

An Oddly Perfect Ending Sunday, 4/12/20

[OFF] For all the things that I love about the Gospel of Mark- it's brevity, it's clarity of purpose and theology, there is one perplexing thing about it, and it comes at the very end, on Easter Sunday. Here's the thing about the ending of Mark: We don't all agree on where it is! Pretty much everyone agrees that the passage we read this morning is included in Mark, and that John Mark is the one who wrote it. Do you remember how that passage ended in verse 8? "The women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened."¹

[SHARE: He is Risen Picture] Taken out of context you might imagine a scary scene like this, as I suggested some weeks ago with the Zombie Pastor Bill meme. But even taken in context, this could hardly be the end of Mark's Gospel! Or could it? Would Mark really leave us with a scene of the disciples fleeing the tomb, too afraid to tell anyone about it? What about the other witnesses to the risen Christ? What about sharing the good news with others? This hardly seems like the kind of good news you'd end your Gospel with to inspire the faith of future generations! And yet, I think verse 8 is an oddly perfect ending to events that turned the world upside down two-thousand years ago.

[OFF] There are many alternate endings that have been associated with the Gospel of Mark over the last two millennia, with two in particular that have endured in our printed Bibles and third that's often included in the study notes. None of them appeared in the earliest Greek manuscripts we now have of Mark's Gospel, and all of them bear trademark signatures of someone else's writing style, vocabulary, and even theology. Almost certainly they were added in by copy editors or well-meaning church leaders somewhere along the way in the long history of assembling the Bible.

Why do these alternate endings remain in so many of our Bibles? Because once something is added to the Bible, it becomes part of the Christian community and the collective experience of the church, and it's very difficult to remove it from the canon. Things have been removed from the Bible. You can see that for yourself if you compare a catholic Bible with a protestant Bible, which has seven fewer books included in the Old

¹ Mark 16:8. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

Testament than the catholic Bible. But that was back in the 1500's, and short of another reformation of the church, I'd guess those alternate endings to Mark are here to stay.

Let's hear the first of those endings now, the so called "shorter" ending, although really, the shortest ending is to omit this additional ending entirely. In some Bibles, this shorter ending is actually included as the second part of verse 8 **{Read Mark 16: shorter ending}** Can you hear what's wrong with that ending? It's just a little too tidy, too calm, as if an editor felt that it was important make everything feel ok again, to reassure the reader that it was all going to work out ok for the terrified women fleeing the tomb!

The second, longer alternate ending has fragments of text that seem familiar from stories in Mathew and Luke's Gospels, but it's also where all those wild verses are about snake handling, exorcising demons, and speaking in tongues. Instead of diving into that ending this morning, I want to suggest that we drop all the alternate endings and go back to the way Mark seemed to have intended we end our reading of his Gospel, as uncomfortable and uncertain as that might make us feel, with the women fleeing the empty tomb in terror.

[SHARE: Emoticons of amazement] Depending on which social media platforms you're using these days, you've probable used or seen emoticons like these. The one in the center is one I use pretty much every day to express amazement when responding to a Facebook post. The other ones are avatars that Apple calls "memojis." They're supposed to look something like me in different states of amazement, confusion, uncertainty, or even total befuddlement. If the disciples were using social media on Easter morning, these are some of the expressions that they might have been posting to each other. In fact, amazement in response to the actions of Jesus is one of the most consistent features throughout Mark's Gospel, starting from the very first chapter.

[OFF] Let's be honest and say there's a difference between responding to an amazing cat video on Facebook and the kind of amazement that the terrified disciples experienced, amazement that carried with it no small amount of confusion, uncertainty, and fear. But we can still relate to that level of amazement, can't we, especially this past month? Reverend Cindy Gregorson, and many others, have noted that this has been the "lentiest of Lents," not because of all the extra spiritual disciplines we've adopted, but because of the overwhelming feelings we've experienced as we've walked through the valley of the shadow of death with

Jesus.

The real ending of Mark, the one that ends with the disciples too terrified to accept the resurrection of Jesus, is the one that resonates most with our human experience this Easter. We know, intellectually, that the tomb is empty because we've seen it with our own eyes of faith, but somehow that hasn't helped us come to a neat and tidy conclusion this morning. After worship, there will still be people dying, people afraid, people out of work, and people grieving and lonely. Pretending otherwise would be like trying to rewrite the Gospel of Mark, fashioning a fairytale ending that imagines life isn't complicated and hard.

[SHARE: Colorful patchwork of three women and the angel] The webcam at the tomb of Jesus had very low resolution, so I'm afraid this is the best image we have of the women's encounter with the angel. Let's see if we can fill in the details with our own imaginations. Imagine the expression that would be on your face if you were standing before an angel? If you're having trouble imagining that, then remember that the first thing God's angels always say is what? "Do not be afraid!" Any one of us would have been terrified from that alone, much less finding the tomb empty.

[OFF] Now I want you to imagine something completely different. Leave the empty tomb of Jesus and come back into your present life. What is it that currently has you completely amazed- not in an amazing cat video kind of way, but in the sense of shaking in your boots as a first-hand witness to the death and resurrection of Jesus? Death and resurrection both entailed painful changes, not only for Jesus but for everyone following him as well. Everything they thought they knew was called into question. Every way they had for living was turned on its head. Every plan they had for the future was suddenly, and repeatedly, called into question. Sound familiar? Every one of us is wrestling with changes, questions, doubts, conflicts, uncertainties, and losses in this time that threatens to overwhelm us with amazement. Whatever it is that's amazing you in these days, know that one thing that has not and will not change is that Easter is a reliable time of hope.

[SHARE: Happy emoticons] It's not that Easter suddenly made everything easy or clear for the followers of Jesus. Easter still doesn't do that for us today. But Easter does radically change our orientation, giving us a new framework from which to see our struggles. Easter reminds us that God is trustworthy and strong, even when so many things

we've put our trust in seem unreliable and weak. Easter reminds us that death and darkness do not get the final word, but rather life and light. And perhaps most importantly, Easter reminds us who this Jesus really is: The anointed one of God, our savior, given selflessly so that we might be called the Children of God, living in the abundant love of God and sharing it freely to all who will receive it. Easter is a time for amazement, but it is also a time for celebration.

[OFF] I'll close with a prayer poem by Helen Steiner Rice, an American poet whose father died in the influenza epidemic of 1918.² Her poem seems especially appropriate for this Easter morning:

God, give us eyes to see the beauty of the Spring,
And to behold Your majesty in every living thing -
And may we see in lacy leaves and every budding flower
The Hand that rules the universe with gentleness and power -
And may this Easter grandeur that Spring lavishly imparts
Awaken faded flowers of faith lying dormant in our hearts,
And give us ears to hear, dear God, the Springtime song of birds
With messages more meaningful than man's often empty words
Telling harried human beings who are lost in dark despair -
'Be like us and do not worry for God has you in His care.

That's my prayer for each of us today, that we might see through the eyes of faith, the beauty of the spring that God is even now bringing because of the Easter promise kept. Amen.



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² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Helen_Steiner_Rice