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The Way the Story Ends

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The Lessons: Mark 16: 1-8

I was talking to a young minister the other day. She was gearing up for her first Easter sermon and wrestling with ways to explain to her people what Easter is really all about. I told her that if she could pull that off, she'd be the first preacher ever to do it, and to please send me the sermon.

What *is* Easter really all about, anyway? The language students in David Sedaris' old bestseller, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, tried explaining it to each other in fractured French:

Easter is a party for the little boy of God who calls his self Jesus...Then he die one day on two... morsels... of lumber. He weared of himself the long hair and after he die, the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples.

The gospel stories about Easter make only marginally more sense than the French students did. Mark's version of what happened that day is particularly elusive. Listen again to the way it ends:

“So they went out and fled, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” [Mk 16:8].

And that's it.

Notice anything odd?

The risen Christ does not appear at all, ever. There's no breathless resurrection announcement to the disciples. No Doubting Thomas poking at Christ's scars. No hearts burning on the road to Emmaus. Just terror. And flight. And silence. As preacher Fred Craddock once asked, "Is this any way to run a resurrection?"

Some early Christian didn't think so. And they tried to make it right.

If you had your Bible open while I was reading, you probably noticed two sections of text tacked on to the end of Mark's story. The shorter one is called "The Shorter Ending of Mark," and the longer one is called "The Longer Ending of Mark." Neither one is "The Original Ending of Mark." They are perfectly fine endings, mind you. But Mark didn't write them. Scholars agree that somebody had to have added them later.

It's not hard to imagine how that might have happened in the early church:

"Hey, Bob!" says Tony the Christian Scribe, pointing to the ancient scroll spread out on the copy room desk, "Is this weird, or what? It says here that the holy women went to the tomb, found the stone removed, talked to the angel, then fled and didn't mention it to a soul. That can't be right!"

"Huh!" says Bob. "Strange ending for a gospel. So ...dark. So... enigmatic. So... ambiguous."

"A bit too ambiguous if you ask me," Tony exclaims, looking vexed. "I mean, is it a happy ending or a sad one?"

"I'm not sure. It's kinda vague."

"Do we have to leave it so vague?" Tony asks, hatching a plan. "We already know the way it's supposed to end from reading the other gospels. What harm would it do to fix it up a little?"

"Yeah, what harm would it do?" Bob says. "We could stick in a couple of post-resurrection appearances and the giving of The Great Commission. That would make it sound more Easter-y. Hey, and while we're at it, let's throw in some stuff about Judas being a hero!"

"Well, okay," says Tony, "but I was hoping we'd go instead with a conspiracy involving a direct descendent of Mary Magdalene's love child and an albino Opus Dei monk."

"Oooh, sorry, man. It's been done."

“Rats! Are you sure?”

“Yeah.”

And so it was—or wasn’t—that the gospel of Mark got a couple of happy, more Easter-appropriate endings. And why not? Isn’t a wrap-up more satisfying than a loose thread? Most of us like tidy, upbeat endings. A few years ago movie producers toyed with making interactive films. The idea was to have several different endings for audiences to choose from. In a test run, nearly all the viewers chose the neat, happy ending, even when it bore no relation to the plot.

(Maybe this predilection for happy endings explains why it has taken so long for many Americans to second-guess the rosy predictions for a happy ending to the current war offered up daily by a certain Methodist son of an Episcopalian who lives at an important Washington address, but who shall go unnamed so as not to expose this congregation to federal tax liabilities.)

Here’s a neat, happy ending story that a colleague spotted in *The New Haven Register* several years ago:

A couple’s small plane crashed into a remote Canadian lake. Rescuers spotted an oil slick and some personal possessions floating on the surface. Nothing else. Days went by. Obituaries were written. Funeral plans were made. The government sent a coroner to the crash site to prepare a final report. And lo and behold, there, on the shore, close to where the plane went down, he found the dead couple. Only they weren’t dead. They were just really thin, having eaten only fresh water mussels the whole time. When they got home, their 8-year old son presented them with a cake that said, “Welcome home, Mom and Dad! (You’re grounded.)”

Isn’t that a great ending? Imagine the couple’s delight. Imagine the coroner’s delight! Imagine the little boy’s delight! Imagine Larry King’s delight—what an interview! *Dead couple resurrected!*

Except, of course, that they were not resurrected, just reprieved. Someday they really will die, maybe in another plane crash (stranger things have happened), and maybe in their beds. But they will die, and there won’t be any rescue then. No reprieve. The neat, happy ending of their story is a temporary one. And so are all neat, happy endings, great and small.

Truth to tell, there aren’t very many neat, happy endings in the first place. A miracle cure for an incurable condition, a last minute pardon for an inmate on death row, a green card for an undocumented worker about to be deported, a sudden reconciliation after a lifetime estrangement—things like this happen only once in a very, very blue moon.

Most stories have messier, sadder, more disappointing endings. You know this from your own stories, the ones that are riddled with ifs, ands, and buts. The ones with hanging questions. The stories whose ragged endings can't be mended, whose painful conclusions you are helpless to change. Not even Jesus' story ends well. His disciples prayed that he would come down from the cross, but he didn't. No cavalry swooped in to save him, and he couldn't save himself.

But, you might be thinking, it did end happily, right? This is Easter, isn't it? Christ rose from the dead. Isn't that the *ultimate* tie-up of loose ends? Isn't Easter really all about an ultimate happy outcome for the great human story?

As I said earlier, if I knew what Easter was really all about, I'd be the first person ever to have figured it out! But if I were to take a guess based on Mark's gospel, I'd have to say no, it is not what Easter is really all about. Mark seems interested in the resurrection not so much as a happy ending as a kind of new beginning after a long and frightful pause. For him, it is (to paraphrase Gracie Allen and the United Church of Christ) not a period, but a comma. Mark's story does not say, "The End," but "To Be Continued." What is it that we are told by the angel? *He is going on ahead of you.*

With the Risen One already out there, ahead of us, and deep silence about all the rest, Mark sets the stage for something that the women did not think possible as they trudged resignedly to the tomb. They figured that their discipleship expired when Jesus did. No Teacher, no disciples. Without the Way, there can be no following. But Mark's Easter story commands them to resume their discipleship, to take up again the pathway they had been walking: *Go to Galilee.* "In Easter's first light," author Ched Meyers writes, "Mark's story ends as it began, inviting us to follow the Lord."

It was something they did not think possible. And it was also something they may not have thought desirable. Back at the start of the gospel, when they first heard the invitation to follow, the disciples jumped at it, leaving everything behind. Now, because they have seen the consequences of discipleship all too well, their first impulse is to flee in terror. And why not? Jesus may indeed have been raised, but if his rising means more discipleship, why would anyone jump at going through *that* all over again?

The resurrection, it turns out, is not some ethereal, otherworldly joy, a neat, happy Hollywood ending. It is, rather, a peculiar kind of earthly burden. Easter does not let us down easily from the cross. If anything, it reinforces the call to Jesus' friends to take up the Way of the Cross-Bearer again, and again, and again. To bear the blessed load into the world of so few happy endings. Into the world so desperately in need of a new script for its heart-rending story.

Who will write that script?

Marks' silences tell us the answer more pointedly than fancy, happy, tied-up endings ever could. When we ask, "Did the women ever re-join the other disciples?" he answers, "That's *their* story. What matters now is *your* story. You heard the angel. Will you go?"

When we ask, "How could the women keep silent?" Mark answers, "How can *you*? How can *you* be so withholding of such good news?"

"Well," we say, "we prefer a different ending, one that rounds it all off happily and doesn't demand so much from us."

And Mark replies, "Yes, you would want it happy and neat, wouldn't you? But if I gave it to you that way, you would just put my book down with a great sigh of relief. You would just put it down and say, 'Wasn't that a wonderful story!' But you cannot put this book down, even if you want to. You have to write the ending with your own life. With your own life, you must write it. And not until you do will the whole graceful story be known."