

Mark 16:1-8

Intro An Unexpected Resurrection March 23, 2008

There are certain things in life you can just count on:

The sun comes up every morning. Each year spring arrives ... along with a foot of snow. Hearing a crash and a child yelling, "*it was an accident!*" A boss saying, "This shouldn't take you too long." A mother scolding, "You'll poke your eye out with that!"

If a story begins: "Once upon a time" it will end "they lived happily ever after." Living happily ever after... that's the way stories were meant to end. That's what we like to hear. We love happy endings. It is our wish in life, even difficult times will have a storybook ending, that's the formula we long for in our novels, our movies...our lives. The stories we've grown up with reinforce the idea that good triumphs over evil.

- The glass slipper fits Cinderella and she goes off to life in the castle.
- Sleeping Beauty meets Prince Charming
- Beauty falls in love with Beast
- Hansel and Gretel toss the old witch in the stove (okay...not a happy ending for the witch).

But it is not just children's stories that placate our desire for nice, happy endings. As adults we like them, too. The movie industry employs Gallup to determine which endings will make the most money. For movies to succeed people must leave theaters with a feeling of vindication, of victory for \$8 a crack.

When Disney adapted Hans Christian Andersen's classic *The Little Mermaid* they jettisoned the tragic noble sacrifice where the Mermaid must see her beloved Prince marry another girl. I wonder if our desire for happy endings will cause a rewrite of such traditional tragedies as Macbeth or Oedipus Rex, in which most of the major characters end up dead, disfigured, or discountenanced. I can only imagine Romeo and Juliet escaping Verona to find joy in Venice.

Perhaps this is why Easter is a joyous time, making Christianity so appealing. We have a happy ending. Despite the worst of circumstances, Jesus is victorious. We can endure the cross because there is a resurrection. A person need not be particularly religious, or care very much about what a relationship with Jesus Christ entails, they know that God wins in the end, all is right with the world.

But the good news of the resurrection does not end the story. It's not the conclusion but the beginning. Mark's Gospel makes it abundantly clear that there is a response called for. In fact Mark deals with the resurrection in a peculiar fashion, as his gospel does not give a neat and tidy ending to the story.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, we feel the tension between Jesus and his disciples. Repeatedly he tells them how the story will play out. Repeatedly they fail to grasp what is happening. Jesus wants them to know that to follow Jesus is to follow him to the cross, that discipleship is hard, that triumph comes through sacrifice. The disciples become fixated on victory, personal power, and prestige. They want what we all desire...the good life.

But glory and power are most clearly recognized as Jesus hangs on the cross. Mark concludes his gospel with the Roman centurion, who, at the foot of the cross, finally utters words of clarity and faith when he says, "surely this is the Son of God!"

How will Mark end his story? How will he explain what happens to the disciples after the resurrection? Will the resurrection open the disciples' eyes so that they at last get it right? READ Mark 16:1-8

The story abruptly ends. The women left the empty tomb trembling and bewildered, not telling anyone the message that Jesus will meet them in Galilee. No tidy bows or happily ever after.

If you've read Mark's gospel before or have a copy open before you now, you'll notice there is more. Verses 9-20 explain how Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene who did go and tell the others and how Jesus appeared on different occasions. That's a happier ending.

While the longer ending of Mark first appears at some point in the fourth century, Mark's gospel ends at verse 8 in the best and oldest New Testament manuscripts. A number of church fathers (Clement and Origen), who quote from Mark, never mention the longer ending and wrote as though verse 8 was the end of the gospel. The two most famous biblical scholars of the early church (Eusebius and Jerome) were both aware of the longer ending, but believed that it was not in the best and earliest manuscripts available to them.¹

We have good reason to end the gospel at verse 8 and this is not a problem to us, other than we have an unexpected conclusion. The integrity of the text remains firm.

That Jesus did appear is not contested. The other gospel accounts give us that information. Mark does not deny this happened, but his account forces us to consider our response to the empty tomb. Leaving us hanging at verse 8, with an unexpected ending, forces us to ask ourselves some critical questions today. There is much here that is unexpected.

THE RESURRECTION PRODUCES UNEXPECTED WITNESSES

1-4

The women went to the tomb expecting there to be a body.

These women were at the cross as Jesus dies (15:40) and accompanied Joseph of Arimathea as Jesus was laid in the tomb. They no doubt aided in preparing the body for burial, wrapping of the body in strips of cloth, between each layer dried spices were placed. But as the sun set and the Sabbath began, they had to wait to complete the process. The stone was rolled in place and they left.

Sometime after sunset on the Sabbath, they purchased the supplies they needed to complete the work of perfuming the body, so that, with decomposition, the tomb's odor would be minimal.

As the women approached the tomb they wondered aloud how to gain access to the sepulcher.

They were present when the small stone which served as a chuck was removed, allowing the large boulder to roll down a channel carved into the soft rock and then fall into place. To open a tomb required several men with ropes and levers. Inside the tomb was a vestibule, or preparation area. At the back of this antechamber was often a rectangular doorway about two feet high, leading into the burial chamber. In this section, along the walls were stone slabs where the bodies would be laid.

As they approached the tomb they noticed something very unusual.

The stone that sealed the entrance was moved. But not rolled aside in its groove so as to be rolled back again to shut the entrance. No, the word here (and in the other gospels) says it was hurled from the entrance, as by some tremendous power. They walked into the antechamber and there seated a messenger. Upon their discovery Mark only concludes that they were alarmed. No wonder. This was not what they were expecting.

Several years ago in what is now Serbia, a town's judge was electrocuted in his bathtub reaching to turn on a light. Hearing the thud of his limp body falling to the floor, his wife rushed in to find his body sprawled on the bathroom floor. He was pronounced dead and, as was the custom, placed in a storage room for burial the next day. Fortunately for the judge, in the middle of the night he came to. Realizing where he was, he alerted a sleeping guard, who promptly ran off in terror. A few moments later the guard returned with a friend. They realized the newly revived judge was not some phantom, but was fully recovered. They gave him the phone to call his bereaved wife. He got no further than, "Darling, it's me..." when she screamed and fainted. Next he went to his neighbor's homes who were certain he was a ghost. In a last desperate measure he called a friend in a distant city who had not heard of his death, and who interceded for him with his family and friends. The unexpected can be terrifying.

It is understandable the women were terrified. They had no hope. This was unexpected, as they never understood what Jesus came to accomplish. Their inability to believe prevented them from waiting for his resurrection from the dead. So the young man seated in the tomb explained the situation to them. For them to understand and believe, someone had to explain it to them.

For this reason, the women are unexpected witnesses

In the ancient world women were not allowed to give testimony in court. Celsus, a Roman opponent to Christianity in the 2nd century, rejected Christ's resurrection because of the testimony of the women at the tomb. He needled the Christian faith as one founded on the gossip of women, whose hysteria makes them unreliable witnesses.

But God chose these unexpected witnesses for that very reason. The issue was not whether they were reliable in that culture, but that what God was doing was so unexpected.

The reason for faith is not based on an undisputable argument, but on God's work among His people. Well-intended apologists walk us through the empty tomb to prove the resurrection. Yet, faith comes not on the basis of the well-crafted argument, but we believe because God graciously works in our hearts in unexpected ways.

THE RESURRECTION PRODUCES AN UNEXPECTED MESSAGE

5-7

The message of the empty tomb is unexpected 5-6

The angel identifies the one who was in the tomb: Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified.

The double identification depicts Jesus' humiliation, as the despised Nazarene's career culminated in crucifixion. The angel's description focused on the worst, the pain and suffering Jesus had told them about. They expected to find him in the tomb, but their search reveals their failure to understand all that he taught: he came to suffer, to die *and* be raised.

The angel's words are gracious and soothing, yet there is a slight tone of reproach.

The word *seek* elsewhere is pejorative. While the living are fixated on death, the Crucified One is consumed with life. For years they followed and listened, they never understood that this was all part of God's plan. That all this is unexpected shows their failure. In 14:28 he told the disciples in the Garden not only of his death, but also of his resurrection and that he would then meet them in Galilee.

What they missed is what confuses us as well. It is all joy or sorrow, triumph or tragedy. Before the cross they expected victory. But with Jesus' arrest, trial and execution, they expected loss. We struggle to comprehend this same mystery in our lives. When suffering comes we conclude God's displeasure. When life is easy, we're certain of life's goodness. But the message of the empty tomb shows how unexpected the gospel comes to us.

However, in the face of the proclamation of his resurrection, there is a message of acceptance that comes so unexpectedly.

The message of acceptance is unexpected 7

What is so unexpected by these unbelieving women is the angel's command: "Go and tell..."

The messenger dismisses the finality of the tomb and dismisses the women to tell others.

They are released to go and tell the disciples...and Peter. There we have a wonderfully unexpected message of acceptance. Peter is singled out not because of his prominence. He who swore he would never deny Christ only to swear and curse that he never knew the man Jesus, was now assured he is accepted and loved.

A promising junior executive at IBM who was involved in a risky venture and lost over \$10 million for the company. When IBM's founder, Tom Watson, Sr., called the nervous executive into his office, the young man blurted out, "I guess you want my resignation?" Watson replied, "You can't be serious. We've just spent \$10 million educating you!"²

We don't expect that kind of treatment. When others fail us we write them off, we set them aside. We can't redeem their failures. But that is exactly what God does with us and why the message of acceptance is so unexpected. What Peter is told, what we are meant to hear is that because the cross and tomb are empty, Christ accepts us.

There is a promise in that reminder: the risen Christ is going before you to Galilee.

To go before was used of a shepherd leading his sheep or a general out in front of his army. Christ's resurrection, Paul tells us, is the first fruits of our resurrection. His empty tomb means the tombs of our loved ones, as well as ours, will be emptied, for the dead will be raised.

While we await the physical resurrection, we also have the promise that Christ today goes before us. Every day as you leave your home, Christ has gone before you. When you return there later, wondering what mayhem you may find, Christ goes before you. When you walk into that meeting, into that tense relationship or painful situation, Christ goes before you.

The empty tomb reminds us that Christ has gone before and calls us to follow, even though we have denied him by our lives. The message of the resurrection keeps us from hiding in the darkness of doubt and failure. There is nothing you can ever do to find yourself outside of God's gracious embrace.

But just as the empty tomb is not the end of the story, neither is the message the end. How do we respond to the cross, the tomb, and the message? It is our response to the truth that matters.

THE RESURRECTION RECEIVES AN UNEXPECTED RESPONSE 8

We come to the conclusion of Mark's Gospel. How will it end? Happily ever after?

Jesus is risen and waiting for the disciples in Galilee. The women are told of their forgiveness for not believing Jesus is risen as He said. The disciples are invited to join Jesus, forgiven for running, denying, hiding. Now it is up to these women to deliver the message. But the final verse leaves us deflated, defeated, for they flee the tomb; say nothing to no one because they are afraid.

We might say that this did not happen. They did tell, and this is why additional endings were added to Mark. Mark's readers knew the women did tell, for his recipients in Rome knew the message went out, otherwise there would be no church.

Mark's unexpected ending with this unexpected response of trembling and fear calls us to view the Christian life on this side of the cross and empty tomb with a proper perspective. There's no triumph. Belief is not perfected. No transformation of the fallible into the faithful. The greatest sign, the empty tomb, is not a guarantee for perfect obedience. Disciples will still fail even as they follow.

The last words the disciples heard from Jesus, according to Mark's gospel, are the words He spoke on the cross to his Father: "My God, my God why have you forsake me?"

Now those words could be as well applied to the disciples, the women, the people of Cornerstone. The gospel is not about our success and triumph as we like imagine.

But is that all there is? Of course not.

The tomb is empty and while Mark ends with the sad silence of these women, we know that is not how it all ends. Not because disciples finally get disciplined and do what is right. Rather, God's power over dysfunctional disciples is the answer. The gospel succeeds despite disciples' disobedience. Our failures are not fatal. Christ will go ahead of us into Galilee, into our homes, Delafield, our classrooms, our marriage, our jobs.

Until we realize this, Easter will be as fuzzy as a pastel bunny and as mushy as a marshmallow chick. You may have sweet feelings over this new hope for spring, but the sweetness is as lasting as eating a bag of jellybeans.

Instead, grapple with the encouraging truth of the empty tomb, that Christ died in your place, for the real sins you commit. Your denials of him do not force him to deny you. Your disbelief will never outweigh his promise to be your God. The empty tomb, his resurrection means that we are accepted even when we fail. He still calls us to come follow him on that hard road that always leads to the cross.

¹ Kim Riddlebarger, "He Is Risen! He Is Not Here", Mark 16:1-8; Isaiah 25:1-12, 2006

² Christianity Today [8/9/85], p. 67