

# ***WHAT'S THE REST OF THE STORY?***

***Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Our National Emergency***

**EASTER SUNDAY, APRIL 12, 2020**

**Bethany Congregational Church, United Church of Christ  
Foxborough, Massachusetts  
Rev. Bruce A. Greer, Interim Pastor**

**Scripture Reading: Mark 16:1-8**

“So, they went out and fled from the tomb, for [trauma and ecstasy] seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”  
(Mark 16:8)

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## **I.**

There are four gospels in our Bible: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Matthew and Luke give us Christmas stories, which we love to sing in our carols and portray with our children’s pageants. John gives us many marvelous stories: from Jesus making wine out of water, to raising Lazarus from the dead, to fishing with his disciples after Easter.

Mark on the other hand gets right to it. A 30-year-old Jesus just shows up out of nowhere to be baptized by John the Baptist; then, *immediately*, we are off and running with Jesus through the wilderness to Galilee; then to Jerusalem; then to the events of Holy Week; then to the dawn of Easter morning. Mark is like a sprint, start to finish, leaving us breathless.

Mark’s gospel ends as abruptly as it starts. Jesus is crucified and buried. On Easter morning, his female followers were terrified to discover an empty tomb with a mysterious messenger inside. “Don’t be alarmed,” the messenger says, following Heaven’s Best Practices for Communicating with Humans. Of course, we’re afraid when we see angels, Captain Obvious!

The women were understandably afraid because Jesus’ body *should* have been there, not some random young man dressed in a white robe. They were alarmed when he said:

He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.<sup>1</sup>

They fled the tomb in fear – seized by trauma and frozen with amazement – saying nothing to anyone. Seizures are not “teachable moments,” let alone “speakable” moments. Mark leaves us shaken with fear, stammering to speak, stumbling away from the empty tomb! There is nothing else after this in his gospel. Nothing! End of story! Full stop!

- No Great Commission to send us to the ends of the earth;<sup>2</sup>
- No sweet reunions in Galilee, on the Emmaus Road, or in Jerusalem;<sup>3</sup>
- No show and tell moments when Jesus showed his scars;<sup>4</sup>

- No fish stories, or stories of breakfast by the sea; <sup>5</sup>
- No attempts to alleviate doubt or forgive desertion. <sup>6</sup>

None of that! Just women running away! Mark leaves us asking questions, longing for answers. Where did the women go? What did they do next? Did they eventually say something? Was the Risen Christ experienced by others?

Mark is that proverbial book in every library with its last chapter ripped out. Mark's gospel ends with missing disciples, a missing body, and women running away. Perhaps Mark invites us to take the stage to solve the mystery and finish the play.

## II.

So, what's the rest of the story? Before we answer that question, consider this. Easter involves the victory of "seemingly powerless love over loveless power."<sup>7</sup> For that singular reason, the work of Christ is never in vain. Would that make sense for Mark's first century audience?

They read Mark's Gospel while at war with Rome, suffering apocalyptic miseries, and seeing their beloved Temple in Jerusalem destroyed (70 A.D./C.E.). Though Mark's Gospel offers 'good news' to all of his readers, he does not downplay or avoid the unpleasant realities of despair, doubt, deceit, and death.<sup>8</sup>

Mark's urban audience lived in a world dominated by empire and establishment, rigid religion and inflexible social structure; in a world of violence, poverty, slavery, sexism, famine, disease, social alienation, and political chaos.<sup>9</sup> They struggled to be faithful some forty years after Jesus' death, and suffered dearly for the sake of Christ and his movement.

Mark's open-ended Gospel invited his first readers to be the rest of the story. He invited them to take another look at the meaning of Jesus' life and ministry, and to affirm that Jesus' death was not the end of the story. Mark invited them to consider what novelist Mary Gordon called:

...a love so unlikely, [a love] so improbable, [a love] so extreme, that nothing could stop its flourishing; nothing could cause it to wither and fade.<sup>10</sup>

Nothing! No empire. No establishment. No evil. Not even death itself could stop or defeat such wondrous love as this. Mark's first audience believed that the love of the Risen Christ never fails and that his hope never dies, even in the face of loveless power.

The resurrection for Mark was not an academic exercise in theology; not a creed to be memorized and recited. It was not a doctrine to defend against cynics and skeptics, doubters and deniers. Not at all. Easter was for Mark and his first-century audience an existential experience, not an abstract concept. If there was any debate, it was about who has the last word: death and evil, or life and love.

"Take courage," Jesus said, "I have conquered the world!"<sup>11</sup>

Given Jesus' humiliating death on a Roman cross, these words sound delusional. Such love seems powerless against loveless power. But that is not the case. Love wins! Love wins every time! *Love always wins!*

### III.

*The rest of the story is up to us! We must decide what to do next.*

How will we finish the story? What will we add to the story? Will we choose the road back to Jerusalem, where empire and establishment enslave us? Or, will we choose instead the road towards Galilee, following the Light and Love that sets us free? Will we head back towards the destructive darkness of Good Friday, or head out in faith following the Light of Easter?

Clearly, someone experienced something so incredible and powerful on that first Easter that it became the hinge of history we observe to this very day. Clearly someone experienced something so powerful that grief was transformed into joy, fear transformed into courage, and defeat transformed into victory!

Mark doesn't offer many details. He doesn't finish the story for us; but that's the wonder of it. The Spirit of God empowered them, and empowers us now, to be the rest of the story. Life triumphs over death! No cross can defeat it. Love triumphs over evil! No hubris or hatred can expel it. No empire or establishment can stand against the power of such Godly love.

Such love empowers us with courage and compassion to engage whatever natural or human challenges come our way, even a coronavirus pandemic! Such love compels us to serve and support each other, even to sacrifice ourselves for others in these difficult days, when the end of the story is not yet known.

Such love is ours to receive and share because it could not be nailed down on a cross or sealed away in a tomb. And so, we celebrate in spite of our fear and worry! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"<sup>12</sup>

Take that victory today and embody the Easter Story!  
May God grant us wisdom and courage for the living of these days.  
Amen.

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### **END NOTES AND REFERENCES**

*(Note: Unless noted, all Bible quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.)*

1. Mark 16:6b-7.
2. Matthew 28:16-20.
3. Such as the post-Easter stories in Luke and John.
4. John 20:24-29.
5. John 21:1-14.
6. John 21:15-19.
7. "Easter has less to do with one man's escape from the grave than with the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power. ...What is the Easter message? That resurrection has overcome crucifixion, that there is more mercy in God than [there is evil] in us; that Christ's work in this world is never in vain..." From: *The Collected Sermons of William Sloan Coffin: The Riverside Years, Vol. 2*. Introduction by Martin E. Marty. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008; 155, 159.

8. Barry Hannah, "The Gospel According to Mark", in *Revelations: Personal Responses to the Books of the Bible*, with an Introduction by Richard Holloway. New York: Canongate, 2005; 247.
9. See Richard Allan Olson, "Between Text and Sermon, Mark 16:1-8", in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, XLVII:4 (October, 1993); 408.
10. Mary Gordon, *Reading Jesus: A Writer's Encounter with the Gospels*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2009; 203.
11. John 16:33.
12. 1 Corinthian 15:57.