

“Easter Closure”
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby
Central Presbyterian Church
March 30, 2008
Scripture: Mark 16:1-20

I rarely say this, mostly because I think Scripture is meant to be heard in worship, but let me invite you to open a pew Bible to read along today. Turn to the last part of the Gospel of Mark, page 47 in your pew Bible. Some people say, “wait a minute, there are two page number 47s in this Bible.” And you are correct. The first part of the Bible, the Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures is longest, and then the numbering starts over again for the New Testament. So, page 47 in the back half of the Bible.

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ ⁸So 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.

The Shorter Ending of Mark

[[And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.]]

The Longer Ending of Mark

⁹ [[Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. ¹⁰She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. ¹¹But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

¹² After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. ¹³And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

¹⁴ Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. ¹⁵And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. ¹⁶The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. ¹⁷And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they

will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸they 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 they will recover.’

19 So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

The Word of the Lord
Thanks be to God

The question is: how do you put closure on the Easter story? The gospel of Mark is the first written gospel, the first completed story of the life of Jesus. Scholars are quite convinced that the original ending to the gospel of Mark ends abruptly at verse eight. The original conclusion of the first written account of Easter ends with the women, going to the tomb early on Sunday. As they enter, they encounter a young man dressed in a white robe who tells them the Easter message and the women “went out and fled from the tomb,” Mark tells us, “for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

The ending in Mark’s version, the first written account of this day, is even more disjointed in its original language. Translated directly from the Greek, the last sentence of Mark’s gospel reads like this: “and no one anything they told, they were afraid for . . .”¹ Here we have the first written account of the resurrection, and this is all Mark can come up with for an ending? The twelve named disciples long gone – having run off as soon as the soldiers came up to arrest Jesus. Even the faithful women, these women at the tomb – at the good news, Mark can only stammer out to us “and no one anything they told, they were afraid, for . . .”?

Just about everyone who has tried to tell the Easter story since then has found Mark’s ending unsatisfactory. “The ending is not only abrupt, but puzzling.”² In fact, as we saw in our pew Bibles there are two additional endings written later, named helpfully, the “shorter ending of Mark” and “the longer ending of Mark.” But scholars agree that those are much later additions. According to Mark, the women hear the news and don’t tell anybody. End of gospel. Close the book.

Since Mark’s original ending was deemed unsatisfactory, those who came later made changes and additions. Matthew reports that the women did tell the disciples. Matthew, Luke, and John all choose to include further stories in which Jesus makes appearances to those first followers, so they could see with their eyes and touch with their hands to prove that Jesus had triumphed over the grave. You can go home and read them yourself and see that they didn’t like Mark’s ending.

For Mark ends in a stammering voice, with the women fleeing from the tomb in terror and amazement and they told no one anything.

There is a whole new Da Vinci Code waiting to be written about how such an ending came to be [Barbara Brown Taylor writes]. Did Mark slump over his manuscript at that point, dead from a sudden heart attack? Did a Roman soldier walk up behind him and say, “You’re done, son”? Maybe those who inherited Mark’s manuscript were so appalled by what he had written that they ripped it right there, right in the middle of that sentence, and pretended that was all there was to it . . .³

Clearly this ending was deemed unsatisfying to some. And so, various editors added to Mark’s original ending.

When I was a kid, there was a popular series of books called the Choose Your Own Adventure books. You would come to a critical juncture in the plot, and suddenly, you would have to make a decision. If you decide to turn back home, turn to page 4. If you decide to wait, turn to page 5. Some of the endings, of course, are more satisfactory than others for the main character.⁴

And that is what we are left with in our Bible for the gospel of Mark. The earliest manuscripts end this gospel differently, so our current translation of the Bible allows us to make the decision. Some end how scholars now believe Mark ended it. Others end with a two sentence “shorter ending.” Others have a much longer ending. And some of the manuscripts have both. You make the decision.

The longer ending is rather interesting. It appears to summarize the resurrection stories from the other gospels (one reason why scholars are fairly confident it is not original). But these stories are crafted into a pattern. Did you notice this pattern? Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and she goes and tells those who had been with him. “But when they heard,” the ending says, “that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.” The disciples would not believe the Easter story. And then it happens again. Jesus appears in another form to two of them.⁵ And again, they share the good news to the rest, but they did not believe them. This ending emphasizes that the good news of Easter is so startling, so amazing, so unexpected, that even the disciples would not believe it. Again and again, the ending says, the disciples would not believe and did not believe.

So what are we to make of this cycle of appearances, proclamation, and disbelief? Well, if nothing else, it resonates with many people here. We have heard the Easter story, we have sung the Easter hymns, we buy lilies and chocolate eggs to celebrate, we may even say “Christ is risen,” but we cannot wrap our minds around it.

Add to those dynamics the growing sense that to question is unfaithful, or unpatriotic, or betrays ignorance. So, in our time, these questions adults have about Easter are often left unsaid, whispered, saved for those late nights when sleep doesn’t come easily. Are we in a time when, as Mr. Incredible of the animated superhero film *The Incredibles* puts it (in a deep bass voice), “doubt is a luxury we cannot afford anymore.”

In these times when issues are seen overwhelmingly as black and white, cut and dried, true or false, it is time for us downtown mainline Christians to take another look at issues of faith

and doubt. Paul Tillich, a theological giant of the 20th century, was very helpful in expressing what faith is in a small, still timely book called Dynamics of Faith. Faith is, he begins, not a believing in a set of dogmas or bedrock certainty, instead faith is a state of being ultimately concerned. Everyone has faith in something that places demands and promises ultimate fulfillment.⁶ So you can trust that the ultimate concern is your country, or your bottom line, or, in the divine Holy presence. Each would offer different competing demands if you said that is your ultimate concern. “If faith is understood as belief that something is true, doubt is incompatible with the act of faith. [But, Tillich argues] if faith is understood as being ultimately concerned, doubt is a necessary element in it. It is a consequence of the risk of faith.”⁷ Faith is about being grasped by something that has an immense claim on your life, and it takes courage to live into those claims.

But then the long ending takes a different twist. It seems like we are getting a pattern established of Easter appearances and continuing disbelief. Support, perhaps, for the experience of many of us.

But then Jesus appears again to all eleven of the remaining disciples at once. The ending says that he “upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who say him after he had risen” (16:14). Despite his “upbraiding them,” he then commissions them to proclaim the good news to the whole creation.

Interesting, is that not?! He upbraids them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, but it is those very same faith-lacking, stubborn disciples he commissions to proclaim the good news. He doesn’t commission others. There is no indication that their stubbornness is gone. It is the commissioning of imperfect disciples put in charge of spreading the good news. How about that?

And then, if you choose this ending, we hear a message that Easter is nearly complete for those who do believe. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved. Those who believe will pick up snakes in their hands. Those who believe will be able to drink any deadly thing and it will not hurt them. Those who believe will be able to lay their hands on the sick and they will recover.

Now there are those who do believe this way. I recently read a paper on Appalachian churches that practice snake handling. It was fascinating and I gained an appreciation for what they do. But that is not for me. The blessing of the Animals is about as close to handling snakes as you will ever see me. In fact, even then I take precautions. About an hour before the first Blessing of the Animals service we did at Central, Kathy Handford handed me individual packets of hand napkins. And she said, you would not want to pick up, for example, a bunny rabbit, and then take your same hands over to bless a snake!

So, I can’t choose this ending with those who believe having magical powers to pick up snakes and drink poisons and heal all who are sick. In my mind, the message of Easter is not that all who believe will have magical powers.

The message of Easter is not that death has been completely overcome. The message of Easter is not that bad things no longer have power. The message of Easter is not that we who believe will be immortal, live forever more.

And so there are those who try to comfort those who mourn with easy answers and try to skip right over the pain of death. There are those take the Easter story and believe that there are no true evils in the world anymore. There are those who believe that with Easter here, doubt has been banished and life will be easy.

How do we choose to end the Easter story? This question, I believe, makes all the difference in the world to our faith.

I prefer Mark's original ending, because it makes one wonder. Living with fear. Like a refrain in music, it sends you back to the beginning again, but this time, you have a sense of where the story is going.

For me, Easter gives us even more respect for the reality of evil – the crosses in the world. But a little less fear. The ending allows us to go back, this time, do a little better at following Jesus and taking up our cross. Trusting that death does not have the final word.

It is “choose your own ending” here today. How will you end the Gospel story? Happy Easter! Amen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Preaching Easter,” The Journal for Preachers, Vol. XXIX Number 3, Easter 2006, 43.

² Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The Last Week: A Day-By-Day Account of Jesus's Final Week in Jerusalem (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006) 196.

³ Barbara Brown Taylor, 43.

⁴ I went to Wikipedia to remember how these books went. This is an actual choice cited by Wikipedia for The Cave of Time. www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choose_Your_Own_Adventure.

⁵ Similar to the story of Jesus appearing on the road to Emmaus in Luke.

⁶ Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) 1-2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.