

## **Write the Ending**

Mark 16:1-8

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So, are you a little surprised by the ending of the Gospel of Mark? The women come to the tomb, hear from this mysterious young man, and then run away in fear. That's it. There is no appearance of the risen Jesus. No comforting of Mary in the Garden. No road to Emmaus. No doubting Thomas. This is it.

All of the earliest manuscripts of this Gospel end at verse eight, with the women running away afraid, not telling anyone what they've seen and heard. Some in the early church were as shocked and puzzled by this ending as we might be, so later generations wrote two alternate endings. Most Bibles you purchase today will also print those two alternative endings.

One is called the short ending and adds these words:

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

The one known as the longer ending was often presented as the only ending in most older editions of the bible. It narrates resurrection appearances of Jesus. It's the ending of the Gospel of Mark that many of you grew up with. The

longer ending includes these infamous verses:

And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.

Fortunately, most faith communities have viewed these verses with a healthy skepticism and don't go around picking up snakes or drinking poison to prove their worthiness. And it is one of the great blessings of modern scholarship that we were able to discover that these verses and the entire longer ending of Mark date from the second century and are not original to the gospel.

Which leaves us with the shocking, unsatisfying ending – the women run away afraid and tell no one.

In our lives, in the stories we read, in the movies we watch, in our tv shows, we prefer that everything be explained, all the loose endings tied up, the plot brought to its natural conclusion. We like our heroes riding away into the sunset or for the couple to get together happily or for the bad guys to get their comeuppance. An open ending unsettles us.

I love the Tom Hanks movie *Cast Away*, but plenty of people didn't. The romance with Helen Hunt is set up in the early moments of the movie. Then

Hanks spends the bulk of the film alone on an island after he survives a plane crash. His only companion is the volleyball Wilson. For 45 minutes there is no dialogue in this movie. When Hanks is finally returned home years later, Helen Hunt is married with children. There is no resolution of the romance.

At the very end of the film, he delivers a package that he has held onto for years. He works for FedEx and all through his exile on the island he kept this one package to deliver. It is a reaffirmation of his identity and purpose.

He delivers it to a remote area in West Texas and no one is home. Shortly afterwards, he encounters a woman at a crossroads, there in the middle of nowhere in West Texas. She explains each geographic location that the various roads lead to, and then she drives off. Tom Hanks stands in the middle of the crossroads looking at the various roads offered to him, and then the film ends.

When I saw this in the theatre a man behind me said to his wife, "That's a stupid ending." I wanted to turn around and say, "That's the perfect ending, and if you don't realize it, I pity you." Fortunately for me, I didn't say anything.

The reason that man and so many other people didn't like the movie is because there was no resolution. He didn't get the girl. His life wasn't restored. And most significantly, it just ends with him standing there.

But I think it was the perfect ending. In the opening scenes, it is established

that Tom Hanks' character is the sort of person who has life planned out, everything organized, he is in control, and he is strictly governed by his sense of time. On the desert island he controls almost nothing. It is difficult to plan and organize, and time is the most abundant commodity he has.

At the end, as he is standing at a crossroads, his life is open before him. He can make a fresh start. Nothing is planned. Nothing is organized. He is free to make a variety of choices.

Much like the film *Cast Away*, the openness of the ending of the Gospel of Mark makes it the perfect ending, maybe precisely because it unsettles us. The reason is: an open ending offers us listeners and readers our own choices and challenges.

The women are coming to Jesus' tomb to anoint him. They have been there traveling with Jesus and the twelve all along. Many believe that they represent a group of female disciples. Keep in mind that the twelve guys have already run away and that Peter has denied Jesus. The women, however, attend the crucifixion and now come to the tomb.

On the way to the tomb, they make it clear that they expect Jesus' body to be there; they assume he is dead. These women have not understood his

teaching that he would be resurrected.

Maybe they haven't understood because in the Jewish religion the resurrection was something that was supposed to happen at the end of time, when God's reign begins. Yet, from the very beginning of this gospel Jesus has been announcing that God's reign has already begun. The heavens have ripped open and God is set loose in the world. Repeatedly he has criticized the disciples and the religious authorities for failing to see that they were even then living in God's promised kingdom.

If God's reign is here and now, if it has already happened, then a good Jew should be expecting the resurrection of the dead. So, if everyone had been paying attention and had understood, then they shouldn't have been surprised that the tomb was empty.

But they are. They see the empty tomb and the mysterious young man and they are afraid. The young man tries to comfort them and instructs them, "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."

Jesus is still leading; Jesus is still showing the way on the journey. Once again they are invited to follow.

And where are they supposed to go? To Galilee. Galilee not only means

the specific place, it is also a symbol. Galilee is the beginning. It is the place where Jesus' ministry started and where he performed so many of the signs and wonders and actions of compassion, grace, and inclusion. It is the place where 5,000 are fed. Where the lepers were healed. Where the demons were exorcised. Where Jesus reached out to Gentiles and tax collectors. Where the boundaries that exclude people were broken down in favor of the outcast and the oppressed. The message is that the disciples are to go back to this place and begin again by faithfully living as if the reign of God has fully arrived.

If they do this, if they go back to all of that, then they will see Jesus. Just like elsewhere in the Gospel of Mark, sight not only means our physical eyesight, but also includes our spiritual insight. If the disciples will continue to faithfully follow the way of Jesus, then they will finally gain the spiritual insight and understanding that they currently lack.

All of this is what the women are to go and tell. But they don't. They are overcome by fear and run away and the story ends.

This gospel of Mark was not just written to tell a story; it was written to create new disciples. New followers of Jesus. The author's goal was to inspire generations who didn't know Jesus personally to also live as faithful followers of

his message that God's reign has begun. Mark wants to inspire later generations to take up Jesus' work of inclusion, grace, justice, and compassion. When they do that, they will encounter the Risen One.

So, when the gospel ends, we, the listeners and readers, are the ones left to follow. The one's left to tell the story. The one's left to do the things that Jesus has done

We are the ones standing at the crossroads. We are the ones who have to figure out if we are going to run away in fear or follow faithfully back to Galilee. Will we write our own story? Will we make this way of life our own, and thereby see the Risen One in ourselves?

This is the challenge that the Gospel of Mark poses to the church 2,000 years later.

Back in 2006 when I was a pastor in Oklahoma City, a small group from my congregation attended a conference in Stillwater, Oklahoma at Oklahoma State University. (A little side note to this story. The conference was organized by this great guy named Michael Cich who I had only just met.)

Anyway, as we drove home to Oklahoma City, Judy Hey, who was sort of our congregation's moderator at the time, was talking about how much she

would like for more college students to attend our church. Among her reasons she listed, “I want them to know that it’s okay to be gay.” I told her that in my recent experience on college campuses, that the students knew that it was okay to be gay, they just didn’t think it is okay to be a Christian. Judy said, “I guess we could advertise, ‘Come to the church where it’s okay to be a Christian.’”

In 2012, the fastest growing religious group in the United States is the “Nones.” Those who mark “none” on surveys that ask them to identify their religious affiliation. But surveys also reveal that this group is highly spiritual and interested in religious topics. They are just turned off by most churches. Our challenge as a church and as people of faith is to reclaim and renew Christianity. To tell this meaningful and compelling story.

And the ending of the Gospel of Mark is a great place to start, because it isn’t an ending at all. It is a new beginning that invites us to write our own story. The Christian faith was not settled in the age of the apostles and the martyrs. It was not forever defined by the creeds and doctrines of the church. It did not come to completion in the Protestant Reformation or the establishment of the Plymouth colony.

The Christian story is on-going and open-ended. God continues to speak to us, and we continue to listen. The Easter story awakens us to a creative



revolution in which we get play our own unique part. We are invited, encouraged, and challenged to carry the story forward and write our own ending.

Go, tell, for Jesus has gone ahead of us, inviting us to follow. When we do, we will see him, just as he told us.