“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.” So ends the Easter morning account from Mark’s gospel. For many people this ending is completely unacceptable. How can you end the resurrection story with silence? Biblical scholars believe this is where Mark ends not only the story of Jesus’ resurrection, but his entire gospel. “They said nothing, for they were afraid.” If you read the gospel of Mark, you will see that it does not end with the eighth verse of chapter 16. In the Bible from which Cheryl Edison just read, they call this the “shorter ending” and what comes after the “longer ending. Scholars argue another writer tacked on the longer ending much later. Today let us set that argument aside to focus on Mark’s account of the resurrection.

“When is an ending not an end?” asks the writer and teacher Lamar Williamson, “When a dead man rises from the tomb, and when a Gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.” In the Greek translation this sentence ends as every English teacher tells you not to, with a preposition. “The women went out from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; they said nothing to anyone, they were afraid for…” The most important story of the Christian faith leaves you hanging without even completing the sentence. We are left waiting, unresolved.

The English translation settles the grammatical anxiety by moving the preposition; “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” However, it does not ease our theological anxiety. The story can not end here, in fear, in silence. That is perhaps why writers felt compelled to attach a more complete ending. Even so, this would not do. We need a flashy ending, something that makes people feel good, that puts people’s mind at ease. After all, Jesus has just risen from the dead. We can’t end with “they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid!”

Fantasy and projection aside, Mark’s gospel is perhaps the most authentic and compelling precisely because of its ending. We can imagine ourselves
as any one of those three women. We can imagine mustering the courage to rise early on that morning hoping to perform one last act of loving-kindness for Jesus. We can imagine not having a plan, not knowing who would roll the massive stone away, but trusting that somehow this would not keep them from entering. We can imagine not understanding what Jesus meant when he told them on the third day he would rise again. How could they have understood? This had never happened before. There is no reason they should have understood. However, it is not faith that motivates their predawn journey, but a deep and abiding love, a love more beautiful and compelling than they had ever known.

When the women reach the tomb and see that the stone has been rolled away they don’t know what to think. There could be any number of logical explanations, all of which send terror and panic through them. Had someone stolen the body? Had they arrived too late to prepare Jesus for a proper burial? Had their fear of reprisal cost them the chance to say goodbye to their friend? Did their own worry about breaking the Sabbath rules keep them from doing the right thing? They are wracked with guilt because they have failed even at this simple, loving task. Mark’s response and ending to this story is painfully real. When the women do not find Jesus in the tomb, of course, they were afraid. Death is awful, especially a death as brutal as public crucifixion, but at least they knew what death meant. Death leaves you feeling numb and raw, but at least they knew what to do next. Death is tragic, but they understood what it meant when someone they loved was gone.

But this, this is something entirely different. These women came to prepare Jesus for burial only to find him missing. Instead, a young man in a shining, white robe greets them. He tells them Jesus is not there. He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of them to Galilee, back where they came from. Go, tell the others what you have seen and meet Jesus there. What are they to believe? There are several explanations. Either they are hallucinating; perhaps a product of their unimaginable grief made only worse by finding an empty tomb. Perhaps this man is part of a conspiracy to steal Jesus’ body or he might in fact be a divine messenger. Any of these explanations would make us run in fear and keep silent.

Each gospel writer has his own account of the resurrection, with its own characters and details. Different people go to the tomb, Jesus appears to some and not to others. Mark was writing to people like us who already
believe the resurrection. He is not trying to convince anyone that Jesus rose from the dead. In this shorter ending from Mark, we get an end without an ending. Without telling us the rest of the story he invites us to write our own ending. Like many of the parables, his ending leaves the conclusion up to the hearer. Parables often leave us with a question. Does the barren fig tree bear fruit after the gardener spends a year caring for it? (Luke 13: 6-9) Does the older brother join the party for his long lost brother? (Luke 15: 11-32) The unanswered questions lead us to wonder further, “will I bear fruit?” “Am I willing to join the party?” Or in response to today’s story “will I tell the world that Jesus is risen and goes ahead of us to Galilee?” Mark invites us, indeed longs for us to find our place in the story.

The gospel writers did not intend us to be passive bystanders, hearers only of the story. This is more than a rerun of “It’s a Wonderful Life.” God wants us to become part of the story. “Were you there when God raised him from the tomb? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.” The resurrection of Jesus changed more than those women’s lives, more than the disciples’ lives, it changed everything. Death no longer has a strangle hold on our lives. Pain and suffering do not define us. Doubts are not indicative of a lack of faith. Jesus has risen, just as he said he would. The world is forever changed and we must not keep this miracle to ourselves.

Mark wrote his gospel many years after the life and death of Jesus. He is writing to a community of believers who has suffered through persecution and terror as faithful witnesses to the resurrection. Life was very difficult for them. Therefore, Mark is doing more than recounting a set of facts in telling the story as he does. This community lived under the reign of Nero, one of the greatest persecutors of Christians. It was under his reign that both Peter and Paul were executed; and many of Mark’s readers were facing the same possibility. Mark was speaking to a fragile community of believers to whom trials, suffering and perhaps death were very real.

One writer believes, “That community of believers did not need a history lesson about the name of some women who find an empty tomb. They needed assurances that Jesus was right there with them in the midst of their troubles now—and perhaps some of them felt like failures in trying to follow the way of Jesus in the midst of their trials.” Is this not our experience too? Are there not moments when we feel lost, inadequate or weak, unable to say the right thing or do what needs to be done? This is precisely when we need to know that what the angel says is true, that Jesus goes ahead of
us—through our own trials, suffering, or death. Even if we fail Jesus, Jesus will not fail us.

However, today’s story is not about failure, but victory. It is not about perfection, but faithfulness. It is not about sorrow, but grace. The kind of grace that compels us to tell the world that something as unimaginable as the resurrection has happened. Mark ends his story with the women’s silence. However, they could not have been silent for long. They must have overcome their fear and told the others what the angel said, because we know the story. We may never fully understand it, the same way that we understand what causes rivers to flood, tumors to grow, or daffodil bulbs to bloom again like magic each spring. What Jesus has done, what he has put to death, what he has overcome is not for us to understand with our twenty-first century, logical minds. It is only for us to believe.

It has been said that hope is not born in knowing where you are going, but in knowing who is leading the way. Jesus goes ahead of us and will meet us in Galilee. He meets us in our hometown, the place most familiar to us, in our own back yards and dinner tables. He will be there tonight as we tuck our children into bed. He will be in the chair where we receive our chemotherapy drip. He will hold our hand in the MRI chamber and surround us with a sense of peace as we meet with the funeral director to prepare to say good bye to a loved one. Jesus goes ahead of us, preparing the way, assuring us that we never make any of these journeys alone.

This is not your typical Easter, prettied up with the Hallelujah chorus and banks of sweet smelling lilies. However, it may be closer to the real thing and to our likely response to God’s intrusions and reversals; astonishment, holy fear, and running the other way. Even if we run away, Jesus waits for us, in our own Galilee where there are piles of dirty dishes, unmade beds, a yard that needs tending, a house that needs cleaning, hams and legs of lamb that need roasting. Jesus is with us in the mundane and everyday routines of our lives. He promises to be in those less obvious places, where once there was a stone, and now there is only a messenger. He goes ahead of us to Galilee. That is where we will meet him. That is where our story ends and where it begins. Jesus is Risen! He is risen indeed! Be not afraid!! We can never leave Jesus behind because he has already gone on ahead of us. That is the power and promise of the resurrection. May it be so! Amen
Opening Prayer

We come this day in joy, O god, to celebrate again the wonderful miracle that you bring life out of death. The resurrection of Jesus reminds us that nothing—absolutely nothing—can separate us from your love. Alleluia! We pray this prayer with your faithful people throughout the ages whom Jesus taught to say when we pray…our father…