

Mark 16:1-8
He is Going Ahead of You
 Resurrection of the Lord/Easter ~ April 1, 2018
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Introduction

We are about to hear the story of how the Christian faith got started. This event is the reason we call this year 2018 and not 5778. It wasn't Jesus' birth, or even his death on the cross that started Christianity. It was what happened on the third day: The biggest surprise that ever happened—God's cosmic surprise party for all of us.

And this year, with Easter landing on April 1, aka April Fool's day, for the first time since 1956, (Yes, that was 62 years ago--which I happen to know without doing the math because that was the very day my husband, Bob, was born), this year we get to consider the empty tomb as God's, "April Fool's" joke to all he world. "April Fool's! He's not dead!" Heavenly hilarity: yes God's divine, ironic sense of humor, calls us to life and to laugh. "Lighten up people, I've got this!"

OK, I'm getting a little ahead of (actually way beyond) myself. This morning's scripture reading does not resemble anything like a fun surprise party—especially not in Mark. You've probably heard the Easter story before. It is told in each of our four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, in four different ways. This morning is our year to listen to Mark's version.

He was the first one to write it down. And Mark's Easter story may be a surprise to you—it's not the one we usually think of or gravitate to. There is no conversation between Jesus and Mary in the garden, no mystical walk with Jesus to Emmaus, no miraculous catch of fish or breakfast with Jesus. None of that. Mark's telling is short, raw and real. Let's try to let those other telling's go for the moment, and listen now to what Mark has to say about what happened on the third day after Jesus was crucified, died, and was buried.

Sermon

Is that any way to end a Gospel? Mark leaves us with the three women fleeing the tomb barely able to get a grip on themselves, "for terror and amazement seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." End of story. End of gospel. This is the unedited version. That's great Mark, but surely you meant to write more down. Or maybe you did, and then somehow it got lost. We know you were in a hurry when you wrote it—but doesn't the amazing, incredible news of God raising Jesus from the dead, God conquering death and sin once and for all—doesn't this Good News of salvation deserve a better ending than that?

That's what the early editors of the Mark manuscript thought. In fact, they were so convinced that Mark's ending was incomplete and imperfect, they quickly added a better, more fitting ending. It's in our Bibles. What's known as the "shorter ending" wraps up where we did, at verse 8. The "Longer Ending of Mark" continues

through verse 20. However, most scholarly authorities have come to the conclusion that whether we like it or not, Mark's original, authentic gospel ends at verse 8. That's right—it ends with the women running away in terror at what they had just been told. Why do you suppose, he might have ended it like that?

The other three gospels writers gave us endings we like better. They appear to be more complete. Matthew gives us 20 verses, Luke, 53 verses, and John 45 verses—all telling the story of what happened after Jesus was raised from the dead with more triumph and less terror, than Mark. Those are the endings we like. The kind where “they all lived happily ever after,” like in Cinderella, Lion King, in Finding Dory, Beauty and the Beast, or Coco. Stories we love to watch over and over. Hollywood will tell you: we prefer happy endings. We like them neat and tidy and wrapped with a bow. And so most of us would happily choose Matthew, Luke or John's versions of what happened on the third day than Mark's.

But this is our year to hear Mark's ending. It's messy and leaves us hanging. And while it may not have the Disney ending we long for, this original ending of Mark's Gospel is closer to where we really live. We don't have to work hard to relate to those women at the empty tomb. Hurt, broken hearted, grieving, confused, trying to take care of business in the best way they know how, through the tears. We know about messy lives and messy endings.

It almost seemed as if they didn't hear what the young man in the tomb, dressed in the white robe, said to them: “Do not be alarmed... He has been raised; He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” (v.6-7) The women had gone to the graveyard, expecting an ending. They went to embalm the dead body of their Lord, stressing about how they would roll away the very large stone in front of the tomb. And when they got there, the surprise was on them. It was too big, perhaps for them to grasp. Yes, they were told amazing news. But it seems as though they did not really hear or grasp it.

This man in the white robe was trying to tell them: Fear not, he's got you. And he's going ahead of you, leading you forward. Leading you from death to life; giving you and all of human kind, unconditional grace to begin again, to reboot, to start over abide more fully with the One who went to hell and back for us. Yes, Jesus who has been in the deepest valley, is also the One who is going ahead of us, to lead us forward into that scary thing we call the future.

Did they hear it? Well at some point they must have told someone, or else we wouldn't all be sitting in this sanctuary today. Somehow they started telling someone. But if you think about it, it's hard to really know how we got from the third day terror and amazement silence to where we are today. How did our faith, how does our own walk with Jesus, Jesus who is waiting there in Galilee for us, begin?

Back in 1949, when my dad and mom were just beginning my dad's first pastorate in Fayetteville, Arkansas, the church there was very excited about the news that my mom was pregnant with their first child and decided to throw a surprise baby shower for my mom. Well, my dad was in on it and helped to engineer this big surprise for my mom who didn't realize anyone at the church knew yet, because she was hardly showing at that point. Back then; such things were not quite so openly discussed as they are now. As the story goes, my mom walked into the dark church basement, the lights went up and they all yelled, "Surprise!" And oh, my was she surprised. Actually she was very surprised and somewhat embarrassed... Only to hear my dad say in a loud and proud voice for everyone to hear, "I suppose you're wondering how all this got started."

First there was a stunned silence, then a little ripple of giggles, developing into thunderous, uproarious laughter. And as my mom tells the story, she felt like she was standing there naked in front of 100 parishioners. And there was nothing my smooth-talking unflappable father could say to diminish the effect of what he had said. As much as we love to talk about and celebrate beginnings: the birth of babies (and grandbabies☺), weddings, baptisms, ribbon-cuttings, and opening day of baseball. The sky's the limit, it's all knew and pregnant with possibility.

The truth is, God is the One who started and starts everything good. It's already in the works, even when we can't see it or imagine it. Like the women at tomb, we also obsess about the huge stone, wondering who will roll the stone away. But then, if we get ourselves to the right place at the right time and remember to look up, we too will see that the stone (whatever that obstruction may be) has been rolled back already. Jesus has gone ahead of us, laying the bridge from where we are to where Christ would have us be. The answer, the solution (often not what we expect or think we want) is already there, ahead of us. Beckoning to us. "Come now, says Jesus, live into the light of your next step.

When I was young, I used to hate it when I got in a fight with my sister Lynn, who is only two years older than I. I would get so mad. And I would be so sure I was right. And she would get this superior, "I'm always going to be older and wiser than you"" look on her face. And I would run to mom, Lynn following close behind. Each of us eager to explain, "that it was all my sister's fault—that SHE started it." My mom would wait for both of us to stop talking and then she would say, "I'm not interested in who started it, I want to know who will end it." That would make me even madder. And, course, when I became a mom, I used the very same line when we were raising our two girls.

That is exactly the question I hear God calling out to us particularly this Easter with this gospel: I hear our mother/father parent God saying to us, "I'm not so interested in who actually started this epidemic of school shootings or church shootings, nightclub or movie theater shootings. I'm not so interested in how young black men and women, like Stephon Clark in Sacramento on March 18, was shot in the back, multiple times, while being black and holding a cellphone in the backyard

with his grandmother. I'm not so interested in how the nuclear arms race began that could totally annihilate in less than three days this world I have so loved; or who started the abuse of this one beautiful planet I gave you tend and care for—I want to know **who will end** these travesties?

None of these ways we continue to crucify Jesus have simple solutions. Blame and responsibility travel in multiple directions. But we know, because of Jesus' work on the cross, that he is with, behind, and ahead of all who suffer shame, humiliation, and injustice. Christ calls to us in the lives and voices of all who are marginalized and exploited. Who will stand in the breach? Who will work to end this sin? We all have a part in the answer to these questions.

As Nelson Mandela once said, "It always seems impossible until it's done." On our recent Urban Immersion Service Retreat with our seven confirmands in Minneapolis, we were struck by this quote on the wall of the dormitory where we stayed. It speaks to the truth of the empty tomb. He is not here—He is Risen! God has opened the door on endless possibilities for us to turn what seems impossible, what seems like death, death and only death, into a beginning, God the Creator can spread a table in the wilderness, wherever or however far out in the wilderness you may feel, or how quickly you may see our country and our world devolving.

God has already surprised us with the impossible. Now it's up to us. Mark's ending leaves it open-ended, beckoning *us* to complete the gospel. Let's see if we can do Mark and God and Jesus the favor of continuing that 16th chapter, doing what seems impossible, because Jesus is already going ahead of us.