

WORSHIP

Sermon | 4.1.2018



The Beginning of the Story

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Mark 16:1-8

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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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But 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. But 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.' 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...

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Welcome to First Presbyterian Church on this most special day when we gather together to worship a God of resurrection – a God of possibility – a God of hope – a God of love. If you are here today as a visitor, I am grateful that you have made the choice to come. I also welcome those of you who are joining us by way of our television ministry on WSOC Channel 9 and those who may be streaming online – we are thrilled to know that you are worshipping with us, wherever you may be.

The center of our faith is a truth that we tell about the boundary-breaking and relentless love of God who came to us in the person of Jesus. After teaching us what it meant to love one another, the climax of the story comes when Jesus is crucified because the kind of love that Jesus talked about and modeled for us *threatened* the people who liked the world the way it was – arranged in ways that benefitted the powerful. And just when it seemed like the light of love that was Jesus' life had been snuffed out – we discover that a cross and a life-less body and a tomb are not the end of the story.



Each of the four gospels tell four slightly different stories about what happened after it seemed all was lost – four slightly different versions of the events that took place on that first Easter. Today, our narrator will be the gospel of Mark. The story picks up two days after Jesus has been crucified and buried...early in the morning on the Sabbath. Listen with me for the word of God.

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In my mind there is almost nothing quite as satisfying as reading a great novel – you know, one that has captivated your attention and kept you up past your bedtime for many nights – there’s almost nothing as satisfying as reading that kind of novel that finishes with such a good ending that you just close the book and hold it in your hands for a few minutes... savoring the experience.

Or watching a great movie in the theatre – one that finishes with a flurry – that connects all the dots – where you find yourself sitting through the credits before heading back to your car.

Or finishing up a good Netflix series – after you’ve invested who knows how many seasons in the characters and the drama – and all of a sudden the story-lines you have been tracing throughout finally come to resolution. And when the show fades to black and there is no preview of the next episode, you just think “wow! They got that exactly right!”

It’s satisfying.

I love a good, satisfying ending.

I used to have an appetite for different kinds of endings.

Ones that ended on a kind of minor key.

With less resolution.

More ambiguity.

I was in that season of my life when the last episode of the TV series “Lost” was released. Remember that? Nobody saw that one coming! I have a lot of Flannery O’Connor short stories on my bookshelves – haven’t opened them in a while – but Flannery was the master at quirky, unresolved endings. I used to appreciate stuff like that.

But no more.

Now, I crave the tidy bow.

The finality.

The sharp focus.

And I think the reason my preferences have changed is because I – like you – live amidst



enough ambiguity; enough lack of resolution; enough chaos; enough uncertainty.

Whether it is the news I watch, the trends I read, the relationships I have that are complicated, or the issues of the day that seem intractable, and polarizing, and difficult – it feels everywhere I turn it's there...uncertainty. Lack of resolution. Ambiguity.

In a lot of ways, that feels like the story of my life – of our lives – and so if I'm going to give myself to another story, I'd just assume it be one that leaves me feeling satisfied...even if that feeling only lasts as long as it takes to finally put down a book, or sit through the credits, or turn off the show.

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I wonder what the world must have felt like for the women who showed up on that first Easter morning. My guess is that it felt uncertain. A little chaotic. Hard.

After all, those women had invested themselves in a man – in a teacher – in an idea – in a story that was not supposed to end with a lifeless body and a cold, dark tomb.

All those things that Jesus taught them – about the power of love, and a different kind of life, and the possibility of hope in the midst of disappointment and pain...what did those things mean, now?

Life was already confusing. But they thought they had found someone who had brought life meaning...and purpose...and hope. But he died. End of story.

So Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome did what we do when it feels like the world is falling apart – especially when we are undone by grief – when there is something that happens in our lives that we just can't understand or can't fix. They busied their hands with an activity. They woke up and they reached for spices to anoint Jesus's body. *They had to do something.*

I don't know what exactly they expected when they went to the tomb, but it wasn't what they found. They thought the story was over, and even though the ending wasn't what they hoped it would be, at least it was clear. Final. But then, when the light of that early morning revealed a stone that had been rolled away, they discovered that there was more to the story:

"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified," said the man – the angel – the messenger. *"He is not here. He is risen."*

Then, Mark tells us, *"the women went out and fled from the tomb, for fear and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid (dot, dot, dot...)."*

What kind of ending is THAT??

Where does that leave us?



What does that mean for us?

I don't mean to sound arrogant or presumptuous, but if I were going to write a gospel about the story of Jesus' life, I would make some different choices.

Evidently, soon after Mark wrote down his account of the first Easter morning, the people who heard the story found that they, too, had similar objections to the gospel writer's work and realized they had a need for a good ending.

I don't know if you noticed, but if you were following along in your pew Bibles, there were more verses after the place where I stopped reading. My Bible has little subheadings that call these extra verses "the shorter ending" and "the longer ending." What we know is that both of these endings were written in a different style and well after Mark finished telling his story of Jesus's resurrection.

It turns out that some of the people who first heard Mark's version were not satisfied with the way he left things. They needed clarity. They needed triumph. They needed something like happily ever after. *They needed more verses.*

I get the reasons why. Something besides, "*they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid dot...dot...dot*" **would be** more satisfying. Something **more** than that at least gives us a story that wraps up – that leaves us settled.

But maybe leaving us settled isn't Mark's goal in the way he shares the good news of Christ's resurrection?

Maybe Mark's gospel isn't trying to tell us how the story ends, but about how it begins?

Maybe Mark tells his story in such a way that it forces us – as the ones who experience the power of God to overcome even death – to ask ourselves, "what do we do now?"

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When I was in school, I accumulated a number of credits in foreign languages. I took Latin 101, German 101, Italian 101 and Spanish 101. In grad school I added Greek and Hebrew. It wasn't that I was proficient at any of these languages – quite the opposite, in fact. I was terrible. I just don't have that foreign language chip in my brain. But one thing I do remember, after all of that exposure to those different languages, is that most of them have something called the imperfect tense.

In English, we deal in past and present and future. It's either then, or now, or in days to come. But what the English language lacks is the imperfect tense that is used in other languages to describe an action that has begun and is continuing.



When Mark writes the Easter story, he speaks in the imperfect tense.

His point is to tell us about the ongoing story of how the message of the empty tomb is lived out in the lives of those who believe.

Bob Dunham, a friend and mentor, calls it the “Easter imperfect.” Instead of telling us how the story ends, the Easter imperfect invites us into the action that God has begun and then asks us to help finish the story.

The Basilica de la Sagrada Família (also known as the Gaudi Cathedral) is in Barcelona, Spain. If you’ve seen it, you know that it looks like a giant drip-sandcastle.

Construction on the cathedral started in 1882. One year later, in 1883, Antoni Gaudí took over as chief architect. 43 years later, at the time of Gaudí’s death, less than 25% of the cathedral had been completed. They hit the 50% mark in 2010, and are hoping to complete the project by 2026, 100 years after Gaudí’s death.

I visited the cathedral a number of years ago and found myself looking at the construction crews with a large measure of compassion. I wondered what it would feel like to show up, every day, to work on a project they did not start and would not complete. I wondered if they ever got discouraged by the sheer magnitude of the task. If they ever felt like it was just ridiculous. If they ever dreamed about switching projects – to something simpler, more manageable, more doable...like a house, or fence?

Because it is hard to live an unfinished life.

To constantly face uncertainty.

To wake up every day to witness brokenness that we either haven’t yet fixed, or can’t.

Where a teenager stands in silence with tears streaming down her cheeks to honor seventeen of her classmates.

Where a school system is as racially segregated today as it was in the 1960s.

Where 39% of our city’s third graders read on grade level.

Where we grapple to come to terms with an illness or a disease.

Where we carry the burden of strained marriages or friendships.

It’s natural to want to find some outlet – some alternative story – some easy explanation that will help resolve those feeling of uncertainty.

Maybe find someone to blame.

Or live in denial.

Or hope it will just work itself out.



Or trust that someone else will address it.

What is harder is to move into it. To trust that there is possibility beyond the places where it feels like life is stuck, and hard.

That is the challenge of Easter.

That is the invitation to a resurrection life.

That is why Mark tells us an unfinished story...because he wants us to join it.

What has always been compelling for me to think about is what it took for those three women – Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome – what it took for them to transform their fear into courage. Yes, they fled from the empty tomb because they were afraid, but at some point they realized that they had a role in telling and living this story about God's son whom death could not contain. This story where life, not death, has the last word. Where the power of God cannot be domesticated or buried. There came a point when the women decided that the empty tomb was not the end, but the beginning of their story.

Like those women, when we hear the good news of Christ's resurrection...when we are confronted – once again – by this familiar, yet amazing story about an empty tomb, like those women we face the same choice: fear or courage.

What is being addressed to us in Easter is that deep place in our souls where we have to decide who we will be, how we will live, and whom we will trust.

Do we think the problems we face, the places we feel stuck, the unresolved stuff in ourselves and our world...do we think those things are the story?

Or do we believe the action that God started with an empty tomb continues – even in the midst of imperfection?

A good friend of mine named Scott is a pastor in New York City. Every year on Easter Sunday – at some point – his phone rings and a voice on the other end of the line says “Jesus is on the loose!” And then, the next sound Scott hears is the click of the connection ending. Scott knows who it is, it is his roommate from seminary.

Scott's seminary roommate is the kind of person the Bible would call an angel – because, you see, an angel is nothing more than a messenger. And the message my friend Scott's angel has is the same as that young man dressed in a white robe sitting in an empty tomb with the stone rolled back.

He is going ahead of you – to Galilee. There you will see him.

The messenger wasn't giving the women directions. He wasn't telling them at what coffee shop they might meet Jesus to sit a spell. It's not about geography. Galilee is the place of ministry. It was where Jesus taught and healed and confronted the things about this world



that were counter to God's purpose. It was where he healed what was broken and forgave what we could not, or would not, fix. Galilee is where Jesus is on the loose.

We're all in church this morning to celebrate Easter.

But Easter isn't over.

That place in your life, that situation in our world, where it feels stuck, hopeless, too full of pain...that's not the story.

God's love has been set loose in this world.

So look for it.

The love of God will show up in your life.

You'll see...

