

The Story Goes On
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Most of us love a good story. We love to follow the plot details and the character development, as well as a saga of adversity overcome. The folks of Walt Disney Studios have invested a lot of time and capital over the years giving us stories that follow that line – stories like *The Little Mermaid*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Finding Nemo*. They all have their twists and turns, but they all finish with a happy ending.

There are some other stories, though, that while it seems that the ending is happy you are not quite so sure. They have a twist at the end, a development that takes you in another direction and makes you curious as to how the characters got along after all of that. My all-time favorite movie, *Casablanca*, is like that, with Rick – otherwise known as Humphrey Bogart – not getting the lady of his dreams, but making a sacrifice so she could fly off to safety with someone else. A better case of this is the more recent movie *The Sixth Sense*, which has an incredible ending to it that leaves you breathless – not to mention scratching your head for days putting it all back together.

We love happy endings. But we also love those stories which have a different twist, which come at their ending differently and leave us wondering – and wanting to hear more.

It's Easter – the day which is the center of our church's life. We come to celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, and we come to hear the familiar story of that resurrection. But which story? It's interesting to note that of the four Gospel accounts, there is an Easter story in every single one. We may think that they all say the same thing. But each one is different.

Matthew has an earthquake, the guards looking like dead men and an angel sitting on the stone that covered the tomb. Luke has the women confronted by angels with the news, which they then take to unbelieving disciples. John is probably the most popular one, with Mary – upon finding the stone rolled away – sharing her news with Peter and the other disciple; then there is a race to the tomb, followed by Jesus' appearance to Mary.

And then there is Mark's. Mark is the oldest Gospel, the one that the other Easter stories patterned theirs after, though it is obvious that there is a big difference here. Personally, Mark has emerged as my own personal favorite among the resurrection stories. Maybe that says something about my personality, and I'll leave that up to other people to figure out.

What is it that I like about Mark's Easter story? It is not neat and tidy. There are too many things left hanging in mid-air. But all of that is in keeping with this day. Resurrection is not neat and tidy. We do not see people rising from the dead. It is outside all of the natural

physical laws as we know them, outside of our concept of reality. So if resurrection is not neat and tidy, then why should Mark's gospel end any other way?

For instance, there is the bit about Mark's story not having a totally happy ending. It leaves you wondering, scratching your head a bit. There is no post-resurrection appearance of Jesus. It ends with the women running away from the tomb, in fear.

Mark doesn't even end his gospel grammatically correct. He ends it with a preposition. Literally, he says, "they were afraid for..." For what? You could clean up the translation a little and make it a complete sentence, but the Greek word 'gar,' which means 'for' is a particle that usually comes with a couple of other words attached. Even in Greek, something is amiss here.

The early Christian church certainly thought so. As you can tell from your pew Bibles, they attached not one but two endings to Mark's account. Perhaps they, too, felt that the ending must have fallen off the manuscript somewhere on the way to the publisher, and that Mark needed someone to put a neat and happy ending on the whole thing, and they were only so happy to oblige.

Most Biblical scholars think that Mark ended his gospel the way we have it, but that still doesn't satisfy us because it defies description. The women are told not to worry, but they stand there, trembling, and when the angel tells them to go and tell, they go and tell no one. All throughout Mark's Gospel, there has been this 'Messianic Secret' thing going on – Jesus telling people to keep it quiet about who he is, only to have them go out and blow his cover every time. Now the word is to go out and tell, and guess what? Those who have been given the good news run away in silence and in fear.

Until you stop to think about it. If they had not spoken about this, if there are not been a visit in Galilee with the resurrected Christ, then how do you explain Mark's narrative? The fact that Mark has penned these words, that we are here this morning celebrating this strange, enigmatic event that defies description, all of these are evidences that these women eventually found their voices.

But when they found their voices, who did they tell, and what did they say? Both of these are significant, and both of these have something to say to us on this most holy of days.

They were told to tell all of Jesus' disciples, including Peter. That is important, because what it says is that resurrection means more than new life for Jesus; there is also new hope for his disciples. These men, who had abandoned Jesus in his time of need – including Peter, who had denied even knowing Jesus at all - would be given a second chance. For them there is a renewed call.

Just like those early disciples, we all have had our times of letting Jesus down. We have not always been the people we have been called to be; we in the church have not always been that warm, friendly, caring presence we like to think we are. We have all done some wonderful, loving things, and we have also done some terrible, rotten things. That's a part of

being human. But the good news, the happy ending is that God is not finished with us yet. Just as Jesus called the disciples of long ago, so Jesus calls us now.

And where does that call take us? “He is going to Galilee ahead of you,” the angels tell the women; “there you will see him, just as he told you.” Jesus is always ahead of us, never exactly where we expect him to be. That was true for those of old, and it is true for us now. One of the parts of being a minister which I deeply love is the opportunity to make pastoral visits. I enjoy visiting people at home or in retirement facilities; there is a great sense of humility at being there with people when they are in a hospital or a funeral home saying good bye to a loved one. It’s a very humbling experience to be called upon to be present with people when they are going through such a watershed moment in their lives. I always find when I go there that Jesus does not show up when I walk in the door. Jesus has already been there - comforting, giving a presence, a peace. Jesus is always out there, out ahead of us, beckoning us to follow him.

But to follow him where? It’s interesting to note that the angel tells the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee. That’s where they got this whole thing started. That’s where they were all from. Galilee is where your roots are, where people know your name, for good or ill. Galilee is ministering in the name of Jesus where you are, even though people may question your motives. But Galilee is also something else. Galilee is where all kinds of people live. Not like in Judah, where all the pure-blooded Hebrews lived. In Galilee there are pure-blooded Hebrews, but there are also pure-blooded Gentiles, and all of those people who are little mix of both. All kinds of people live in Galilee, the faithful and the not so faithful, the devout and the irreverent.

We live in Galilee, all of us. This time of year most magazines put out a feature on religion, and the cover story in Newsweek last week was on the report that the number of people who are unaffiliated with a religion has doubled in the last 15 years. That’s not news to most of us, but it is still jolting to some that the culture doesn’t wait to hear what the church has to say about anything anymore. We live in a land of Galilee, a place filled with all kinds of people, with all kinds of religious viewpoints and all kinds of approaches - or non-approaches - to God.

But our call is to go to Galilee. Or maybe, since we are already there, our call is to see what Jesus is up to in Galilee. For Galilee is where Jesus is. The focus of Mark’s resurrection story is not on the resurrection of one person, but on the call to discipleship. We are called to witness to the good news of resurrection which is there for all people, all the people of Galilee. Jesus has gone ahead of us to them, but Jesus is inviting us to go and embody his good news in all of the Galilees of our lives.

Brian Blount, who is now the president of Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, teamed up with a fellow minister several years ago to write a book about Mark. In their section on the resurrection, Blount noted:

“...Everything turns on the theme of discipleship. Mark wants his readers to stop gazing up to heaven looking for apparitions and get down to the business of following the way of Jesus in boundary-breaking discipleship. The only way he can force this is to focus on an empty tomb that leaves questions rather than resurrection appearances that provide happy endings.”

There is one more reason why I love Mark’s Easter story more than the others. That is because it is so open-ended. Mark leaves the story of Jesus and the resurrection open not just to tease us. He forces us to turn back to the start of the Gospel and read it again, to read it with new eyes, to read it with resurrection eyes.

But he also does it to draw us into the story. That’s right, you and me. Because Mark’s account of the gospel is incomplete, there has to be someone who gets to finish the story. That someone, of course, is the Resurrected One himself. But before he does that, we get to write our part of the story. We write it by the ways we go to the Galilees of our lives and live out the good news. We write by the ways that we live in resurrected hope. We write by the ways we feed the hungry, care for the sick, visit the lonely, work for justice and do all the other things Christ is calling us to do.

Mark leaves his story open so that we can write our own chapter in the story. God grant us the grace, the strength and the mercy to write of faithful lives that touch others, so that they can write their story, too. Amen.

Text is Mark 16:1-8.
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