

“Ending Without End”

Acts 10:34-43, Mark 16: 1-8

Easter/B, April 12, 2009

Lynne M. Dolan

This Easter we hear Mark’s version of the post-crucifixion story. He begins with apprehension, moves on to shock and surprise and then ends on a note of fear. Mark’s is the briefest Easter story and for many is the least popular. Many people don’t like the way his story ends. In the land of fairy tales all the best stories have a happy ending. A good movie is one that can make you feel something at a deep level. We go home satisfied when everything works out in the end. The girl gets the guy, they fall madly in love and everyone lives happily ever after. Mark’s is the farthest thing from a fairy tale gospel. In Mark’s account of the resurrection the women run away speechless and afraid, unable to tell the others what they have seen. Jesus does not meet them or appear to them. There is no meal, no more teaching, no final rendezvous with Jesus. There is really no conclusion. We do not know what happens next. Mark’s gospel offers us an ending without an end.

If you read Mark’s gospel you will find two alternative endings. They were added later by editors who could not reconcile this jarring ending. Mark’s ending is so abrupt that when you read it in the Greek it actually ends with a preposition. In Greek the last sentence reads, “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 just stops and the end just hangs out there. It is like a piece of music that ends with an incomplete chord. It just doesn’t feel right and you end up with an unsettled feeling. Mark’s last sentence leaves you waiting, wondering if there will be a satisfactory resolution. Will Jesus appear to these women and ease their grief? Will he assure them that he has gone on to be with God as he had instructed them before his death? We know what the mysterious man at the tomb has told them, but we have no further confirmation.

The English translation solves the grammatical problem by moving the preposition. “They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” This may make the English teachers happy, but it does not address our spiritual angst. We are uncomfortable with the women’s inability to handle what has happened. We are annoyed that Mark chooses to end his entire gospel this way. Why would Mark intentionally withhold what we believe to be the rest of the story? It seems like a cruel joke for people who have already suffered so much. Ambiguity is unsettling. We expect a story to have a beginning, middle and satisfactory ending. The way Mark ends his gospel is intentionally unsettling. He gives us no Great Commission, no road to Emmaus, no breakfast of fish on the beach, and no appearance of the risen Jesus. There is only a promise that we will see him, followed by fear and silence. We don’t know how or when this promise will be fulfilled. We are not sure who will experience its fulfillment. We wait anxiously for the dramatic final scene and there is none.

If you want the story to be tied up in a neat bow, you will have to read the other gospel accounts. In Matthew the risen Jesus meeting the disciples on the mountain later. Luke rewrote the entire episode, adding a second man in dazzling clothes and includes the story of Jesus' appearance to his disciples on the road to Emmaus. Later that day Jesus meets two of them on their journey to Emmaus. He does not tell them who he is. As they walk he interprets the scriptures to them and then joins them for dinner. These endings bring the story to a more satisfactory closure. The disciples in their profound grief can move on as they experience Jesus in all his resurrection glory.

There is no such satisfaction in Mark's story. What happened to Jesus was horrible and we can not make it better by wishing for a happy ending. The writer Patrick Wilson says, "the jagged edges of these final verses, do in fact, trace Mark's pastoral wisdom. He refused to tie the loose ends of the gospel into a tidy bow of fleeting consolations. The final verses are ambiguous: a promise greeted by fear. A pledge that we will 'see him' swamped by our own uncertainty and fear. What Mark's ending lacks in romance it makes up for in sheer realism. Isn't this the world we live in? No enchanted world of thinly fabricated happily-ever-afters, but a world in which we hold tightly to the promise and fearfully tread our way through a tangle of doubts and amazement?"

That is perhaps why I like Mark's account most of all. The ending has yet to be written. Therefore each one of us may now find our place in the story. I believe Mark's ambiguous, unsatisfactory ending is the whole point of the story. In Mark's version the story keeps on going. We can go to the tomb with the women, believe that Jesus has gone ahead of us, that he will meet us somewhere else, that he has been raised from the dead and has been let loose in the world. Offering an ending without end allows this to be more than an historical account. It is no longer the end to the Biblical story, but an invitation to be part of the story that is still being written. It is like one of those plays where the audience gets to vote on how the play ends after a break in the action. Only in this case we get to live the ending.

Christ's disciples, past and present, write the ending to this story. Jesus has been raised from the dead and is going ahead of us where he will meet us in the margins; in Galilee, in Bagdad, in Hartford, in those places where the promise of the resurrection is most needed. Jesus has shattered our understanding of death. We may never fully comprehend the resurrection, but we do know that our lives have new meaning because of it. Jesus told us this would happen, but how could we possibly understand?

I so appreciate Mark's gospel precisely because of his ending. The thought that Jesus has overcome death and is still loose in the world is awesome to consider. The man in the tomb tells us that Jesus goes ahead of us and expects us to meet him in the world. Mark gives us an ending without an end because the story is not over. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. Jesus was put to death by human hands, but through the power of the resurrection, God invites men and women, young people and older people, you and me, into new and transformed lives. The story we hear this morning is not someone else's story. It is not the women's story. It is not an eyewitness account of what happened long ago. This is our story, whose ending has yet to be written.

What then do we do with our transformed lives? If you have an encounter with the risen Christ, what difference does that make? In an era of unprecedented prosperity there are still children in the world that do not have access to simple medical care or clean water. In a nation of vast resources needy people flock to food pantries and soup kitchens looking for a way to make ends meet. Does Christ's death and resurrection really make a difference today? Are we writing an end to the story that would bring glory and honor to the Christ who gave his life as a sacrifice for us?

We do not always receive satisfactory answers to life's deepest mysteries. However, despite the mysterious, God promises to love us and care for us even when life does not provide us with a happy ending. God promises to be with us no matter how our life story unfolds. Jesus was not immune from tragedy. He experienced sadness and despair and longing and suffering just as we do. His life and death helps us to accept that even though tragedies befall us, even though children get cancer and die, innocent people are killed by drunk drivers, or earthquakes decimate an entire community in the blink of an eye, Jesus is never far from us. We do not understand how or why these things happen, but we do not stop believing in the power of the risen Christ because these do. What we know is that God came to be with us to embrace the complexity of humanity, not to keep us from experiencing what life offers.

This is a story whose ending has yet to be written. You are the actors and God is our co-author. Patrick Wilson says, "Every finale forecloses the drama prematurely. An ending says too much too surely, and therefore it never says enough. Although it may satisfy us for the moment, we sense its failure and falsity. The young man in the tomb understands there is more to come. 'He is not here,' not in the tomb, not at the end of the story, 'he is going ahead of you,' always ahead of us and 'you will see him' in Galilee and in places we would never have expected. He is going ahead of us and of his story there is no end." Let us go then, expecting an encounter with the risen Christ, expecting to be blown away by what is yet to be. Amen