annoyance of the men in the room, especially Judas.

We remember what a long day Thursday was as the Last Supper ended and Jesus prayed his heart out in the garden while his disciples slept. Then Judas betrayed him with a kiss, he was arrested, and the disciples ran away. We watched in fear as he was dragged into a kangaroo court where liars testified against him and the leaders were chomping at the bit to condemn him to death. And then Peter

denied three times that he knew Jesus and was left weeping and broken in the courtyard.

And then- Friday. Friday. He was nailed to the cross and screamed out a cry of abandonment to God. With the women watching and weeping nearby and his male disciples nowhere to be found, he died. His body was removed from the cross and laid in a borrowed tomb.

The Gospel of Mark says not one word about Saturday. We know nothing of what Jesus's followers did on the Sabbath. There was just silence and emptiness.

Now we come to Sunday morning with some sense of anticipation- because we know how the story ends. Some of us have heard it hundreds of times. In worship this morning we have been singing songs of good news and great joy! There is a real sense of excitement and happiness.

And then we hear the ending of Mark's Gospel- perhaps the MOST important text in scripture. And this is what we get? *"... and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."*

*"It takes Mark five chapters to record the final week of Jesus's life but just a few short verses to unleash the mystery of the resurrection among us."  
(Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm)*

Is this any way to run a resurrection?

Give me Matthew's Gospel where there is at least an earthquake and an angel with an appearance like lightning who came to roll back the stone.

Give me the ecstatic women from Luke's Gospel who couldn't wait to share the unbelievably great news of the resurrection with the rest of the disciples, even though the men didn't believe them at first.

Give me John's Gospel where a weeping Mary Magdalen is met by the resurrected Jesus and she recognizes him only when he speaks her name. Then she runs to tell the rest of the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

Now those are what I call resurrection stories. Mark doesn't seem to do us any favors when he ends his Gospel so mysteriously and so abruptly. In the original Greek it's even worse, there isn't even an ending. A literal translation goes like this: *"To no one anything they said; afraid they were for..."*

And that's it. Is this any way to end a Gospel?

How can a Gospel that begins with these words, *"The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,"*

end with these: *"And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."*

Apparently, we aren't the only ones who aren't happy with Mark's ending. Throughout the history of Christianity, four different endings have been tacked on to Mark's story by various editors and scribes. The New Revised Standard Version contains both a "shorter ending" and a "longer ending." Some biblical scholars even argue that the original scroll from Mark's hand was somehow damaged and the ending piece was torn off and lost.

Others are convinced that this is exactly what Mark intended. They believe that he was writing for an audience who already knew about and believed the story of the resurrection and didn't need Mark to prove it to them.

Regardless of which of these theories we believe, this is what we know from Mark's Gospel. Early in the morning of the new day the grieving women go to the cemetery with spice to honor Jesus- as was their custom. They expected to find his dead body in the tomb. They knew it wouldn't be a pleasant task, but it was all they could do for him and for themselves at this point- so they went. On the way they began to worry about how they would gain access to the tomb.

They were there Friday night and they saw the large boulder that was used to seal the tomb. Their first inkling that things were a little weird was when they saw that the huge stone had been moved and the entrance to the grave of Jesus yawned open in front of them.

And it got even weirder. When they looked inside, they found, not a dead Jesus, but a young man in a white robe. He had a message for them.

*"Don't be afraid. You are looking for Jesus, the one who was crucified, but he isn't here. He has been raised. You can see the place where they laid his body. Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee where he will meet you just like he said he would."*

Right about now their jars of spices are probably lying in pieces on the ground as they try to comprehend what they are seeing and hearing. They are paralyzed by fear and amazement and they told no one.

How can this be?

If the resurrection of Jesus doesn't leave all of us afraid and speechless then we are not taking it seriously. This reality-shattering event changed the course of history. How could any human being possibly put into words the magnitude of what God did in the confines of that cold, dark tomb early that morning?

None of the Gospels can ever really end the story of Jesus because his story continues with us today. It continues with us and with all of those who have followed him these past 2000 years and will continue with all who will follow him in the years and centuries to come. Mark is very clear about this.

Crucifixion was not the end of the story. Death was not the end of the story. The tomb was not the end of the story. Just as the grave could not contain Jesus, so Mark's Gospel, cannot contain him. Not even the whole Bible can contain him because he lives and breathes even today as the Risen Christ.

Contrary to what we may be thinking, Mark doesn't leave us with a lousy ending, He gives us a glorious invitation! David Lose writes, *"The story of what God is doing in and through Jesus isn't over at the empty tomb. **It's only just getting started!** Resurrection isn't a conclusion, it's an invitation. And Jesus's triumph over death, sin, and hate isn't what Mark's Gospel is all about. Mark's Gospel is all about setting us up to live resurrection lives and continue the story of God's redemption of the world."*

Mark wrote his Gospel during a time of trauma- about 70 years after the resurrection of Jesus- not long after the Roman armies had quashed a Jewish rebellion, destroying the temple and much of Jerusalem. Jews and Christians were killed by the thousands. Mark wrote for those devastated people; those who had

never seen Jesus in the flesh; those who had never heard his voice or looked into his eyes. He wrote a message of hope for those who had none left. So, he ends in silence, a silence that honored their current tragedy.

It is a silence that acknowledges how difficult it is to put "resurrection" into words. Mark invites us to stand with our silent sisters, Mary Magdalen, Mary, and Salome, as we too try to put into words the audacious claim that the One who was crucified on the cross and laid into the tomb did not stay put. He did not stay dead. It is hard to articulate such a message because if this is true, then everything changes. And everyone must change. If this is true it should take our breath away and make talking impossible- at least momentarily.

No matter how much we want him to, Mark refuses to domesticate Easter- he refuses to make it easy for us to understand. He makes us work for it. He is telling us that God is on the loose in the world and that should make all of us stop and shut our mouths- for just a bit.

The Risen Christ calls his disciples, and he calls us to move forward, always forward. *"He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."* Not only is Jesus alive but he is going ahead of us, always leading the way, always showing us the way. Always inviting us to follow him.

Bethany Seminary professor, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, reminds us that *"Mark 16:1-8 does not bring closure to the Gospel but opens wide the doorway to the tomb, beckoning Jesus's followers to take another look inside, then to go out to proclaim what they have seen and heard of the resurrected Lord."*

*"By the power of the Holy Spirit, he is already out ahead of us, leading the way. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we will proclaim Christ's life-giving message in word and deed. The Gospel of Mark begins and ends with the proclamation of the good news and the invitation to participate in God's reign alive among us." (1)*

The simplest way to describe what happened Easter morning is this: God's love is stronger than hate. God's life is stronger than death. Jesus didn't die to make it possible for God to forgive us, but rather to show us that God already has forgiven us because God loves us so much.

The leaders of the Roman Empire thought they had won when they nailed Jesus to the cross. They were convinced that they had proved, once and for all, that Caesar was lord. For them death proved everything. But Mark shows us that the empty tomb only proves that death did not have the last word. Easter is about revolution.

Biblical scholar, Walter Brueggemann tells us not to take Easter for granted and not to assume that the Imperial Empire is a thing of the past. He writes, *"Easter is not just an ancient oddity. Easter is an unsettling way in the world that continues to have socioeconomic, political, and human implications. Easter is not just a spiritual event, but a surging of power that touches all of life. The Easter question is not whether you can get your mind around the resurrection, because you can't. Rather, the question is whether you can permit in your horizon new healing power, new surging possibility, new gestures to the lame, new ways of power in an armed, fearful world, new risk, new life, leaping, dancing, singing, praising the power beyond all our controlled power."*

Brueggemann warns, *"In our world, the old ways of greed and hate and fear are about to destroy us. We hate our enemy, and we inevitably die a little. We abuse our neighbor, and we end up in a vicious cycle of abuse. We find ourselves lonely and weary, but in control. But now, now, comes a powerful, unimaginable alternative!"* (2)

The tomb was empty and it was morning- the first day; a day filled to overflowing with glorious, sparkling, shimmering hope and possibility!

It was on the Sunday  
that God had the last word.

They went to the tomb  
and nothing was as  
they had expected.

The stone had been moved.  
They looked inside  
and there was no dead body.

A young man told them:  
He is not here!

He has been raised!  
Go tell the others!  
And they were stunned  
into silence.

It was on the Sunday  
that **God** had-  
that God **has**  
the last word.  
Alleulia! Christ is Risen!

End Notes:

- PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MARK: PROCLAIMING THE POWER OF GOD,  
Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm. Westminster John Knox Press. 2008. P.262.
- "The Surge of Dangerous, Restless Power," from THE THREAT OF LIFE,  
Walter Brueggeman, Fortress Press. 1996. Pp. 156-157.