

The Rest of the Story

Mark 16:5-8

Welcome back! Last weekend over 3000 of us celebrated the resurrection of Jesus. It was incredible, wasn't it? And here you are again! Welcome back, all of you! Last week you heard about the empty tomb! Now...you get to hear the rest of the story.

Many of you know I studied at St. Andrews University in Scotland. My residence hall had a library and I decided that as long as I was living in Scotland, I ought to read some classic Scottish literature. So I borrowed *Ivanhoe*, Sir Walter Scott's best known work. It was over 400 pages long and frankly...a little too wordy. But...I hung in there until the moment I turned to page 385...and realized the rest of the book was missing. The last few pages had been torn out! I was left dangling!

Would you be surprised to discover that the same thing happened to the gospel of Mark? Mark wrote his gospel around 60 AD. We don't have that original manuscript; it was lost long ago. But we do have thousands of ancient copies. **And the oldest, most reliable copies of Mark's gospel end abruptly at verse 8.** The women have entered an empty tomb; they discover an angel who announces that Jesus is alive and tells them to take that news to the disciples. So they have their marching orders. Listen to what happens next:

And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid...

If there were a category in the Bible called, "The Greatest Waste of Breath," the hands-down winner would be the opening line of every angel who ever appeared to a human being. What do they always open with? "Do not be afraid." And how do the people respond? "Oh, ok... I feel much calmer now!" Nope! Every time, they are terrified.

Same thing here. The women walk into the tomb of Jesus, they see an angel, he tells them not to be terrified, they be terrified anyway, and he just keeps going with his speech. Jesus is not here; he is risen, Now...go tell his disciples. Bada bing bada boom.

Now here is what I wish we read next: "After a momentary shock, the women were filled with joy, remembering what Jesus had told them. They rushed off, found the disciples and eagerly shared the news: Jesus is alive! Huzzah" THAT'S how I'd like the story to end.

Here's how Mark's story DOES end. "And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid..." The End."

But you say, "Wait a second...what about verses 9-20!" Read the fine print. It says, "Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include 16:9-20." They are being polite. There is no question that these last verses were not written by Mark; the style is completely different. Mark's original gospel ends abruptly at verse 8.

So...what happened? There are many theories. Some say Mark intentionally ends with a cliffhanger to make the reader come to his own conclusion. Rubbish. Or, Mark was martyred before he could finish the gospel.

Maybe. I think it's simpler than that. I think...the last page of his book fell off. Really. That often happened with these ancient books. The outer pages deteriorated first. And so...early Christian leaders decided to fill in the missing part of the story. They actually took stories from Matthew, Luke and John. There's nothing wrong with what was written; it's just not original to Mark.

So why'd they do it? Because they wanted the punchline! The other three gospels tell of Jesus appearing in the flesh. These early editors wanted Mark to end that way, the way they assumed the original ended! So, they did their best to fill in what had been lost. I understand that, don't you? I'm a historian by training. I wish we could read Mark's original ending. Maybe...maybe someday it will be found!

BUT...there is a sense in which every Christian writes the ending to that gospel. Here's what I mean. We believe that EVERY PERSON who invites Jesus to take control of their lives...every single one of us writes an epilog to the gospel. The resurrection wasn't just for those frightened women or those cowardly disciples. The resurrection is for us. Jesus wasn't just alive 2000 years ago; he is alive today. Right now! His Spirit waits to be invited in, one person at a time. That's how the kingdom grows!

Initially, those women were terrified. They didn't say a thing because their heads were spinning. But that was temporary. We know that as the truth of what they had witnessed sunk in...as the Spirit of the Resurrected Jesus settled into THEIR spirits... their fear was replaced with courage; their timidity with power; their despair with hope, their silence with shouts of joy! Otherwise, we wouldn't be here!

Let's face it: encountering Jesus can be terrifying! It means getting honest with ourselves about all that is broken in us...and deciding whether or not we trust Jesus to do a better job with our lives than we have done. (And by the way is, the answer is YES! He can!) Every time someone raises their hand to follow Jesus...like so many last week...every time someone presents themselves to be baptized...as we will tonight/today...we are finishing the gospel story. We are adding OUR name... OUR story...OUR witness to that of the billions of Christians who have gone before us.

I want you to meet two Chapel Hill folks who have their own Easter story to share. First, Gina Stuart. Gina is an elder on our Session and has been a part of our church since 1996.

[interviews]

Jesus is writing a new story in Gina and Matt's life. How about you? It is so easy, when we encounter the risen Christ, to run. To keep silent. To be terrified at the prospect of relinquishing control of our lives. But really...honestly...how is your life going with YOU in control. I'll bet 95% or more of you would say that you are Christians... and maybe 99% have been baptized. And yet, we live in a culture of control freaks. Maybe you are a spiritual control freak your next step is CR. Just try it...and discover how to loosen the grip on your own life so that God can have his way with you. Why not come Wednesday and listen to the rest of Gina's story?

And for those of you who have been running from the Lord, I want to ask you to do a really courageous thing. Admit you need him! Offer your life to Jesus. Let HIM run things. Your starting point might be baptism. If you've never been baptized before...and you want to confess faith in Jesus and follow him and be a part of his church ...we have elders who would love to meet with you right over here. If you want to be dunked, we can do that! If you'd like to be sprinkled...we can do that, too. But this is your moment to do what those women were too frightened to do: testify to your friends that Jesus is alive...and that he is alive in you. I pray you will respond to that prompting.