

WORSHIP

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What Comes Next...

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Mark 16:1-8

Every word we read from God's holy word in Scripture is important – but as followers of Jesus, what we read on Easter Sunday is at the heart of what we believe.

Each of the gospels tell four slightly different versions about what took place on that first Easter. A few months ago, I had planned to read Matthew's account of the Easter. But then the world changed. So, instead, 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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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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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 – one that finishes with a flurry – that connects all the dots – where you find yourself sitting through the credits not quite ready to leave your seat.

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!”

I’ve had a lot of time to enjoy A LOT of books, movies and shows in the last few weeks – confined to the house with more idle time on my hands – and I’ve experienced more than a few, good endings.

They are quite satisfying.

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.
That was true before I learned what a Coronavirus was – and, goodness knows, it is more true now.

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 – to be honest – 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.

Yet, in Jesus, they thought they had found someone who had brought life meaning...and purpose...and hope.

But he had died.

End of story.

I don't know what exactly Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome 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. However, 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. Maybe take out some of the nuance. The guesswork. Help people connect the dots.

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

I don't know if you have a Bible with you at home, if not now, check it out later. There are 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 from scholars like Union Seminary's President, Brian Blount 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. As Dr. Blount says, 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 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 happens next?”

That's a question I've been asking myself these past few weeks...haven't you? That's why I thought Mark's Easter story might be a good one for us in these moments.

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When I was in school, I accumulated a number of credits in foreign languages. I took Latin, German, Italian and Spanish. In graduate 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 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 about Easter, he speaks in the imperfect tense. His point is to tell us 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 that we might help finish.

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When it comes to my knowledge about matters of science, it makes my aptitude for foreign language look positively brilliant. But in these past few weeks I have been thinking about – and reading about – those scientists who are on the front lines, working feverishly to find a vaccine, or a treatment, for the virus that ails us.

What I’ve discovered is that these scientists who are working around the clock in laboratories around the world aren’t just trying to solve the Coronavirus puzzle. Their work is something akin to Sisyphus pushing his bolder up the mountain and watching it roll back down. Because there are always cures to find. Always viruses and diseases to fight. Always work that is left unfinished.

I already consider those scientists to be heroes – but now I have even more compassion. I wonder if they ever get discouraged by the sheer magnitude of the task. If they ever feel like what they are trying to accomplish is just too impossible...too big. If they ever dreamed about doing something else with their time?

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.

With intractable issues like economic inequality and school segregation.

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 just live in denial. Pretend it isn't real.

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.

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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. They must have made that turn, or else we wouldn't be sitting here today.



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 at 5th Avenue Presbyterian Church 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. He's been making that phone call for 25 years.

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.

Galilee is where Jesus is on the loose.

The messenger wasn't giving the women directions. It's not about geography. Galilee is the place of ministry. It is the place where Jesus started his ministry – and where he calls us to continue it. It is where Jesus affected healing and forgiveness and hope – and where he is still at work bringing those things!



We're gathered – in homes and hospital beds and empty sanctuaries 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.

That's the story.

So look for it.

You'll see...

