



“Living the Story”

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Mark 16:1-8

During Christmas break my first semester of seminary I went to see the first installment of the *Lord of the Rings Trilogy* in the theater on opening night. The salty smell of popcorn and the flickering of the film projector enveloped my senses, thrusting me into a world of hobbits, elves, and dwarves. The excitement was electric as battles ensued, monsters caused mayhem, and heroes fought valiantly for the freedom of Middle Earth. Two and a half hours passed in the blink of an eye as the movie’s climax perched me on the peak of anticipation. In rapid succession, one of the champions dies, the villains gain strength, little Frodo Baggins abandons his closest friends, and the movie ends. I shouted, in a voice that was deeper and darker than any ogre’s voice, “COME ON! IT CAN’T END LIKE THIS! I NEED MORE!”

It is difficult to deal with confusing and abrupt endings, isn’t it? The Disney Company makes millions of dollars by doing the complete opposite. They have spent decades selling fanciful stories that have been forced into prepackaged boxes of high-gloss finales. How would we have felt if, at the end of *Beauty and the Beast*, the self-absorbed Gaston had married Belle and the beast had died a miserable death? What if Sleeping Beauty had never awakened from her eternal slumber? What if Cinderella remained forever a pauper under the misshapen heel of her evil stepmother? Would you or your family see these revised movies? Would you or your family make the pilgrimage to the theme parks in Florida and California? We want happy endings. Happy endings grant us moments of glitter in our often flat, fragile and featureless lives. Brian K. Blount, an author and theologian, calls this need for everything to be wrapped up neatly and nicely the “Walt Disney effect.” The creators of Disney films want us to believe, if even for a moment, that there is such a thing as “happily ever after.”

In the original resurrection account of Mark, there is no happily ever after. The ancient manuscripts end at verse 8 saying, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” This Gospel lesson that you heard this morning is where the story stops. For the women at the tomb there was no appearance of Jesus and there was no happy ending. Their fairy-tale was left unfinished. Their hopes and dreams were crushed on a cross and entombed in lifeless stone. The body of Jesus, which they had clung to in life and they had expected to anoint in death, was strangely missing. These faithful followers who had entwined their own existence into the very essence of Jesus were left perched on the edge of their seats.

We too are connected to Jesus as our faith in the outcome of our lives is tied to the outcome of his. If there was no victory for Jesus, then why should we lift our Easter voices in praise? If there was no victory for Jesus, then how can we expect to live “happily ever after?” If there was no victory for Jesus, then what will be the outcome of our stories? We, as readers of this jagged

ending, are left feeling like the confused women fleeing from the scene in terror and amazement to remain fearfully silent. We are abandoned to wander hopelessly in a fractured fairy tale nightmare. What was Mark thinking? What did Mark hope to accomplish by finishing his gospel so abruptly? We don't know what happened to Jesus! This is Easter Sunday and Jesus is missing! This story makes me want to shout out again in my deep, dark voice – COME ON! IT CAN'T END LIKE THIS! I NEED MORE! I NEED MORE!

The 2nd century church was also uncomfortable with this unexpectedly scandalous ending. The early Christians needed happiness, they needed victory, they needed triumph. In Blount's words, they needed a few more verses to tie up the loose ends. So, what did they do? They added them. They added verses they wished Mark had written. We know that these verses were added at a later date because they have no similarities in the Gospel Matthew or the Gospel of Luke and the best and oldest manuscripts of Mark are void of the longer ending. Let's listen to the entire added text and see how it differs from the shorter Gospel reading for today:

“When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These two returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen. He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name, they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.”

Wow! What a wonderfully happy ending! These verses reported that Jesus appeared to Mary and the disciples; that his followers would have mystical powers; that the Lord was whisked up into heaven beside the almighty God. Truly this is a happy ending. However, in creating this perfect ending, the original ending of Mark was betrayed. The early church's addition explained away the mystery of Jesus; the mystery of faith; the mystery of miracle; the mystery of resurrection.

Why does Mark's conclusion need the abrupt ending, need the mystery? First, let's look at the mystery of faith. In the longer, happy ending added to Mark, unbelief becomes the villain. Unbelief becomes a sin! The added text says, “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned.” Faith, in this addition, is made to be simple. Faith is made to be a static reality. But it isn't. Faith is messy. Faith is complicated. Faith is difficult. When you look into the trembling, glassy eyes of your spouse as the words “I was fired” spill from her mouth, where is your faith? When you have to stand over your frail father as he lays lifeless in a hospital bed, where is your faith? When your baby boy has a devastating illness that strikes him with seizures, making him grind his teeth until his jaw pulses

with pain, where is your faith? True belief includes unbelief. It is a growing, a maturing in our understanding of faith. Faith isn't always simple – it is mysterious and changing.

Mark's editors were out to over simplify the mystery of miracles as well. Their added ending explains miracles as, "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 the sick will recover."

Now, I wish miracles were that easy, don't you? Do you think we could drink poison and survive? How about we all go outside and pick up some snakes? And how many of us have actually laid our hands on someone and the disease was lifted from that person's infirmed body? My thought is that hardly any of us have done any death-defying miracles in our lifetime. But I guess that is what makes them miracles. They are unpredictable, unexpected, and unexplained. We are not guaranteed to perform "wonder-working powers" just because we are Christians. If the disciples, the twelve that were so close to Jesus that they could smell the salt from the sea in his hair, if they could not cure a seizure-plagued, demon-possessed boy, then how often will we be miracle-makers? Faith and miracles are mysterious. Without the mystery, we wouldn't need the resurrected Jesus.

Mark's abrupt first ending leaves the reader with the faith-filled promise of joining Jesus in Galilee. The mysterious promise is no longer mysterious in the extended ending. In the added ending, Jesus ascends in marvelous splendor focusing our attention on a cosmic Christ in a distant heaven rather than with his probing call to dynamic discipleship here on earth. What about the Jesus who walked the cracked and stony soil? What about the Jesus whom the masses could reach out to touch and to feel? What about the Jesus who asked for a passionate following... even to Galilee? Mark's silent ending calls out for us to respond, to follow, and to engage in active discipleship.

Following the risen Christ is fueled by mystery. Would we be authentic followers if there were no questions? Would we be active in our faith if we knew all the answers? The women at the tomb had questions, they had concerns, they had needs. And they responded with silence, with uncertainty, and with fear. Anyone who truly understands what it means to be a disciple of Jesus is accustomed to fear. Discipleship is the way of the cross and if we are not afraid then we don't understand. Jesus is about calling faithful disciples to walk through the darkness, not cuddling comfortable Christians who want to rest victoriously in the light. Mark wants his readers to stop gazing at apparitions but to see the emptiness of the tomb, to see where Jesus' body was laid. Discipleship is challenging and often times frightening. If we extract fear from the narrative then we hollow out what it means to follow Jesus.

So, what do we do with this mysterious ending? Why did Mark want me to shout out at the conclusion of his resurrection story – COME ON! IT CAN'T END LIKE THIS! I NEED MORE! Perhaps he wanted his story to be never-ending. Perhaps each one of us, each of us listening to this word today, will continue Christ's story. The dilemma of the abrupt ending is precisely what Mark refuses to resolve for us; he leaves us to wrestle with whether or not the

women at the tomb ever overcame their fears. To provide a “neat closure” or “happily ever after” to the narrative allows the reader to remain only passive, self-absorbed, with no further action.

But, this never-ending story yearns to be lived out by every disciple who will read this precarious plot. The good news that Mark promised us is that the risen Lord awaits us not in an empty tomb or in some distant future or remote reality. Jesus Christ awaits us in our discipleship and through our discipleship in this time and in this place. In most people’s lives today there are no awesome apparitions promising happy endings. There are only the harsh realities of the empty tomb.

But we are assured that Jesus’ absence at the tomb is the promise of his presence in Galilee. Jesus’ absence in the conclusion of Mark is his presence in and through us today. We are Jesus’ presence for those fleeing war-torn countries, those lonely on our city streets, those bullied in the hallways of our schools. We are Jesus’ presence to those dying in hospitals, to those decaying in prisons, to those destitute and homeless. We are Jesus’ presence in the aisles of the supermarket, in the pews of our church, in our offices at work, in the halls of our legislators. We are Jesus’ presence on the sidewalks of our neighborhoods, picking up our kids from soccer, with our parents in nursing homes, and at home dining quietly with our families. Our discipleship today is the presence of Jesus in the world. We are resurrected people living the unfinished story.

What kind of discipleship will our stories reveal? Are we following or are we fleeing? As Easter people, how are we living the story?

Amen.