



University Christian Church – Austin

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You End Mark

Easter, b, April 12, 2009

Mark 16:1-8

One of the great challenges and also the exciting opportunities of being a Christian who seeks to take seriously the Bible is the kind of situation that we find this morning as we are reading from the Gospel of Mark. You see, the passage that Ron just read for us is not something that leads up to the conclusion of the Gospel. It is the end of the Gospel.

“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. 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.”

That’s it. That’s the ending? Why in the world would the Gospel end there? It is clear enough from other aspects of the Gospel of Mark that Mark did truly believe in the resurrection of Jesus, so why would he end the Gospel with women aware of the empty tomb and just fearfully moving away? Where’s the glorious post-resurrection appearances to the disciples? Where’s the resurrected Jesus’ Great Commission that we find at the end of Matthew, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I

am with you always, to the end of the age." Isn't this Markan version somehow just off the mark?

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, the late Donald H. Juel tells the story of one of his students who had memorized the whole Gospel of Mark in order to do a dramatic, Broadway-style reading before a live audience. After careful study, the student had decided to go with the scholarly consensus regarding the ending. [That is, the ending that we just heard from Ron.] At his first performance, however, after he spoke that ambiguous last verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other, the audience waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for a proper ending. Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, "Amen!" and made his exit.

The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively. Upon reflection, though, the student realized that by providing the audience a satisfying conclusion, his "Amen!" had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the text. So at the next performance, when he reached the final verse he said, "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." He simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence. " The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious," said Juel, "and as people exited the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the nonending."ⁱ

Like this student's audience, for centuries after the writing of the Gospel of Mark so many of the faithful said that this could not possibly really be the end of the Gospel! Surely there was more originally written than that. Some said that the outside of the scroll containing the Gospel must have been lost & with it the true, original conclusion. That's it. We can fix that. Just add another verse! And you

will find in some of your Bibles an extra verse that was added some 300 or so years later: “ but they reported briefly to Peter and those with them all that they had been told. And after this, Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. “ There, that fixes that!

But even that was not enough for some, though. So later still, people added another 10 verses with extra story material, that ended up sounding very much like the victorious ending of the Gospel of Matthew we heard at the beginning of the service. ⁱⁱThat ending has Jesus appearing again to the disciples, “ And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved,” among other promises, Then the Risen Christ , “was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And 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.” (Mark 16:15-16a,19- 20). Now THAT’s a proper ending! Or so it seems.

But let me suggest to you this glorious Easter morning that Mark ended his Gospel the only way that made sense to him. You see, Mark demonstrates throughout his Gospel very little confidence in the ability of people -- even people like the disciples of Jesus who had such close contact with him. Mark didn't believe that we have much ability to recognize what God is doing in the world.

If you think back to the way Mark describes Jesus’ hearers, what you find is a great number of outsiders who hear his teaching about the kingdom of God, but never seem to understand it; a bunch of usually loyal but dim witted disciples whose minds and hearts seem finally unable to understand his teaching. Here at what most scholars say is the proper end to Mark, we have women who have

appeared right at the very border of the greatest wonder, resurrection, but instead of demonstrating joy, they demonstrate fear and silence. Remember back to Jesus' teaching of the sower who broadcasted seed far and wide, yet most of the seed falls on soil that is hard, or full of thorns, or shallow, all unfruitful. Mark believes that few of us will really get it.

So Mark ends his Gospel in the only way that makes sense to him. Remember these words on lips of the mysterious young man dressed in a white robe who was the harbinger of the wonderful news, "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."

Who are Jesus' disciples? John, Peter, James, surely. And what about Paul, Thecla, Martin Luther, Alexander Campbell, Mother Theresa? And if we are going to receive the Good News ourselves, then we also are the disciples who are to go to the Galilee where we will see Jesus again. That's our promise.

Where is Galilee? Well, it is, to be sure, a geographical place north of Jerusalem, but it is also the spiritually geographic place where nearly all of Jesus' earthly ministry took place. Besides a few side journeys and the final journey to Jerusalem in order to die the prophet's death, it was the Galilee where all the witness took place; where in Jesus God's power was healing bodies and souls, and teaching the ways of the Kingdom of God; liberating those captive in guilt with the word of the Lord God's forgiveness; and the freeing of those trapped in fearful, stunted living to experience the very fullness that God had intended for them all along!

When we go back to the Galilee this time, we go back now with the foreknowledge that in the end Jesus is going to be victoriously raised from the dead. We know who Jesus is and what he represents.

So now we reread the Gospel story – which I am convinced is exactly Mark’s clear intention in his ending of the Gospel in such an otherwise anticlimactic way - by pointing us back to Galilee to go through the whole story once again from an entirely new vantage point. In the unfolding of Jesus’ teachings and healings and actions, Mark’s point is for us see what the disciples didn’t see the first time through. We are to pick up how it is that God was working in the world, now with the assistance of 20-20 vision hindsight. And with a little good fortune, we might even – Mark hopes – we might even be more sensitive to discerning God’s activity in the world going forward, as well.

Now the question is no longer why Mark ended his Gospel story short of the victory shout. The question becomes, how will YOU END MARK? How will I?

What wondrous work of discipleship will you and I do because we understand that not even the most powerful military forces in the world can keep our work dead?

What obstacles of pride or fear of failure; what walls of isolation... are coming down now, because Christ’s saving hold on us is not going to let go no matter what the world throws at us;

What works of art, or compassion, what works of service or witness will we engage because the living Spirit of Jesus Christ is not dead, but alive in us still unfolding God’s purposes in the world?

How will YOU END MARK?

Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen, indeed.

ⁱ This information and some of the structure of this sermon come an article written by Thomas G. Long who teaches at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta. This article appeared in *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006.

ⁱⁱ Matt. 28: 18-20 And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."