

TO BEGIN ANEW

Do you remember last Easter? We had great plans to move from livestreaming at my home to beaming the service to you direct from the Meeting House. But then there was the steam line break and problems with the Wi-Fi signal and there we were back in my living room. No hymns, no organ, no lilies. It was nonetheless a lovely Easter, although certainly a bit muted when compared to what we've come to expect on Easter. I think that's been one major effect of the pandemic: it has muted things; it has forced us to see things as they are, without being able to gussy them up. It has stripped things down to their core essence. So, perhaps this indeed a good year to be in the Gospel of Mark for Easter. The Gospel with no appearances of the resurrected Jesus, no road to Emmaus, no breakfast on the beach. The Gospel which ends with, "... and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

It's not a satisfying ending. Which likely explains why there were attempts to extend the ending, to make it more like the other gospels. In your Bible you may well find multiple alternative endings, some adding an additional 12 verses. The great preacher Fred Craddock once summarized the options like this:

Where does the Gospel of Mark end? There are four possibilities. The ending with the least support among ancient Greek manuscripts of Mark is the one comprising 16:8 and a short summary statement. This "shorter ending" is obviously non-Markan. The longest ending, verse 8 plus verses 9-20 plus a lengthy insert, is also suspect (the insert after verse 14 is especially lacking in manuscript support). The third candidate, verse 8 plus verses 9-20 without the insert, has more manuscript support, but the verses are not in the oldest and most reliable texts of Mark, and some of them are found in the other three Gospels and Acts. These verses can best be read as the work of a Christian scribe seeking to overcome the awkwardness of ending at verse 8.

Preacher Thomas Long goes even further and points to the grammatical incompleteness of ending at verse 8:

Not only does this verse fail to provide proper narrative closure, it also lurches to an awkward grammatical stop. A more literal translation would read, "To no one anything they said; afraid they were for . . ." It is almost as if the author of Mark had suddenly been dragged from his writing desk in midsentence.

Many have noted that this is "no way to run a resurrection."

When Mark speaks of that first Easter morning he is nothing but succinct narrating the chain of events in but five verses:

- The stone has been rolled away,
- a young man in white (an angel?) is seated inside on the right, and as would be expected when experiencing a divine revelation, the women are alarmed.

- The Easter message they receive is brief: do not be afraid; Jesus was crucified; he was placed here; he is not here now because he has been raised.
- Then they receive an Easter commission: go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee; in Galilee they will see him. This is the message Jesus had told them earlier.
- The response of the women is to run in terror, amazement, fear and silence.

We can hardly blame the women considering what they had witnessed their past few days in Jerusalem: a triumphal entry that ended with their beloved Jesus hanging on a cross until his death. In many ways, not surprising given both their present moment in history. How could they possibly envision something like resurrection? If the past was any indication this was the way these sorts of stories always ended. Nothing new to be seen here. Perhaps that's why folks felt the need to amend Mark's gospel. To move the narrative beyond the crucifixion, beyond fear and isolation, to something new, something beyond Mark's seeming lack of imagination.

But what if we're not giving Mark enough credit. Maybe Mark doesn't offer a satisfactory ending because he wants us to go back to the beginning. "... go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." In other words, go back to the beginning as noted in the Mark's first chapter, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." Not in the sense of repeating the past, for the Bible is not really about the past – its direction is always forward, but in beginning anew. If we do so, we see Jesus healing and teaching and casting out demons, but always being misunderstood, even by those closest to him; we see Jesus breaking through into human life as one who is powerful, but also as one who will suffer and die. As Thomas Long notes:

We go back to Galilee, and the second time around every story in the Gospel of Mark is a postresurrection appearance. What we see is a God who surprises us at every turn in the road, a God whose power is expressed finally in weakness.

We encounter a God constantly at work to redeem the world, to restore wholeness, to bring healing, to usher in justice. When we return to Galilee we are reminded that this has never been our story, but Jesus' story – God's story, and God isn't finished writing it.

During COVID there has been far too much death. It has touched all of us in some way. One thing I've noticed is that we tend to linger at cemeteries a bit longer. Some of that is simply due to the fact that we haven't been able to gather anywhere for a reception afterwards. There this no home or reception hall fit for such mingling under COVID constraints. The pandemic has left us entombed for far too long. It is time to step back into the story God continues to write. In a recent NY Times piece, Professor of New Testament Esau McCaulley notes:

As we leave the tombs of quarantine, a return to normal would be a disaster unless we recognize that we are going back to a world desperately in need of healing. For me, the source of that healing is an empty tomb in Jerusalem. The work that Jesus left his followers to do includes showing compassion and forgiveness and contending for a just society. It involves the ever-present offer for all to begin again.

How might we begin again? I certainly hope the “new normal” looks vastly different from the old normal. That includes the church. We have learned much during our time of isolation and remoteness. We have had to repeatedly re-invent our ways of being the church. We have had to be open to new story lines, new forms of character development, an openness to re-imagined plots. Dare we continue in our creative exploration when the temptation to return to the way things were becomes a real possibility? How might we revisit the past, not to repeat it, but to reinterpret it and thus live life going forward differently? UCC Pastor Molly Baskette writes:

Here’s a shocker: Maybe the Gospel writers came up with four different endings because they were doing their best to comfort a people who needed hope, even not-quite-precise hope, even hope with a spin, even false hope.

We know about needing hope. Life is beautiful. Life is also very, very hard. Some years are years of Good Fridays that leave us broke and broken-hearted.

The unreliable Gospel narrators knew there were other versions of the story. They even borrowed from each other, like a cup of sugar between neighbors, a story just as sweet.

The authors didn’t care that their Easters were different. They experienced Easter each in their own way. They weren’t trying to write endings. They were writing beginnings.

Easter is not a history lesson with a tidy ending, but an invitation to look past death in all its disguises. After every death, new things get born. Your story is not over. You are a resurrection in progress, still becoming. You may sometimes have a year of Good Fridays, but Easter will always arrive.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed, alleluia! Now, let the story continue. Let’s step off the page and into the future God is continuing to write.

AMEN.