

Fool's Day
Mark 16:1-8
by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
First Central Congregational Church
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Back in November, the novelist Annie Proulx received the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, basically a lifetime achievement award, at the National Book Award ceremony. She began her speech:

We don't live in the best of all possible worlds. This is a Kafkaesque time. The television sparkles with images of despicable political louts and sexual harassment reports. We cannot look away from the pictures of furious elements, hurricanes and fires, from the repetitive crowd murders by gunmen burning with rage. We are made more anxious by flickering threats of nuclear war. We observe social media's manipulation of a credulous population, a population dividing into bitter tribal cultures. We are living through a massive shift from representative democracy to something called viral direct democracy, now cascading over us in a garbage-laden tsunami of raw data. Everything is situational, seesawing between gut-response "likes" or vicious confrontations. For some this is a heady time of brilliant technological innovation that is bringing us into an exciting new world. For others it is the opening of a savagely difficult book without a happy ending.

After diagnosing the diseased time in which we live, she still concluded, "Yet somehow the old discredited values and longings persist. We still have tender feelings for such outmoded notions as truth, respect for others, personal honor, justice, equitable sharing. We still hope for a happy ending."

And then she read the poem "Consolation" by Wisława Szymborska which ends,

Hence the indispensable
silver lining,
the lovers reunited, the families reconciled,
the doubts dispelled, fidelity rewarded,
fortunes regained, treasures uncovered,
stiff-necked neighbors mending their ways,
good names restored, greed daunted,
old maids married off to worthy parsons,
troublemakers banished to other hemispheres,
forgers of documents tossed down the stairs,
seducers scurried to the altar,

orphans sheltered, widows comforted,
pride humbled, wounds healed over,
prodigal sons summoned home,
cups of sorrow tossed into the ocean,
hankies drenched with tears of reconciliation,
general merriment and celebration,
and the dog Fido,
gone astray in the first chapter,
turns up barking gladly in the last.

We hope for a happy ending.

When I read Proulx's speech last autumn, I found it encouraging, inspiring, and hopeful. But I also knew I had to save it for Easter Sunday 2018 precisely because on this Easter Sunday we were going to read the ending of the Gospel of Mark. And it is not a happy ending. It is precisely NOT the kind of ending that Annie Proulx and Wisława Szymborska believe we are longing for.

One wonders if it is an ending at all. The women flee in fear and tell no one what they've seen. New Testament scholar Ben Witherington III declares "Mark 16:8 is not good news." Jesus and his movement seem to have failed.

And because of this people have been trying to add an ending onto the Gospel of Mark pretty much from the beginning. Because there are no resurrection appearances of Jesus. There is no clear triumph or closure or Fido returning home at last.

And, yet, the ending of the Gospel of Mark is perfect. Let me tell you why.

Jesus imagined a different world. Better. Fairer. More Just. More Equitable. One designed to benefit those most often marginalized and excluded—the poor, the children, the sick, the disabled, the mentally ill.

And this world could be achieved with the birth of a New Humanity. A people committed to love and nonviolence. Where the highest value was service to others. And where mutual forgiveness became the practice that held the community together. He was creating a new family symbolized by open table fellowship.

But his dream of a reordered world was a direct challenge to the powers-that-be. And Jesus took that confrontation right into the heart of the powers, to the Temple in Jerusalem and there he engaged in a direct action campaign which the powers viewed as a threat and so they killed him like the Romans would any insurrectionist, by crucifying him.

Jesus went to his death betrayed and abandoned. The solidarity he had envisioned broke apart under trial.

And that could have been the end of the story of a noble visionary cut down by the powers he challenged.

Instead the Gospel of Mark tells us that the women came to the tomb that Sunday morning to care for the corpse of Jesus, but what they found was an open tomb and the corpse

not there.

But the tomb wasn't empty. There sat this young man dressed in white.

This young man, a follower of Jesus, appeared once before in this Gospel. He was there in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was betrayed by Judas and arrested. He stayed after all the other disciples had fled, but when the authorities tried to grab him, the shroud he was wearing fell from his body and he escaped into the night naked.

The naked young man in the night symbolizes the followers of Jesus who in the resurrection will be set free from the powers of death. And here he returns to proclaim the resurrection—the vindication by God of Jesus.

Alone in the Gospel of Mark, we don't get Jesus appearing at some point to announce his own resurrection. What we do get is this disciple who proclaims that Jesus has already gone ahead of us and if we simply follow, then we will see him.

If you've been following along in the Gospel of Mark with us the last few months, then you know that seeing is one of the dominant themes of this Gospel. And for Mark seeing means to gain spiritual insight. To understand. It means to understand what God is doing through Jesus.

And it also means gaining spiritual insight about yourself as you follow on your spiritual journey. Reading the Gospel of Mark has compelled us to examine our fears and our willingness to be vulnerable in love. In doing so it has led us on an inward journey to gain insight about ourselves. And where we are on that inward journey is tested by the ambiguity, the uncertainty, the vulnerability of this ending.

Here at the close of the Gospel, the young man tells the women that if they follow Jesus, then they will see him. If they go forward with faith, with imagination, with confidence, that the values and ideals Jesus proclaimed and lived are the right way for us to live, that the world has been reordered, that a New Humanity has been born, that all things are being made new—if they live with that imagination and confidence—then and only then will they see Jesus.

So, it's kind of backward from what we are used to. And from what the other three Gospels give us. Usually we want to see something first, have good evidence of it first, and then we'll commit ourselves to it. But that's not what the Gospel of Mark offers. You first have to follow in faith and then you'll gain the ability to see, to understand.

What kind of fools does Mark think we are?

Today is, of course, April Fool's Day. Popular culture has made great hay with the idea that Easter Sunday is Fool's Day.

But we realized it months ago and were pretty excited about the coincidence. Because Easter is pretty foolish.

The entire Gospel tradition invites us to believe a series of absurdities and to then make them the very power by which we live our lives.

Our faith contends that divinity is revealed and the salvation of the world is achieved in the execution of an all-too-human Jewish peasant street preacher, miracle worker, and prophet of the end times.

It is an absurdity to believe that God was incarnate in the life and death of the historical Jesus. The moment it becomes easy to believe this claim, the moment that it seems rational and explainable, then you have robbed it of its power and you are on the way to losing the

passion of your faith. It is foolishness.

And from there the foolishness abounds. A group of illiterate, undisciplined fishermen are to spread the gospel. A group of freed slaves are God's chosen people. Despite all appearances to the contrary we are to believe that the universe is bending toward justice. And God is on the side of the weak, the oppressed, the poor, the slave, the neglected, the other. Crazy talk, all of it. From Genesis to Revelation.

In their now classic book *Resident Aliens*, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon wrote, "Christianity is an invitation to be part of an alien people who make a difference because they see something that cannot otherwise be seen without Christ."

So, Happy April Fool's Day, you beautiful, foolish people.

The reason the Gospel of Mark has a better ending than any of the other gospels is because it understands precisely what must happen if the good news of Jesus Christ is going to continue to change the world--We have to wrestle with our own fears so that we can become the story.

Michael Coffey, a Lutheran pastor in Austin, Texas, wrote in an essay on this ending that its power is "its ability to leave the reader in a state of wonderment, dissonance, and deep inner questioning. . . . The ending challenges the reader: Go wrestle with this! Listen to your own inner struggle with fear and your own desire to trust God's resurrection good news."

As such, he thinks this is the perfect ending for our "deep, cynical, pessimistic, despairing moment" because this ending says "to keep wrestling with it." If we want the happy ending, then we have to write it ourselves by our choices, by the decisions we make, and the actions we perform.

After reading this Gospel have we gained the insight to understand what God wants of us? Do we have the faith, the imagination, the confidence to follow on that way? Will we continue the work of Jesus in the world?

The Good News of Jesus Christ, that only began here in the Gospel of Mark, is open-ended and on-going, and we are invited to write the next chapter in the story. To become the story. Jesus has gone ahead of us, and we are to follow.

And if we do, then we will see him. If we live as God has called us to live, then we will come to understand that Christ has risen and lives among us, empowering us to carry on the work.

This Gospel ends by going back to the beginning. Jesus is going back to Galilee to where it all began. He's going home again.

And like all the great journey stories the hero's journey always leads back home but the hero and home have both changed. They are transformed into something greater.

The Czech poet Vladimír Holan wrote a resurrection poem that seems to best fit with Mark's Gospel.

Is it true that after this life of ours we shall one day be awakened
by a terrifying clamour of trumpets?
Forgive me, God, but I console myself
that the beginning and resurrection of all of us dead

will simply be announced by the crowing of the cock.

After that we'll remain lying down a while . . .
The first to get up
will be Mother . . . We'll hear her
quietly laying the fire,
quietly putting the kettle on the stove
and cozily taking the teapot out of the cupboard.
We'll be home once more.

The world has ended, and we've awakened on an ordinary day at home. But we are different now because we have seen Jesus. What will we make of this day? How will we live differently? How have we become a New Human Being?