

The Three Endings Of The Gospel Of Mark
Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Patricia L. Hunter



Each gospel writer had their own way of telling the Resurrection story. If you haven't had the opportunity to read the resurrection story in all four gospels, I encourage you to do so. I won't take you long maybe 10-15 minutes. The resurrection story in Mark's gospel is rather unique in that there are three endings. Today, each of the pastors will read one of Mark's endings and share our reflections. I have the first ending that comes from Mark 16:1-8.

16When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, '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. ⁷But 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.' ⁸So 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.

Well, this is a different twist to the traditional Easter message about the women when they left the tomb. For terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Well, it could have happened that way. At times fear can be so gripping that we are paralyzed and can't move or do anything. We can be afraid for our lives; afraid of losing our reputation; afraid of losing a relationship, a child, a job, or even a home. Fear from racial violence is real for many people of color these days. Fear is real.

I'm sure the women who went to the tomb were afraid. But it is equally important to take note that the women were together. Three women decided that in spite of the obstacles they were likely to encounter, they were going to the tomb to give their beloved Jesus a proper burial. They didn't have all the details figured out about how they were going to remove the stone in front of the tomb. But as strong determined women, they figured they would come up with something and off they went.

In my tradition, we say God can make a way out of no way. There was no way those three women could have removed that stone, but they didn't have to. God took care of that. God made a way for them.

Going to the tomb and seeing the stone rolled away must have been mind blowing. Seeing and hearing angels must have been disorienting to the women. Receiving instructions to go tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus had gone ahead and would meet them in Galilee could make one's heart beat really, really fast.

But would the three have been so frightened that they said nothing to anyone? If the angel said to go tell, would the women have remained silent? Hum.....I wonder? I think I would opt for another ending.

There is an African proverb that says,
If you want to go fast, go alone.
If you want to go far, go together.

The women were together. Jesus even said where two or three are gathered in his name, he would be there. There is wisdom, strength, and courage where two or three are gathered in the name of Love. The women may have been afraid, but some of us know how to push through fear. Many of us don't have the option of being paralyzed by fear. We have to find the courage to push through fear. The work of love and justice calls for us to push through fear.

The women may have been afraid, but they told somebody about the good news of our risen Lord. The women may have been afraid, but they went and told the disciples and Peter just what the angel said. We are not afraid. We will share the good news of love, hope, and belonging in Christ Jesus.

The Rev. Anita Peebles

Mark 16:9 (the shorter ending)

[[And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.]]

...that's it? That's the Scripture? Yep, this is what we call the shorter ending of Mark, composed of just verse 9. But let us not overlook the verse simply because it is short...it shouldered a heavy burden: this verse is tasked with resolving a great deal of ambiguity. Because, as Pastor Patricia just addressed, the first ending to the gospel of Mark concludes in an open-ended place. Unlike the gospels of Matthew and Luke and John, in Mark, there are no appearances of Jesus to the disciples, no road to Emmaus, no touching the scars in his hands and feet, no ascension into heaven. On the surface, ambiguity can be exciting and interesting, with myriad options and space for imagination. But ambiguity can also be challenging, especially when we'd just like some concrete answers, just some idea of what to expect or what to think. This ending of Mark has perplexed readers ever since it was written in the first century of the Common Era, perhaps even being the impetus for the other gospel writers to include endings in their renditions, as the community of early Christ followers tried to figure out how to continue Jesus' ministry without

him physically present. Now, forward to the 4th century and “the shorter ending” of Mark appears, offering an explanation for what happened after the women left the empty tomb and returned home on Easter morning.

I wonder what happened in the space of those few centuries such that someone felt the need to clarify what happened after the women returned home. I wonder what happened such that the mystery of Jesus’ resurrection was no longer satisfactory and so some concrete ending had to be added. I wonder if the mystery, the ambiguity, was dangerous in some way.

Beloveds, we are in an ambiguous time. Even today, on this festival of the resurrection, we find ourselves wondering what is to come next. After a year of worshipping virtually, many are experiencing hope that comes along with vaccinations and we are making plans to worship together in our sanctuary again this summer...and we also know there is still a lot of grieving to be done, and that the work of public health in containing this virus and addressing the harm is far from over. As a country, many may have been feeling like they can take a breath following the inauguration of a new president...and yet we must be aware that the work of deconstructing white supremacy and Christian nationalism is far from over, but we must do it so we can live justly with our neighbors here and around the world. As a church, we have had some fascinating and important conversations about long-range planning, dreaming big dreams about how we can love each other well and serve our neighbors...and yet we are still figuring out how to get from “here” to “there.”

And on Easter morning, we are leaning into the ambiguity even as we three pastors preach together. Here in the middle slot, between Pastor Patricia and Pastor Tim, I urge you to not move too quickly toward resolving ambiguity. I invite you to breathe. To imagine yourself at the tomb with the women, in the garden, listening to the young man. To imagine yourself about to be surprised when the women deliver the good news. I invite you to allow yourself to be fully present in this moment, embracing the mystery--just for right now. Even if you have lots of wondering to do, wondering what will come next, wondering how the story will end, wondering how you fit into God’s work of justice...know that even, and perhaps especially, in the liminal spaces at the edge of what is known and unknown, what has come to pass and what is yet to be, God is with us, calling us by name and empowering us to spread the good news.

The Rev. Dr. Tim Phillips

At our house, we have pretty much had enough of reality. We can only take so much news, so much noise, so much calculated nastiness.

These last four years have left us needing an escape from time to time. And the place we find it is ... Hallmark movies. Yes. It’s sad but true. Because you can always count on an uncomplicated plot – there are only five or six of them anyway – and you can be sure of a happy ending. It’s television’s *unreality* series – the gateway drug to superficial American values.

And if I am honest, I suspect that's what most Christians want out of Easter – an uncomplicated plot, a happy ending, and a superficial assurance that all is right with *their* world.

Unfortunately, as you have heard, that's not what we get in the gospel of Mark. Its Easter story is messy and ambiguous and unfinished.

And, as you have also heard, several folks have tried to fix it along the way.

Now, it falls to me to talk about the later and longer ending – which, frankly, I wish whoever came along to add this part would have left well enough alone.

Here is the third ending of Mark:

9 Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. ¹⁰She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. ¹¹But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

[If that sounds familiar, it's because it is borrowed from Matthew.]

Verse 12 goes on: After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. ¹³And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. ¹⁴ Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.

[This is borrowed from Luke – the Emmaus Road story in Luke 24].

Verse 15: And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. ¹⁶The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.

[This ominous sounding part is a summary of the gospel of John.]

And before we go on, I want to remind you that Mark is the earliest gospel. Even though the order we have in our Bibles is Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Mark is decades earlier.

Think about that. For many years, the only Easter story the early community of Jesus told was Mark's, that ends with: "... they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Perhaps Mark imagined and even invited people to write their own endings to the story of Jesus made up out of the resurrections in their own lives – those times when Jesus showed up for them or those pivotal moments when love and life rose unexpectedly out of deep loss.

And maybe some of you take comfort in the fact that the earliest witness of the resurrection left people very *uncomfortable*.

Whether it was Mark's intention or not, a lot of people got involved in re-writing the ending of his story. They added pieces of Mathew, Luke, and John and then couldn't resist adding something of their own.

Here are verses 17-20:

¹⁷And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover. ¹⁹So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

Since this is not historically authentic to Mark, I'm happy to join the chorus of biblical scholars and throw this part out – especially the snakes.

But I wonder if, even this ending, points to something about resurrection.

Maybe it means no story of life – no matter how good or beautiful or full - has a completely satisfying ending. Or maybe, since endings and beginnings are so bound together, we never get endings exactly right. They are never exactly what they seem to be. Maybe, for Mark, resurrection means that we are always re-writing endings in light of new beginnings.

What we know for sure is that this is no Hallmark movie – it's complicated and the ending is a question mark that asks something of us.

Does it feel strange to be celebrating Easter on the day Dr. King was murdered? Or does it seem exactly right? His final words at Mason Temple on the night before he died were set against the betrayal of violence on the previous day. He told friends he felt like a failure. But people still believed and they still needed some word and they still showed up. And Dr. King closed his message that night with:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter to me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And he's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

The gospel of Mark leaves us to wonder what happens next. No doubt the days ahead would be difficult. And Mark leaves us with ambiguity that dares us to imagine what we will do now. It calls us to move beyond our fear and to re-write endings in light of new beginnings. No matter how long the journey to Galilee, Jesus will meet us there - if we can just find the strength and the courage to take that next step toward that vision of promised land, that good news for the whole creation, that glory that is on its way to meet us.

I don't know if they sang "We Shall Overcome" on that evening in Memphis. If they did, it was no Hallmark moment. Reality was too strong, life was too complicated, threats were too pervasive, the stakes are too high.

I don't know if they sang that night. But I can imagine it. Because I can hear those voices stretching from then to now. I can hear it in the voices of our ancestors. I can hear it in your voice. I can hear it in my voice. Because, I think, this is the Easter we are really looking for: "We shall overcome!"

And today, if you hear that voice – even if, especially if, the only voice you hear is your own - do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

See James Tabor, "The Strange Ending of the Gospel of Mark And Why It Makes a Difference," February 6, 2021 www.biblicalarchaeology.org. The final sermon from Dr. King can be found in *I Have A Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. James M. Washington (HarperSanFrancisco, 1986, 1992) p. 203.