

Romans 6:1-11

Psalm 150 with Hymn #250

Mark 16:1-8

April 16, 2017, The Day of Resurrection/Easter

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

Journey to the Cross
WILL WE LIFT HIGH THE CROSS?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Where were you and what were you doing on Friday night, March 21, 1980 at 9:00 p.m.? I can't guarantee this, but I'm pretty sure I was in my dorm room in Westminster Hall on the campus of Union Presbyterian Seminary in Richmond, Virginia watching TV with any friends who came over. There was an open invitation to anyone who wanted to join me on Friday nights to watch "Dallas." I was hooked on that show!

On Friday, March 21, 1980, the final episode of the third season aired. Texas oil baron J. R. Ewing was alone in his office when he heard some noise in the hall. He went out in the hallway to investigate and somebody shot him. For eight months the question was "Who shot J.R.?" Larry Hagman, who played J.R. Ewing, called it "the shot heard around the world."

People in the TV industry credit "Who shot J.R.?" with introducing the highly successful "cliff-hanger" format. "Dallas" fans had to wait eight months to find out "who shot J.R.," since the assailant's identity wasn't revealed until the fourth episode of the fourth season in November 1980. A brand new news network called CNN, which debuted a couple of months after the "who shot J.R.?" episode aired, got a boost in its PR as it provided regular reporting over the summer about rumors and twists in the mystery.

There are other famous examples of literary unfinished business and cliff-hangers.

* Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* ends abruptly when the Nazis break into the family's hiding place.

* Virgil's *Aeneid*, a twelve-book poem of tales about the Trojan War hero Aeneas was never finished. Virgil intended to do more research and write more, but died suddenly from a fever. He had left written instructions to his friends to burn the manuscript because it was incomplete. They ignored his dying wishes, edited and published the work.

* Mark Twain wrote three different versions of the book *The Mysterious Stranger*, in which Satan is a main character. The book ends in the middle of a scene, suggesting that Twain abandoned the novel.

* Samuel Coleridge never finished *Kubla Khan*, his tale of a mighty emperor. The unfinished story, also called "A Vision in a Dream: A Fragment," was supposedly

written while Coleridge was in an opium-induced dream. He said he wasn't able to finish the poem before the vision vanished.

* In the 14th century, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote his *Canterbury Tales*. Some of you will remember reading and studying the twenty-four tales in high school. Chaucer had planned to write about 120 tales, but only wrote about 20% before he died in 1400.¹

Those examples are taken from a list of the "Top Ten Unfinished Works of Literature." The list didn't include the Gospel of Mark, which certainly seems like it should have made the list, maybe even at #1.

When I read and study the Gospel of Mark with folks, I always ask, "What's missing from the beginning of Mark's gospel?" The obvious and quick answer is, "There is no Christmas story." That's right, there are no shepherds and wise men and stars and angels and mangers. The gospel abruptly starts with the proclamation "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It almost sounds more like a title than the opening line of a story about Jesus.

We can ask the same question about the end of the Gospel of Mark. If you will, take one of the pew Bibles and turn to the end of Mark 16. Our gospel reading this morning stopped at verse 8. Notice in the pew Bible that there are more verses to follow. The first two verses are set off by [[double brackets]] and are labeled "The Shorter Ending of Mark." Verses 9-20 are also marked off by [[double brackets]] and titled "The Longer Ending of Mark." For lots of reasons — technical, grammatical, stylistic, and theological — many people think these shorter and longer endings of Mark were added some time later after Mark wrote his gospel. But why?

Well, the answer to that question might depend on the answer to the question, "What's missing from the final verses of the Gospel of Mark?" And the answer to *that* question is "Jesus!" That's right, in Mark's story about Easter Sunday, the risen Jesus isn't there, except in name only. He's gone on ahead. He's on the road again!

At the end of Matthew, the risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, and the eleven disciples on the mountain in Galilee.

At the end of Luke, the risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, the other women, the two people on the road to Emmaus, and the disciples in Jerusalem.

At the end of John, the risen Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene at the tomb in the garden, ten disciples in a locked room, Thomas a week later, and the disciples in Galilee on the beach of the Sea of Tiberias.

But not in Mark! The risen Jesus doesn't meet anyone. The young man dressed in white gives the women a message, "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." (Mark 16:7) In addition to Jesus' absence, the story ends in a strange way. Instead of doing what the young man has told them to do, "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." (Mark 16:8)

When I learned how to diagram sentences in 7th grade English, we were taught never to end a sentence with a preposition. You can write that way, but it's really hard to talk that way! You end up saying things such as, "This is the sort of English up with which I will not put." Apparently, the no-preposition-at-the-end-of-a-sentence rule can be traced back to 17th and 18th century writers who tried to make English conform to Latin grammar. Someone has called them "Latin-obsessed 17th century introverts."

Not only is Mark's story strange because the women run away and don't say anything about the resurrection, the story ends with a little three letter word in Greek — gar — sometimes used as a conjunction, sometimes as a preposition — it means "for, because." It's just a strange way to end a story, much less an entire gospel!

But what if the ending is just the beginning? Let's go back to Mark 1:1 — "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Another way to put it is, "The beginning of the *gospel* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Mark didn't mean "gospel" in the sense of a book of the Bible (as when we say, "Turn in your Bible to the Gospel of Mark."). Instead, Mark means both the gospel/good news *about* Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the gospel/good news that Jesus Christ, the Son of God *brings*.

In his reflections on this strange ending of Mark's gospel, David Lose writes, "It's only the beginning; this story isn't over. It's only the beginning, and we have a part to play. It's only the beginning, and if you wonder why there is still so much distress and pain in the world, it's because God's not done yet. It's only the beginning, and Mark is inviting us to get out of our seats and into the game, sharing the good news of Jesus' complete identification with those who are suffering and his triumph over injustice and death with everyone we meet. It's only the beginning, and we're empowered and equipped to work for the good in all situations because we trust God's promises that all will in time come to a good end even when we can't see evidence of that."²

"Resurrection isn't a conclusion, it's an invitation." An invitation to what? Notice what the young man in white tells the women: "He is not here. Tells his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee." Going to Galilee is going back to the site of Jesus' public ministry, where he healed the sick and taught God's love and preached the gospel and raised the dead and fed the multitudes. But going back to Galilee doesn't mean going back to the past, the ways things used to be before Jesus was betrayed, handed over, and killed on the cross. No, Jesus is "going ahead of you." And, as he has throughout the gospel, Jesus says, "Follow me."

Here's a Poem for Easter Sunday called "To Galilee He's Gone" that echoes Mark's forward-looking Easter story:

We saw where the body of Jesus was laid,
laid within the tomb.
And we asked who will roll the stone away,
who will roll the stone away.

We heard the angel say Jesus has risen:
behold his empty tomb.

And we asked
where to go to find him,
now that he has gone.

The angel said he's going ahead of you:
to Galilee he's gone.
And we asked
what he'll do in Galilee
in the place we know as home.

The angel said you'll find him where new life
lifts hearts of those in tombs.
So we asked
to be those who serve him,
who show that life has won.

We find him risen feeding the hungry,
risen among the poor,
and we meet
him among the friendless
and bringing the homeless home.

Thus we say, today, in our Galilee,
pointing to the empty tomb:
see where God
is rolling the stone away,
is rolling away the stone.³

The poem for Easter Sunday says, "So we asked to be those who serve him, who show that life has won." Here at the end of his gospel, Mark asks, "What you going to do with this good news?"

On that Friday afternoon 2000 years ago, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid (Mark 15:47) On that Sunday morning 2000 years ago, the women didn't go to the cemetery to celebrate the resurrection at a sunrise service. They went to anoint the crushed, crucified body of their beloved friend. Someone has called the women "the ascribed custodians of the crucifixion, the trash-collecting body bearers of Easter." No wonder they were seized with terror and amazement when the young man said, "He has been raised; he is not here." As one writer puts it, "When you are on a death hunt and find life, amazement is a natural response."⁴

After six weeks of our Lenten journey to the cross, we have arrived. On the way, three times Jesus has told us what awaited him in Jerusalem: great suffering, rejection, and death on a cross. That would be a sad and tragic end to the story, if it were ac-

tually the end to the story! But Mark 16:8 is really just a cliff-hanger, and Mark asks us this Easter Sunday morning, “What will you do with this Good News in a world full of death?”

We confessed to God this morning our tendency to get caught up in the worries of the world, to remain discontent, grumbling, and anxious, to worry and complain, rather than to live in the spirit of new life, to share the Good News, and to risk the joy and encouragement of new life in Christ. But then we asked God to “call us back to your ways . . .” — not back to the way things used to be, the things of death and hopelessness, but to God’s ways of hope and reconciliation. We also prayed the young man’s message to the women at the tomb: “Call us forward to follow Jesus who leads us into your promised future.”

The glorious hymn we just sang, “Lift High the Cross,” was written for a festival service under the auspices of an important Anglican mission organization, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The hymn is often sung as colorful processions walk down the church aisle, led by the crucifer (literally, the cross-bearer) who lifts the cross high.

The apostle Paul writes about the new life in Christ, “if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” Because the tomb is empty, because Jesus is alive, we are all given a new name — Christopher! We are Christ bearers! We are called to follow our risen Lord Jesus Christ who goes ahead of us to where his ministry can be found, and he continues to say to us, “Follow me.”

What will we do with the good news? The story isn’t over. The ending is just the beginning. Will we lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim, till all the world adore his sacred name?

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, we come this Easter morning with eager anticipation. Open our hearts, that we might experience you anew. Open our lives, that we may be faithful witnesses to your resurrection. May we proclaim in word and deed your steadfast, liberating love to all people, everywhere. Amen.

NOTES

¹Ash Grant, “Top Ten Unfinished Works of Literature,” August 19, 2009, in *Literature* at www.toptenz.net.

²David Lose, “Easter B: Only the Beginning,” March 30, 2015 at www.davidlose.net.

³Andy King, "To Galilee He's Gone," A Poem for Easter Sunday (Yr B) at www.earth2earth.wordpress.com.

⁴Alyce McKenzie, "Easter Expectations: On Empty Baskets and Empty Tombs," April 1, 2012 at www.patheos.com.