

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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April 12, 2009
Easter Sunday
Mark 16:1-8

Now What?

The day has come. The day for which we've been waiting has come. This day, Easter Day, which some years comes earlier and some years later, has come this year, today, in the middle of April. Like other days for which we make preparations—graduations, weddings, anniversaries, family reunions—we have been waiting as we have journeyed along the way to today. As we do every year, the church observance of the preparation time, called Lent, began more than 6 weeks ago on Ash Wednesday. And if we think about the story of Jesus' life that we retrace each year leading up to this day, the story began with his birth on Christmas. But even before that, if we think back to December, that's the time called Advent when we wait and prepare for the whole Christian story to begin. So in the larger scheme, today is the end of a lot of waiting—waiting that began last year right after Thanksgiving.

So like the graduation celebrations for which we prepare, like the weddings that we anticipate with myriad details that must be planned, our celebration of Easter, when Jesus was raised from the dead to new life, when the scheming of Jesus' adversaries was once and for all neutralized, our services today in this church and in Christian churches across the world are partying heartily with verve, vigor, vitality and with thanksgiving to God.

It all seems like a wonderful ending to a long storyline doesn't it? In fact when we look at Mark's gospel's telling of the story it really is a wonderful *surprise* ending to the story isn't it?

Chapters 14 and 15 in Mark describe in great detail the events that we remember and commemorate during Holy Week, the week that has just ended leading up to today. The story of how the disciple Judas betrayed Jesus. The story of Jesus' last supper with his disciples. The story of Jesus and the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was arrested. The story of the disciple Peter's denial of Jesus. The story of Jesus' trial before Pilate, the Roman governor. The story of Jesus' crucifixion, his death on the cross. And finally, the story of Jesus' burial in the rock-hewn tomb.

For any other mortal, that would have been the end of the story. And in this case the story ending was a sad and tragic and rather grisly conclusion. The taking down the bloodied, bruised and lifeless body of Jesus from his cross of death, wrapping it in a linen cloth, carrying it to the tomb and laying it there, and the final rolling of the large stone over the tomb's entrance leaving it in the growing darkness of that Friday evening, the beginning of the Jewish sabbath, seemed to have closed the story of the man, Jesus of Nazareth. In that moment of his burial, it was really a rather unremarkable sad end that was faced by common criminals of that day.

That Friday night, the chief priests, the elders and the scribes, who had brought the charges against Jesus went to bed thinking that the story of this rabble-rouser Jesus was finally over. That Friday night, Governor Pilate himself also went to bed with nary a thought about the Jesus he had sentenced to crucifixion—just another in a long line of those pesky Jewish troublemakers against whom he had brought judgment many times previously. They along with just about everyone else in this story went to bed thinking that the end had come.

Just about everyone thought it was over.

There were two people though that night who didn't go to bed with such thoughts. They were two people who had another idea as the Sabbath began. Being devout and observant Jews, these two, who shared the same name, knew that from sundown on Friday until sunup on Sunday—the length of the Jewish Sabbath—they would be kept from the normal tasks of daily living. And it was one of those tasks that was on the mind of these two women as they went to bed that Friday night.

Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary, the mother of some of the disciples, are two people mentioned by name at two points in the story of the events of Jesus' death. They're mentioned as having watched and witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus all the way until Jesus drew his last breath and gave up his spirit. And they are also mentioned as having witnessed Jesus' body being laid in the tomb and watching the stone rolled against the tomb's door.

As they went to bed that Friday night these two Marys were fretting. Fretting over the fact that given that the Sabbath was upon them, there had not been sufficient time to properly prepare Jesus' body for burial. And they were further fretting that when the sabbath was over on Sunday morning it would be nearly impossible for the two of them to roll the stone away from the tomb's door so that they could attend to Jesus' body then.

So that is the background leading up to the end of Mark's gospel that we picked up in chapter 16 this morning. We read that it was very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, that these two women went to the tomb. They didn't want to wait a moment too long. With the sabbath rest ending with the first rays of the sun on Sunday, the women were free to resume the duty that they had been prevented from doing when the sun set on Friday evening. I imagine that like as on Friday night, the women again on Saturday night did not sleep well at all, with this unfinished business of properly treating Jesus' dead body. After all, Jesus was their Lord whom they loved. He had led them and the other followers during his 3-year ministry to know and understand God and God's love in new and deeply profound ways. Jesus had shown them a new way of living and of believing. Jesus had opened the way to the new kingdom that Jesus told them was here now in and among them. That Jesus was now dead was devastating. And it was even more devastating that he had been buried hastily without the proper and customary preparation. Indeed these two Marys were greatly relieved when the sun had finally come up on Sunday so that they could attend to this urgent and unfinished business.

Although they were relieved that the second of two sleepless nights was over and the sun was finally up, they were also nervous about how they would even get into Jesus' tomb since they had themselves witnessed the large stone with which it had been sealed. So imagine how surprised and relieved they must have been when upon their arrival in the graveyard, they saw that the stone had already been moved away. But that relief gave way quickly to the shock that in the tomb was not the dead body of Jesus but a "young man, dressed in a white robe" sitting where the body had been.

It's at this point that the "end" of this story changed in an instant. All those who I mentioned went to bed on Friday night thinking the end had come were probably still contentedly asleep on this early Sunday morning as these women were witnessing something very different from what anyone had expected. So shocked were the women by what they saw and by the words of the young man in the white robe, that they fled from the tomb in terror and amazement. And Mark's closing words of his gospel are, ". . .and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

And so ends the story according to Mark's gospel. Some of you who were reading along in your Bibles may have noticed that there are a couple of other endings that have been appended to Mark's gospel. In my Bible one is called the shorter ending of Mark and the other is called the longer ending. But you know what? Bible scholars all agree that these endings were added to the gospel at a later date, by someone other than the writer of the rest of the gospel. The leading theory is that these additions were necessary because the actual authentic ending must have been lost somewhere along the way. So these endings were written so as to more satisfactorily bring the story of Jesus to a fitting conclusion and end. It just can't be that the story ends with an implied resurrection rather than with some actual appearances of the risen Jesus.

Or could it be that what we have in Mark 16, verses 1-8 is exactly what Mark intended us to have as his closing words? Mark already is the shortest of the 4 gospels. It is a gospel of fewer words and yet it packs a full punch just like the other 3 gospels.

Could it be that Mark intentionally leaves us hanging as the two Marys rush away in silent fear and amazement? Could it be that we're left hanging precisely because it isn't the end of the story after all? While Mark puts his pen down at the end of verse 8, the story of Jesus goes on and on and on. Could it be that Mark knew that the story would continue to be written by the generations of those who would come after him?

My friends, Mark is telling us in this account of the empty tomb that Easter is not the end of the story at all. If anything it is the beginning of the new story that goes on for as long as everlasting life goes on. It began with the Marys' fear and amazement. And it continued when Jesus met them and the disciples in Galilee just as the young man dressed in white had promised them. And from there the news—the amazing news—began to spread throughout the land that what had appeared to be the end, hanging lifeless on the cross of crucifixion, was no end at all, but rather a beginning unlike any other beginning previously known. Death itself had been defeated. The dark powers of the world to bring about death simply were not enough to overcome God's love for the world, revealed in Jesus.

That brings us to today, to those of us here who are gathered for this annual celebration. Although we have indeed been waiting for this day as if it were the final destination of our journey, the amazing good news is that we are actually given a new beginning in this gift of Easter from our loving God.

Guess what? You didn't get here in just nick of time. Rather, you got here at the start—the beginning—when our new life as followers of Christ gets underway. Congratulations on being here when it all begins.

Did you ever wonder why in the world we celebrate communion on Easter Sunday? After all, wasn't this sacrament instituted by Jesus at the *last* supper he had with his disciples? Didn't we already have communion on Thursday night after our Seder Dinner? Well if we think about Easter as the end of the story then maybe communion should be part of that preparation for the end of the story. But if we think of Easter as the beginning, a beginning that changes everything, then communion takes on a new meaning as well. No longer is it a re-enactment of the last supper. No longer is it only a memorial meal. As Easter transforms all of our living, Easter transforms this communion meal into a celebration banquet.

So, come to this table eagerly. Come to this table with gratitude that you're here in time for this new beginning. Come to this table ready to receive guidance and direction from our loving God. For the new story of our new life in Christ is just beginning!