

“Finish the Story!”

Sermon: Year B, Feast of the Resurrection

Text: Mark 16:1–8

Preached: April 5, 2015 at CTL

Grace and peace to you from God, the author of our story, and from our Lord Jesus Christ, who is risen indeed. Alleluia!

I loved my father very dearly. One of the Easter lilies here today is in his memory, the first Easter I’ve had to say that, as he died in the Lord this past year. He was a kind and compassionate man, gently-spoken, a terrific preacher, and he was a wonderful pastor. But he had a quirk. He didn’t finish his stories. In conversation after conversation, throughout his life, he had the habit of beginning a story, and then... just... [*silence...*]. He would look off into the distance, or down at the floor. That’s it. You were left hanging. And the whole family would yell, almost in chorus, “Daddy, finish your story!!” Sometimes he did, sometimes he didn’t. And sometimes he would just start all over, as though he hadn’t told you that part before. Now, you have to know, my dad was in fact quite a storyteller, and he had a phenomenal memory for people and events. He was a preacher for more than 65 years, and a storyteller in the pulpit who engaged his hearers, and crafted sermons that brought scripture and life together, and they always went somewhere...so it’s not that he *couldn’t* tell a story. But for some reason, in everyday conversation, he would just ... stop. I’ve never really figured out the reasons for that. He would probably insist that it’s because the rest of us were yammering away so loudly that he *couldn’t* finish it, and in our talkative family, that is often the case. But trust me, he could do it in a quiet situation, as well.

I recently had another experience with unfinished stories. On Netflix, we had begun watching a BBC series, a detective story that told a continuous story from episode to episode, and I believe there were four seasons total. I had binge-watched much of it. I was down to the last three or four episodes. I sat down one evening, determined to plow through to the end...and then, much to my surprise, the series was not listed in my queue. I scrolled through all 210 selections, then again. It wasn’t there. I went to the search feature. Nothing. It was gone. Later that week, I learned that Netflix and the BBC had failed to reach an agreement on the licensing for that particular show, and so it had been pulled. I couldn’t see the ending. I was left hanging.

Don’t you hate that feeling? Getting caught up in a story, and then not being told the ending? Today’s resurrection story from the Gospel of Mark is just like that. The women go to the tomb, find it empty, encounter a young man dressed in white, and are alarmed. And like an administrative assistant explaining to someone who has shown up in the office looking for the boss, the young man gives them the message that they have just missed him, but he has left a message for them. “Don’t be alarmed. You’re looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. (You’re in the right place!) He has been raised; he is not here. But he did leave a message for you. Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he’s going ahead of you to Galilee; you’ll see him there, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement (or as the Greek says, “trauma and ecstasy” had seized them; *and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid*. Bam. Period. Full stop.

See, that’s not where I, or the official committee that selects the readings we hear each week decided to cut it off, really. The fact is, that’s where the oldest copies of the Gospel of Mark stop. That’s the ending of the gospel. No Mary Magdalene mistaking Jesus for the gardener. No footrace between Peter and John to see who could get to the tomb first. No dinner in Emmaus, no appearances in locked rooms, no doubting Thomas, no breakfast on the beach. We have to go to the other gospels to get those accounts. But consistently in the most ancient versions of the Gospel of Mark, that’s where the story ends, with women fleeing in trauma and ecstasy, and saying nothing to anyone.

Finish your story, Mark! What comes next? Why are you leaving us hanging? The ending is so abrupt and uncomfortable that 100 years later people started adding on endings of their own, endings that brought in the traditions that the other gospels included, the appearances to Mary Magdalene, to the two on the road to Emmaus, to the eleven in the locked room...you can see those endings in your Bibles, where they are usually marked off with brackets to show that they were added much later. But Mark just stops, literally in the middle of a sentence. In Greek, it ends with a preposition, as though the writer is about to launch into something else.

Why would he do that? Once when I was conducting a Bible study on Mark's gospel, one of the participants made a profound comment. She said, "This is like one of those mystery evenings that my seniors group go to...it's like the ending is up to the audience." I think that's spot on. As Barbara Lundblatt puts it, "Mark's story invites us to stand where those first trembling witnesses stood. Those three women didn't see Jesus. Neither do we. They didn't hear Jesus call their names. Neither have we. They weren't invited to touch his wounded hands. We haven't touched Jesus' hands either. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome are our silent sisters. The narrative is left for us, the readers, to complete."

And I think there's very good news in that. I can identify with those women. I can identify with their confusion, and yes, their fear, their trauma. Even though they've heard the promises from Jesus over and over again that he will die, but yes, he will then be raised from the dead, they've come to the tomb that morning with burial spices, because what he has said to them hasn't made any sense, and frankly, it just defies logic. And while they've come prepared with what they need to properly prepare Jesus' body for burial, they're halfway to the tomb before they even begin to wonder how they're going to manage to get the stone away from the opening. Whoops. They don't have a plan. They just know they need to do something important. There's a bumbling quality to their efforts to honor their dead friend that I can identify with. And then after the young man gives them the message, they fail to do the one task they've been given to do: Go and tell the others. And that's the picture of disciples throughout the Gospel of Mark: the followers of Jesus are always people who try to understand, but just don't get it; people who want to follow, but are afraid; people who want to do the right thing, but fail. People who are told to speak, but in their fear and confusion, remain silent. People like... me.

And the good news, the great news, of this story is that Jesus refuses to give up on them. Even Peter, the one who has failed in the most spectacular way just three days earlier, the one who has denied even knowing the Teacher whom he professed to love so much, is mentioned by name in the young man's instructions. Jesus wants especially to make sure that Peter—and we—know that our failure to be faithful disciples, even when we crash and burn, is not the end of the story. Not one of the disciples gets it, even when Jesus is explaining it to them. Not one. But Jesus is still waiting for us. He is risen from the dead, and there is work to do, and even though his followers, his friends, still don't fully get it, that simply doesn't matter to him. The Risen One is right back out there in the world, waiting for us to catch up. He's back in Galilee, where he spent his time healing the sick, feeding the hungry, speaking Good News about this crazy, upside-down Reign of God. He's doing the work he was sent to do, and he's waiting for you and me to come join in, even though we may not have a clue of where to go, what to do.

We really want simple endings, don't we? We prefer the comfortable quality of a story that gives us all the details, a story that has a clear beginning and ending. And that's the way we want our resurrection story, too. If we tie up all the loose ends, if we think the story has ended, then we can put the whole thing away for another year and not have to deal with it in our daily lives. There's no urgency for us, if we think the story has been told. But if the story hasn't ended yet, if the story involves you and me, if the next episode involves us going out to find the Risen Christ wherever he's now at work in the world, and joining with him in the acts of healing and reconciliation, then this resurrection thing is not about what happened then, not just some historic event that we commemorate, but it's an active, living experience that invites you and me into the telling right now. We will find the resurrected Christ not at the tomb, but alive and active in the world, back out where we live, where we find a hurting world waiting to hear Good News. And we're not alone. And our imperfection, our disbelief, our failure to understand, our fears, our inability to see, our trauma and our ecstasy, none of that stops the story.

You know, the writer of the Gospel of Mark had another quirk: The end of the gospel ends almost mid-sentence. But the writer wasn't much better with beginnings, either—the gospel *starts* mid-sentence, also. The first words are "The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." So when the gospel ends as it does, the whole story becomes really just the beginning, the first episode. Jesus' death is not the end. Jesus lives again, and so do we, and just as Christ's story doesn't end with his death, our story isn't finished yet, either. The story is just beginning for us. So, sisters, brothers, let's go catch up with Jesus, out there living and breathing in a world that needs healing. So, go, tell the Good News. Christ is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed! Alleluia, alleluia!