

The end is the beginning

Menno Mennonite Church

Easter: April 4, 2021

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Purpose: To celebrate the invitation to follow after given us by the risen Christ.

Message: God's resurrection life flows forth, inviting us ever deeper into the story.

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

Synopsis: Mark's ending for the grand story of resurrection leaves something to be desired. Accustomed as we are to the ongoing documentation of the resurrection story of Jesus, ending the story (and many academics believe the book) with the disciples abandoning the empty tomb in amazement is a bit perplexing. What are we to do with such a cliff hanger?

Perhaps that is the exact point. Maybe the open question of what happens when Jesus goes before us and invites us to follow is precisely the point itself. Resurrection is death re-shaped by life. Resurrection life is the invitation for us to step into the reality of a life not contained by the ending, but rather launched into the way of being that holds no life as impossible. Perhaps in this we can celebrate all that God is inviting us to live into.

Mark 16:1-8 NRSV

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When the sabbath was over,
Mary Magdalene,

and Mary the mother of James,

and Salome bought spices,
so that they might go and anoint him.

² And very early on the first day of the week,
when the sun had risen,
they went to the tomb.

³ They had been saying to one another, “
Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”

⁴ When they looked up,
they saw that the stone,
which was very large,
had already been rolled back.

⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man,
dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side;
and they were alarmed.

⁶ But 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.

⁷ 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.”

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.

I don't know about you, but I am sucker for a good ending. The right words to conclude a story can set us right and allow us to hold onto the experience that we have immersed ourselves in. That right word to end a story is the cherry on the Sundae, allowing the credits to roll, and, perhaps, leaving you wanting more to hold onto. Often it is the endings we remember best. We don't need to try that hard to summon to mind Humphry Boggart strolling into the mists of Casablanca night with the comment "Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship" or Scarlet Ohara pining that "tomorrow will be another day" as she begins to conceive of life without her beloved who just stormed out the door. I will also admit that the strongest retention of *A Tale of Two Cities* that I can easily command is the opening: "I was the best of times, it was the worst of times" and the ending: "It's a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done..." The middle is a broad blur. And we can all no doubt recite with Dorothy that there is "No place like home."

This is what we want. The characters who we have journeyed with to end up where they belong if not physically then at least emotionally or psychologically. We want our star-crossed lovers to unite, the loveable losers to prevail over the odds, the tortured hero to find redemption at last. It is the world as we would prefer it to be, neat, tidy, and semi-sweet. Emily and I struggle to find stories to share often as I am far more into drama than her. A story is supposed to end in hope and newness, with the dawning of a new day for all concerned.

Our hopes for our biblical story are no different. We come to the end of journey, the end of the long road of Lent, walking toward Jerusalem with Jesus and we come to this point. Here is the payoff; here is where we get to celebrate with the disciples and rejoice as the way of Christ is reconciled. Here is where we celebrate the dawning of understanding and comprehension with all those involved: Christ is Arisen—Alleluia. Christ is alive and we know it and we go running to the now-empty tomb to see for ourselves, shouting the story from the roof tops to anyone who would listen. The one who was put on the cross for our sake, for our sins has been raised by the God who holds us in a caring, loving and comforting embrace now that all things are made anew.

But this is not what Mark gives us. Far different from the accounts of the other Gospels with the breathless play-by-play for the day of and days after, this is what we get left with here: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. What? The day is spent not in proclamation of a world made new, but in the problem of those who witness fleeing in terror. Christ is alive! Run

away? What is that supposed to do for us? How is that supposed to be an invitation to resurrection and recreation?

What's more if you check your footnotes in your Bibles, you may see something along the lines of "most ancient manuscripts of Mark end here." The earliest versions of the text basically end us at this cliff hanger of verse 8. My text even has a chose your own ending with a short 2 sentence conclusion, and the longer paragraph or so that we find many times. Mark who states at the very beginning of the book that this was beginning God news about Jesus the Messiah brings us right to here: a risen Christ who has gone out before them, and an invitation to follow along. No matter how you read the text, the events come to this basic point: You who are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified must do something different than turn to the tomb, than come in reverent awe. He has been raised. He is not here. Instead, you are invited to go and seek him as he said in Galilee, and to follow him there.

Its this basic misunderstanding, and the invitation within it that catches my eye. Because it is the message that makes a difference. Jesus had told his disciples what was going to happen, the horror that they were going to encounter, and their response of shame and self-protection, denying that they even knew who their rabbi was. They just did not believe it. They didn't believe of themselves that they could be such a thing. They did not believe of the Messiah that pain and God could coexist. But sure enough, it was all true. Jesus was crucified and the disciples had run away, denied that they had ever known them. But also, they hadn't allowed for the possibility that God's power could change the worst of outcomes. This message of the tomb is meant to restart their stalled belief and fire their imagination. The message at the tomb is given them was to remind them of what they were to do, what came next; you are each invited just as I said, even Peter who denied three times, you are each still loved no matter what you did or did not do, no matter how far you are or how near, no matter where your identity lies, no matter the guilt you carry. You are each invited to come again to Galilee and to follow the risen Lord. You are invited to be renewed, despite your denial, despite your doubt, despite your uncertainty, despite your failure, and to live again in the life of discipleship, renewed to follow the way of the risen Christ.

The message is that you will not be, you cannot be abandoned, even when we fail to love, even when we fail to live up to your own expectations, selves, even when we fail to live out what God might intend for us but are rather invited again to come and follow on. The life of faith

cannot begin and end at a destination, but always calls us onward toward the new, toward promise, toward hope, even in the darkness of life. Faith is defined by the way of grace and hope renewing all of life, in all situations as we follow behind the one who goes before us. Jesus is not here, but is arisen, and you are invited to follow in the path that he leads.

That is because the end, abrupt though it may seem, is the beginning. It is the declaration of the good news which inspires the decision to follow on behind it. It was true on that day and it is true on this day; Jesus calls us forward and invites us into the new. Not that this is always easy. We know that there are days where we race to the tomb to see if it is all true, and those where we would rather stay behind the locked doors avoiding the life of the disciple all together. We might wonder now and again whether the path remains ours to follow. When we look at those who we walk beside and those who have walked before we find the confirmation that the invitation to step out yet again remains. When we hear the message to follow, to find Christ in the journey, who walks beside us, who calls us forth, we are challenged to go where he goes, to obey even when obedience comes hard, to love even when love is anything but natural, to become instruments of peace even when warfare is the rule of the day. When we fix our eyes upon the risen Christ and follow on where he has first gone, we will meet and be met by the risen Lord along the way. We will find grace for our failures and joy in our successes. We will find hope even in hardship. We will find faith even in the depths of despair. We will find security when sorrow seems our portion. We will find courage even when we would rather flee. We will find love for our neighbor even when we would rather not dare to love. And in Life and in death, we will find hope even in the face of the worst the world can bring.

Mark launches us into the real good news of the Easter message: that we are called forth, not to prove all things beyond a shadow of a doubt, but rather to follow along where the path leads us. End is not the end; it is the beginning. It is the inauguration of the kingdom where all are welcome, and none will be made afraid that is with us already and forming around even yet. We receive this launching not based on our capability to be followers, or to walk well the road we are given because we are good, but rather simply because we are invited. God has come and breached the gap between here and there, reconciled all of humanity to God's self and holds us together in that reconciliation. Writer and Spiritual thinker Madeleine L'Engle wrote "Easter is always the answer to our cry of "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me." The answer is you are not forsaken, if you would simply look up and see what is in front of you.

The reality of the resurrection is not found at the tomb, empty though it is. It is found in following the way of the risen one out into the world, living out the way and the hope that we have, despite our silence, despite our failings, despite our doubts, we will be made new living the way of resurrection in the world that is being recreated. This is the work of God—bringing the life of heaven into even this world, just as we pray consistently. In this we are called ever again toward life, toward hope, toward promise.

. We are invited to take up the challenge of the way, living not in the shadow of the tomb, or burden of the cross, but rather in the hope of the life lead by the one goes before, encountering the risen Lord in a renewed life. This is our hope. This is our promise, this is our path. May we continue to walk on, our eyes fixed on Jesus, knowing that there is no path, no peril, no fault that can ever separate us from the love of God and promise of the empty tomb, for he is not here, but leads us forward. May this be our recreation and resurrection in all things forever more. Amen.