

A Different Kind of Story: A Sermon for Easter Vigil

Virginia Theological Seminary

April 8, 2012

The Rev. Dr. Joyce Ann Mercer

Text: Mark 16: 1-8a

Prayer for Illumination: Glorious God, Risen Christ, Joyous Spirit: On this holy Easter morning, Enliven our hearing and receiving of your Word, we pray, that we might bear it into the world in gratitude and gladness. Amen.

Finally this day has come, when we can with joy announce again our alleluias with glad shouts: Christ is Risen! **He is Risen indeed.** That joy is where we *go* on Easter; celebrating Christ's resurrection, we celebrate also the resurrection of Christ's people.

But joy is not quite where Mark's Easter narrative takes us. This strange story has more of the quality of a suspense novel that doesn't quite work: there's been an arrest, a courtroom scene, a death. And now we're primed for the exciting climax of the story—only to have Mark give us this ending: “For 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.”

What sort of an ending is that?? Don't get me wrong: I love a good suspense narrative, a story with some mystery to it—J.K. Rowling, Agatha Christy, PD James, Laurie R. King, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and countless others have given hours of pleasure and escape, conjuring a world, setting up a puzzle and then offering clues along the way, daring me to figure out the riddle. Is Severus Snape good or bad? Did some rogue cop plant the evidence leading to a lawyer's conviction or was the lawyer a bad egg all along? Who really pulled the trigger? What happened to the body? I love it when I figure out ahead of time, before the final pages of the book, that the butler did it. I love it even more when I *don't* figure it all out ahead of time—when

the writer takes me all the way to the end, and in a climactic surprise, unfolds the answers that make sense of all that has gone before, with the pleasure of good closure to a well-told tale.

So I have to say that as a suspense narrative, Mark's gospel seriously fails. Mark's Gospel which began so auspiciously with the words "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1) seems to go up in flames when we get to chapter 16's "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16.8). What a disappointment! There's no resolution of the dramatic tension, no closure to the story—the tomb is open, the body of Jesus is not there, and the women go away silent and afraid. What kind of an ending is that? No mystery writer in her or his right mind would end a story without letting the readers know what happened to the body. As if that were not enough, verse 7 even foreshadowed a post resurrection appearance by Jesus—"there [in Galilee] you will see him, just as he told you", the women hear from the stranger sitting on the tomb—so that with them we are primed for something really dramatic... But then unlike the other gospel accounts of Easter, Mark's story doesn't narrate any such appearance of the Risen Christ! And then there's the problem of who's left to stand on the side of the Good in this tale: the disciples and Peter fell away in the preceding chapter, Jesus has been killed and is nowhere to be seen, and much to our disappointment, even these women who have remained steadfast throughout the story, providing for and following Jesus to the end, well even they seem to fall apart here in this last moment of narrative action, first by arriving too late to perform their ritual function of caring for the body of Jesus by anointing it with the spices they purchased, and then by being reduced to silence and trembling in the face of the messenger's command to seek the Risen Christ in Galilee, and to go and tell the disciples and Peter.

Why, as a suspense-filled narrative account, this gospel ending seems to fail on so many levels that other, better endings have been proposed practically from the start—two of which even made their way into the canon in the form of vs. 16: 8b- and 16:9-20. For some time now, there has been wide scholarly consensus that 16:8 where our text ends today, is the more authoritative textual end of Mark’s narrative, and the other two endings were added later as attempts to deal with unease and dissatisfaction this ending provokes. Even when scholars affirm vs. 8 as the more authoritative ending, this doesn’t stop them from trying to “fix” the narrative some other way to bring good closure to the story: NT scholar Richard Horsley is prompted in the Oxford Annotated Bible to append as his note to vs. 8 the comment that “The narrative ends with the women terrified. Obviously, however, they eventually told the tale, or Mark’s gospel could not have been written.” These moves to “fix the ending,” or at least to fix the women, by redactors, scholars and interpreters of Mark reveal an interesting unwillingness to let this narrative conclude as it does, to let these women be with their silence and their fear, to hear the open-ended, uncomfortable, and unresolved place Mark leaves us.

It is a lousy way to bring closure to a story. But perhaps for Mark, that is the whole point. The reason this “ending” is so discomfiting, is that in Mark’s narrative it isn’t supposed to be the ending of the story at all. There is no closure, no final sorting out and rehabilitating the main characters, no sense of resolution that tidies up the loose ends, because in Mark’s narrative this passage operates as the *middle* of the Jesus story: the ending is still open. In this gospel narrative, we the hearers and readers have been silent partners in the unfolding narrative all along: we were there for Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan; we were there with Jairus asking Jesus to help his sick daughter, and with the bleeding woman touching his garment in search of healing. We were

present at his trial before Pilate; we were there on Friday as he hung on the cross, and we were there at his tomb this morning. Although the story seems to end in silence, with no one left to witness to the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Mark's odd, unfinished ending is unfinished precisely because it takes account of us—we are the ones who remain, to witness to the Good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God. The story continues in the lives of those who hear the Word and respond. The young messenger who met us in the tomb instructs us to return to Galilee, figuratively the place of ministry, the world where people yearn for healing, peace, wholeness, and salvation. There are many possible endings!

My children used to read these books—precursors to contemporary video gaming-- where, just at a critical point in the action, the reader gets to choose: if you want the hero to face a monster, go to page 123; if you want the hero to have a sword fight with the butler, go to page 74. In these books, the reader constructs the ending of the story by making choices along the way.

We have such choices to make as we participate in the Jesus story given to us by Mark. If this morning's text is the *middle* point of the story, the question is, *How will we finish it?* Will we go back to Galilee, back out into the world, to the places of Jesus ministry, in search an encounter with the Risen Lord Jesus? If we grasp fully the meaning of such a choice, it is a daunting question. I think the women at the tomb in Mark's narrative knew that! What if the real reason the women in Mark's gospel ending were seized with terror and amazement is not because they failed in their faithfulness, but because in this moment at the empty tomb, sent back into ministry, they finally fully grasped what they were being asked to do—to seek their Lord not

where his body lay in a grave, but back there in Galilee, out there in the world, just as Jesus had told them?

The story is meant to continue in the lives of those who hearing it, encounter the Word, as we who are baptized into Christ's dying and into his rising continue the work of ministry that manifests the Kingdom of God in a world broken yet beloved. Are you going out there? Out there where babies cry for hunger and mothers cry watching their babies suffer? Are you going out there, to proclaim that in God's reign death is not the end, out there where earthquakes shatter houses and lives? Are you going out there to mark the end of oppression, out there where Travon Martin died, where George Zimmerman lives, and where young black men disproportionately fill our prisons? Are you going out there—out there on the streets of DC or LA or Minneapolis, where right now people are shivering as they wake up under highway overpasses? Are you really going out there to look for Jesus, among good people who are farmers and laborers who can't figure out how to pay the mortgage this month much less send their kids to college? Where war ravages nations and peoples? Where the affluent wonder if there is any good news for them? Are you going out there to Galilee to the world, to the places of encounter with the Risen Christ?

If so, we might want to take a clue from the women who went in search of Jesus in the tomb and instead found a messenger who sent them out—perhaps a good way to start out on such a journey is in silence and trembling. It's a daunting journey—so let's go together. Let's go as the church, as the body of Christ. Let's go and seek him. Of course, after we get started, after we get past the initial shock of realization of what this mission could mean for us, we might also

just begin to find our voices....perhaps starting with a whisper, and eventually rising to a shout that the whole world can hear: Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed!

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia. Amen.