

Do Not Be Distressed ☺

Most scholars agree that this is where the Gospel of Mark originally ended. With verse 8. Let's read that aloud together, to get the full effect. ⁸*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.* No Resurrection appearances. Just the women, fleeing in fear from the empty tomb. If you open your Bibles, you probably have both a "shorter ending" and a "longer ending" added in. But scholars say these endings were added later by editors. What we just heard is how the original writer chose to end his gospel.

Two out of the three lectionary commentators I normally use avoided Mark's version of the Easter story completely. Our denominational curriculum writers didn't even list it as one of the texts.

So why am I preaching on it, you might be wondering? Or why didn't I at least include one of the two endings that were added later, to make it more palatable? Two reasons. One, the lectionary itself does include this passage (verses 1-8) as one of the texts for today (albeit it's listed in italics, as if we are to consider it optional). And two, I believe that there must be something important for us to learn. (Actually, there is a third reason I'm preaching on this today. I've never preached on this passage. And I thought, after 24 years of preaching, why not? We'll see if I made a good decision.)

So what if this were the only version of the Easter story that we had? No Jesus appearing to Mary outside of the tomb? No Jesus appearing to two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus? No Jesus appearing to Thomas, and inviting him to put his hand in Jesus' side? Would we even have any Easter hymns, like Christ the Lord Is Risen Today? Could we even say the beloved words we love to say on Easter, "The Lord is Risen!" and the reply "He is risen indeed!"? I'd like to make three observations.

First, let me put those questions I just asked to rest. Even assuming that this is how Mark ended his gospel, that doesn't mean the Lord Jesus did not rise from the dead. Even given this unsettling ending, Mark has already told us that Jesus has risen. Or rather, the angel inside his tomb, dressed in white, told us. Verse 6, the second sentence: "He has been raised." Verse 7: "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." And then the angel adds "just as he told you." As if he was gently chiding them, for forgetting what Jesus had indeed declared earlier in the Gospel. Three times! Mark 8:31—"*the Son of Man must undergo great suffering...and be killed, and after three days rise again.*" Mark 9:30: "*The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.*" Mark 10:33-34, "*See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him*" (which by the way is exactly what had happened), "*and after three days he will rise again.*" He couldn't have been more clear. Did they not believe Jesus' own words? Do we?

Which brings me to my second observation, which again starts with a question. Why did Mark decide to end his gospel the way he did? The fact that he wrote his gospel at all is itself

proof of the Resurrection. If the Resurrection hadn't really happened, there would have been nothing to write about, no "gospel," no "good news." Listen to how he begins his gospel: Mark 1:1 "*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.*" Not merely "Jesus of Nazareth, a really good guy, who did some amazing things, some of which got him killed by the Romans." But "Jesus Christ, the Son of God." There is no question in the writer's mind who Jesus was, and is, and always will be. No doubt whatsoever.

But here's the thing. Jesus' disciples did doubt. Over and over. In fact, that's one of the things Mark loves to emphasize throughout his gospel. How the disciples were so slow to believe, so slow to understand. Even at the end. When everything that Jesus said would happen actually did happen. How he was handed over, and mocked, and spit upon, and flogged, and killed. And "after three days he will rise again."

Ah, of course. That's the part they doubted. That's the part they didn't yet believe. That's the part they apparently were too thick-headed to understand. And that's where Mark decided to end his gospel. With an angel at the empty tomb. With a promise: "He's going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." And with the women at the tomb doubting it. Disbelieving it. Or at least, not understanding it. At least, not yet. Because they haven't yet seen him for themselves. All they had was an empty tomb, and the promise of an angel.

When you think about it, isn't that pretty close to what we have? An empty tomb? The promise of an angel? Sure, we have these other stories, in the other gospels, about how Jesus did appear. But we ourselves haven't seen him yet, have we? Not like Thomas, who after he saw Jesus no longer needed to put his hand in his side, but exclaimed on the spot, "My Lord and my God!" No more doubt there.

But Mark wanted to leave his gospel with all those who, like us, are in between. Who are prone to doubt. Slow to believe. Too thick-headed still to understand, at least understand completely. And maybe even afraid. Mark's gospel gives us the empty tomb, and the promise of the angel. Will that be enough?

For my third observation, I want to come back to these final eight verses. I may have given the impression earlier that all of Jesus' disciples doubted, were slow to believe, and too thick-headed to understand. But when Mark talks about the disciples this way, he's always only talking about the men! What about the women? It was three women who came to anoint Jesus' body on Easter Sunday morning. It's as if they were different somehow. Sure, they still fled from the tomb, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." But they weren't only feeling afraid. They were also feeling something else. When the women found the stone rolled away, and entered the tomb, and saw the angelic young man, dressed in a white robe, what did he say to them? Not "do not be afraid." He used a different word. He said, "Do not be alarmed." He used a Greek phrase, *Μὴ ἐκθαμβεῖσθε*, that can also be translated "do not be overwhelmed"; "Do not be amazed"; "Do not be astonished"; "do not be stunned"; "do not be distressed." It could also mean "Do not be frightened," but Mark uses a different phrase when he wants it to mean that, the phrase *ἐφοβοῦντο γάρ*, the last two words of the gospel, which here are translated as "for they were afraid." But *Μὴ ἐκθαμβεῖσθε* is different. Of course they were overwhelmed. Of course they were amazed. Of course they were astonished. And stunned. And distressed. And yes, when it came down to it, at the very end, of course they were also a bit frightened. We would have been too. We would have been all of those things. And maybe still are a bit. Every time we hear this story.

One of Lois' and my favorite movies is titled "Everything is Illuminated." It stars the actor Elijah Wood, who also played the part of Frodo in the "Lord of the Rings" movies. But here he plays the part of a Jewish man who travels to the Ukraine, on a quest to try and discover his roots. (That should sound mighty familiar to those of us who are Russian Mennonite, and whose forebears came here to Kansas from the Ukraine.)

Anyway, in the movie, the man's Ukrainian guide (who is named Alex—or as he says, "dubbed" Alex) says repeatedly to him, throughout the entire movie, [with accent] "Do not be distressed." [Again, without accent] "Do not be distressed." It's our favorite line in the movie. And we say it to each other often! [With accent again.] And then we laugh.

Amen.