

**Mark 16**

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>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. <sup>7</sup>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." <sup>8</sup>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.

I used to tell stories. I don't tell them as often as I used to. The person I used to tell them to is studying for a graduate degree in literature so it doesn't come up so often anymore. When I do tell stories, they never have anything to do with real life. They are full of strong-minded people doing wonderful things and putting everything right. I always wrap everything up. And, from long-standing tradition, I always finish by saying "The End".

I've always had to do that. Even if I was reading someone else's story I was required to say "The End" when the story was over. It was pointless to argue that "The End" may not have been written at the end of the story. I was reminded to say it. The story is supposed to end.

That is not just a trait of small children. Everybody seems to like endings. Shakespeare is considered the greatest storyteller in the history of the English language...probably on the strength of his endings. Now Shakespeare ends stories. Everybody dies. That's how you know they're over. Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, MacBeth...none of them live past the final act. "The End."

It's important to remember that real endings usually mean death. At least something to be done with. And that is why stories with real endings, seldom have anything to do with real life. They are either fantasy or they are death.

The Gospel is neither.

The Gospel reading for this morning has been plaguing the Church since Mark gave it to us two thousand years ago. Nobody can stand it. Look at how the Gospel of Mark ends. These are his last words to us, "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." And that's what we're given to read on Easter morning. That story doesn't end; it quits. The ending doesn't do its job. An ending ought to resolve conflicts, tie together loose ends, otherwise it's not an ending. These people run away afraid and say nothing.

Historically, the Church has looked at the ending of the Gospel of Mark and decided that it just wasn't right. "It couldn't end here." So there has been a lot of speculation on the "lost ending" of Mark. The theory is somewhere, back in time, when there was only one copy of Mark, the ending was lost. And this is what we were left with.

So people have made up different ones. Go home. Look up the end of Mark in your Bible. It depends on which translation you have, but there will be a wide space and then there will be some other verses added. And then in smaller print there will be some other verses added, where someone else tried to come up with a decent ending. Let me read the note from my Bible, down at the bottom of the page to try to clear things up: "The most ancient authorities bring the book to a close at the end of verse 8. (That's the way we read it this morning.) One authority adds another verse after 8. Other authorities include the preceding passage and continue with verses 9-20. In most authorities verses 9-20 follow immediately after verse 8; a few authorities insert additional material after 14."

That's a quote.

This is all just a variation on the same complaint I used to get at bedtime. "You forgot to say, 'The End'." People have been trying to put the words "The End" in Mark's mouth ever since he wrote his Gospel.

But the fact is – this is what we've got. The Gospel, just as we heard it this morning. And there is no evidence that Mark chose to end his story in any other way, - except the fact that we don't like it.

Stories are supposed to tie everything up. I like stories that way. I can stand surprise. I can even tolerate some degree of disappointment. I can't stand loose ends. It doesn't even have to be a happy ending, as long as things are wrapped up. But then – I never tell stories about real life.

We all need endings and conclusions for our stories, because there are hardly ever such moments in real life.

Relationships seldom have decisive endings. We sort of lose track of each other. We forget to write. We forget the reasons we were interested in something that used to really motivate us.

We go through life without decisive endings. Usually, we hold on to the hope that something decisive will at least happen at death. That is a cherished myth. We love to think that we will tie up all the loose ends. We will have time to reconcile with friends, say thank you to all the people we have failed to appreciate, to say good-bye. It probably won't be that way.

Life will end with all sorts of loose ends dangling, conflicts unresolved, words unspoken.

That's what life is like. And Mark has given us a story about life. That is the message of the Gospel. That is certainly the message of Easter. Life. Remember the greatest story-ender in history was Shakespeare. Everybody was dead.

Mark isn't interested in ending a story. He is going to tell us about life.

Of course the story doesn't end. How can it end – if it is a story about us? This story points beyond the final words. The story points to the future. The story talks about real life.

Easter does not settle all questions. Jesus is alive, but there is still disappointment, fear. The young man, dressed in white, tells the women, "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."

The last words that Mark recorded to Jesus' followers are about still another promise of Jesus. The concluding words of the heavenly messenger are "there you will see him, just as he told you." Words that drive us beyond the end of these words. They drive us beyond the story. They drive us into life.

Mark prepares the reader for a chapter which he has not yet written. It's up to the reader to write that chapter.

That's what your life is for.

To continue this story that will not end. It is a story of an empty tomb – of defeated death. It is a story you have to live.

Let people be disappointed that the story doesn't end. I don't want it to. Stories end with dead people. At least people we don't need to think about anymore. This is not the case with Jesus. He is not dead, and we do need to think about him. We must not have our relationship with Jesus Christ reach some satisfying conclusion.

A story that ends is not the story of Jesus. It is not your story either. Are all the loose ends of your life tied up? Are you finished? Have you completed all your obligations? Is there nothing that you are hoping for? I don't think you're ready to say "the end".

To finish the story would be to destroy it. It is a story of real life. Our life. Lives without ending. Lives lived with God.

This Easter morning worship service will come to an end, but we will go into real life. We are not here to celebrate a fantasy. This is not an occasion to pretend everything is over. This is a place we come to celebrate the story is not over.

Death is defeated. Jesus is alive. The tomb is empty.

Jesus has made promises to meet us. To continue to live with us. He continues to point us into the future. We will live our lives – really live them – in the face of all the loose ends and disappointments, and fear, and confusion...because Jesus has defeated death.

And he will keep us in life for eternity.