

1 Corinthians 15:12-20, 50-58 Mark 16:1-8 April 20, 2014
Easter Sunday/The Day of Resurrection
Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

NO ENDING, JUST THE BEGINNING

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.

Did you know there is a website where you can learn how to do anything? It's called "WikiHow" and makes the claim "We're trying to help everyone on the planet learn how to do anything." Among other things, on WikiHow you can learn how to: draw the Easter bunny; live within your means; grow lilacs; wrap a toga; appear on a courtroom TV show; and be a fan of a losing team.

I came across WikiHow as I worked on last week's Palm Sunday sermon and discovered "How to be more like Jesus" in seven easy steps: (1) Know who Jesus is and what he did; (2) Love him; (3) Care for other people; (4) Be learned and wise; (5) Be humble; (6) Be considerate of others in all that you do; and (7) Watch your tone of voice, your style of language (don't curse, blaspheme, etc.).

That's not a bad list, but it doesn't take into account Jesus' death and resurrection, and how the risen Lord Jesus Christ himself can help us to be more like him. The "how-to" list doesn't take into account the Easter story.

Speaking of the Easter story, particularly in Mark 16, I went back to WikiHow this week and looked up "How to write a good ending to a story." Five helpful hints were offered. Let me share #2 and #3:

#2: Consider when is the best time for a story to finish. Too early, just the right time, or too late? Obviously too late is wrong. Just the right time would seem correct, but it isn't. Endings are about providing a satisfying close, not about resolution. If everything is answered and wrapped up, your ending will seem false because the reader will be aware that they are reading a sculpted ending.

#3: Ask yourself "what is the main conflict in my story?" Now make a list of how that conflict can be resolved. Write until the point that that conflict is resolved and then bow out gracefully. Any subplots or side conflicts resolved along the way are great but, as per the above step, not all of them should be resolved (though all should be acknowledged).¹

You might get the impression that the gospel writer Mark could have learned something from WikiHow about how to write a good ending to a story. Does it strike you as a little strange that Mark would end his story about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead with verse 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." Period . . . end of story. Or is it? Maybe it's really just the beginning . . .

Donald Juel was a beloved New Testament professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. In his commentary on the gospel of Mark, Dr. Juel tells about one of his seminary students who decided to memorize the entire gospel of Mark and present it in a dramatic monologue, theater-style, before a live audience. The student studied the different endings of the gospel of Mark (your Bible probably has some additional verses with headings such as “The Shorter Ending of Mark” and “The Longer Ending of Mark”). He decided to end his one-man monologue at Mark 16:8.

At the end of his first performance, when the student said, “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid,” he stood awkwardly before the audience. The audience seemed to be waiting for him to say something else, for some type of closure to the story. Finally, the student said, “Amen!” and left the stage. The audience gave him a rousing round of applause.

But the student wasn't satisfied with his performance. He felt adding the “Amen!” at the end had somehow betrayed the meaning and style of Mark's gospel. At the end of his next performance, he finished with the words “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid,” waited a few seconds, then walked off the stage in silence. In his commentary, Dr. Juel wrote, “The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious, and as people exited the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the nonending.”²

Matthew has the Great Commission at the end of his Easter story, when Jesus meets his disciples on the mountain in Galilee and sends them out on their mission to baptize and teach. Luke tells us about Cleopas and his traveling companion meeting the stranger on the road to Emmaus, and realizing it was the risen Jesus when he broke bread with them at the table. John tells us about the risen Jesus appearing to Thomas and the other disciples and about Jesus fixing breakfast on the beach for Peter and the disciples who had been fishing all night.

Mark's gospel, on the other hand, seems to end, not with a BANG! but with a “whimper.” His Easter story literally ends with a little three-word Greek word that is pronounced “gar.” It's a conjunction that means something like “for” or “because of.” Greek word order is different from our English word order, so Mark's conjunction “for” is the last word in his story. Nevertheless, the last words in the Easter story we heard read this morning are “for they were afraid.”

Mark didn't really need to use WikiHow, because he apparently already knew about Step #2: “Endings are about providing a satisfying close, not about resolution. If everything is answered and wrapped up, your ending will seem false because the reader will be aware that they are reading a sculpted ending.” It's as if Mark's gospel story has no ending, just the beginning. All the way back at chapter one, verse one, Mark tells us: “The **beginning** of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” If Mark had nicely and neatly rounded off his Easter story and tied up all of the loose ends, his ending might have seemed false to us, at the very worst. At the very least, we might hear the sculpted ending and think, “That was a nice story from the past. Let's go home now and enjoy our Easter ham.”

Mark's Easter story won't let us get off so easily. The open-ended nature of his story confronts us with the question, "What are you going to do with what you've heard?" We weren't there at the empty tomb with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome that first Easter Sunday morning. But, thanks to Mark's storytelling skills, we get to hear with the three women what the young man dressed in a white robe (it has to be an angel of the Lord) says: "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." (Mark 16:6-7)

On this Easter Sunday 2014, do we believe that "Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified . . . has been raised"? Are we willing to go to Galilee and meet the risen Lord, wherever Galilee may be for you and me? Are we willing to be a part of the story of the good news of Jesus Christ that has a beginning but is not yet finished?

Another New Testament scholar writes about the young man's message to the women, "He has risen, he is not here": "The message brings dramatic reversal to a tragic narrative which had seemed to end in the abandonment and death of the Son of God. The tragedy is stood on its head . . . The crucifixion had seemed to end the story but did not. The resurrection does not really do so, either. Resurrection-with-appearances would bring closure . . . Mark's ending is no end; only the reader can bring closure. . . 'He is going before you . . . there you will see him.' This possibility and this promise makes of Mark the Gospel of expectations still unfulfilled and of a future beyond our control."³

Surely you came to Easter worship this morning fully expecting to hear the story about the women at the empty tomb just as the sun was rising on the first day of the week. Maybe you didn't know which gospel story you would hear (Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John), but wouldn't you have been surprised if you had **not** heard one of the four stories?

Maybe you came to Easter worship this morning, expecting to hear the gospel story **one more time** (how many times have you heard it?), but not really expecting to hear anything new in the story. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Amen. Let's go home. Or, let's go back to the ways things have always been. Or, what choice do we have but to go back to the way things have always been? Is the story of your life and my life over?

The Easter story says "NO!" Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb that Sunday morning, expecting things to be the way they expected them to be. They didn't go there for an early Easter Sunrise Service. They didn't go to the tomb to put pretty flowers in a cross in the corner of the garden. They didn't go to the garden to shout "Alleluia! Jesus Christ is risen today!" No, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went and bought aromatic spices so they could anoint the dead body of Jesus. They went to the tomb to do their loving duty to their friend, but they thought the story was finished, the book closed on Jesus' life and love and promise.

Is that how life looks to you this morning? The story is finished, the book is closed? That there is nothing more to be said? What situations are you struggling with in life this Easter morning that make you feel as if there is no future? No good ending to the story?

The Easter message — “He has been raised, he is not here . . . he is going ahead of you” — means the story didn’t end on the cross on Friday afternoon or even at the empty tomb on Sunday morning. “He is not **here** . . . he is going ahead of you.” The Easter message — “He has been raised, he is not here . . . he is going ahead of you” means our stories aren’t finished yet, either. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, God calls us to be a part of his ongoing story of grace and love and new life and compassion and hope.

As we Christians have made our way through Holy Week, Jews around the world have been observing the Passover, which began at sundown on April 14. According to biblical tradition and directions, Jewish families gather at the table to remember how God led his people out of slavery in Egypt. The youngest child at the table asks, “Why is this night of Passover different from all other nights of the year?” The other family members answer the question by telling the story of the Exodus — **their** story: “**We** were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt, but the Lord brought **us** out of Egypt with a mighty hand.” The Passover story is not just a tale from the past. The Passover story continues to be written and lived until this very day.

We might ask, “Why is this Sunday morning of Easter different from all other Sundays of the year?” The answer is, “We were sin’s slaves, but the Lord brought us out of death with a mighty hand, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” The Easter story is not just a story from the past. The Easter story continues to be written and lived until this very day.

The Greatest Story Ever Told is still being told and written. Won’t you help tell and write the Easter story, not just today, but every day? Who knows what the great Author of Life has in mind for us?

We do know this. Easter is no ending, just the beginning.

Let us pray: (a prayer from the Church of Scotland)

Gracious God, touch us all again this day with the grace of Christ’s rising. Give us new lives for old, new spirits, new faith, new commitment, in place of all that has grown tired and stale and dead in our lives. So may we rise and go from here, to whatever awaits, in joy, and trust. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

NOTES

1www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Good-Ending-to-a-Story

²I found this story in many different sources. The initial reference was in an article by Thomas G. Long called “Dangling Gospel (Mark 16:1-8) at www.religion-online.org.

³Lamar Williamson, Jr., *Mark* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), pp. 284, 285, 286.