

Text: Mark 16: 1-8
Title: Through the Front Door
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Eight short verses.

Eight short verses ~ that's it.

Mark's gospel builds to the grand crescendo of resurrection and all we get are eight short verses. It is as if he ascends to the gospel summit and then abruptly falls off a cliff.

You want to turn the page and see what comes next.

You want to be filled in with more details.

You want something more than this.

It is climax without closure.

It is Easter morning and we're left hanging.

Eight short verses. Seriously?

There is no sighting of the resurrected Jesus ~ there is a stand-in.

There is no description of the resurrected body.

There is no confirmation by the disciples.

There is no gripping global commission.

There are no last tender words with Jesus.

Eight short verses.

Now, Mark, the gospel writer, is noted for his clipped, brisk, compact writing style. He is never one for artistic flourish or literary license, but even by Mark's standards this seems abrupt. Of course there is speculation that this isn't the end of Mark's gospel. There could be some rolls of the scroll missing; we could be short a few pages. Or, there is the possible addition of the text that's tacked on in our translation; but most scholars agree that was a later addition by those who found Mark's last eight verses decidedly unsatisfying.

What is remarkable, however, is how those eight short verses end.

The women flee the scene buffaloed and bewildered.

They take off trembling with fear and the last word in the gospel of Mark is "afraid...."

Well, actually that is not quite true. Actually, in Greek the last word in Mark is *gar* ~ which is translated as "for" or "because."

So, rendered literally:

To no one anything they said, afraid they were because...

That's not the triumphant joy of Easter morn. There are no trumpets and lilies and bright hopes. The Gospel of Mark ends with a dangling incomplete clause. Eight short verses and it's a gospel without an ending.

It could be that Mark just didn't know how to end. Endings can be the hardest things to write. The story is told of a seminarian who was eager for feedback about his preaching. So, during Sunday dinner he asked his straight shooting Aunt Mary what she thought of his first sermon. Not one to mince words, Aunt Mary replied, "Well, I thought you had a good sermon. In fact, I thought you had a number of good sermons. In fact, I thought you missed about three good stopping places in your sermon....." It could be that Mark just didn't know how to end.

Or, it could be that Mark didn't want to end. New Testament scholar and preacher Tom Long says that the key to the end of the Gospel of Mark is not in the eighth verse but in the seventh verse:

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

We readers can't go to see the risen Christ in Galilee. So, Long thinks it's a clever way for Mark to frame the gospel. It is literary construction. Where is Galilee? In Mark's gospel Galilee is at the beginning. After John the Baptist is imprisoned in Mark 1:14 ~ then it reads:

Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God.

Mark ends his gospel by sending his readers back to the beginning. Go back and read it again; only this time read it in the shadow of the cross. Read the gospel again, only this time read it in the light of the resurrection. The end of the gospel sends us back to the beginning to hear the parables,
and read of the miracles,
and listen for Jesus' voice,
and see the kingdom....

In Long's words:

Mark is telling us that the saving action of God in the world is always hidden, ambiguous, sealed off from the obvious explanation. Reading Mark a second time, we see Jesus breaking through into human life as one who is powerful, but also as one who will suffer and die. In other words, we see a God whose power is a strange, suffering power. We go back to Galilee, and the second time around every story in the Gospel of Mark is a post-resurrection appearance.

Mark didn't know how to end....

Mark didn't want to end....

Dear friends, what are to make of these eight short verses?

On Easter morning what are we to make of the abrupt ending of the Gospel of Mark?

Well.....

What if it is the recognition that we stand at the precipice of great mystery? What if it is the acknowledgement that peering into an empty tomb we would rightly be bewildered, trembling, and afraid? What if we come at it this way?

Hampton Sides in Blood and Thunder: An Epic of the American West writes that the Navajo people had a deep seated fear and revulsion of death. There was no clear notion of an afterlife and they wanted nothing to do with corpses or funerals or anything connected with mortality. So, for example Sides explains:

When a person died inside a Navajo dwelling – the round, windowless, dome-roofed hogan made of mud and timber – the body had to be removed from the structure by bashing a hole in the north wall (the direction of evil) and pulling the corpse through it. Then the hogan had to be destroyed. The taint could never be washed out.

That is a remarkable image. Standing at the edge of death the mystery is so great, and the fear is so overwhelming, and the darkness is so deep, that the response was to drag the body out the back way and burn the house down....

There is no glib Easter greeting here; there is no reminder of spring flowers pushing through thawing soil. Rather, there is the reality that we are dust and to dust we shall return. There is the taint that can never be washed out.

Maybe there is nothing dangling and unfinished in Mark's gospel. Maybe, even on Easter morn, there is the taint of fear.

For early in the morning three women go the tomb with precious herbs and oils to tend to the body of Jesus. They wanted to comb out his hair, and sponge away the dried blood, and annoint his body with oil. They wanted to do what was traditionally done before sealing a body in the tomb. It was an act of devotion in the face of death.

On the way there they discuss the problem of how they will move the stone away. The big burly disciples were still home in bed, or hiding out in fear, or they'd moved on already.... But, these faithful women waited through the sabbath restrictions and rose at first light to tend to their friend and their Lord.

When they got there the stone had already been rolled away.

The tomb was empty.

The burial chamber was vacant.

There nothing but a cold slab.

The stink of death gone.

And then they are afraid.

Maybe this was the last insult in this whole horrible affair ~ they first took his life and now they had taken his body. Maybe it was just too much to absorb. Or,

maybe it seemed like death had finally and utterly won. Death had ultimately swallowed up their friend and their Lord.

But, then revelation breaks in.

But, then God speaks a word.

But, then with unequivocal clarity the young man, the angel, says,

Don't be afraid.... Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was crucified, has risen! He is not here. He is going ahead of you in into Galilee. There you will see him...

Dear friends, a mystery, worth a measure of awe or trembling, is that Jesus didn't go out the back-way and burn the house down, but Jesus – in the power of God – in a specific time and place, in the confines of history, rose up from the dead and went through the front door. And, whether in eight verses or eight volumes there is no way to explain or contain that glorious mystery.

Jesus ~ dead, three days dead ~ shook off the shackles of death, stood up, and walked out the front door and therefore....

death doesn't hold the last card,
cancer doesn't have the last word,
and darkness doesn't snuff out the light.

Jesus ~ dead, three days dead ~ shook off the shackles of death, stood up, and walked out the front door and therefore

he is alive and he is going ahead of you ~ wherever you journey,
he is alive and you will see him ~ whoever you are,
he is alive and can't be contained ~ however we try,
he is alive and love triumphs over evil, forgiveness trumps sin, and joy overwhelms fear!

We stand at the edge of a great and glorious mystery. Resurrection is not the end, eight short verses and it is not the end of the story, but it is the beginning of a new creation. And before we sing Hallelujah ~ we rightly join the women at the tomb, trembling with awe. For:

*Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was crucified....
He is risen! He is not here.
He is going ahead of you...
You will see him...*

Hallelujah!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.