

Beginnings

Just a couple of weeks ago, our Wednesday Bible Study class finished the gospel of Mark, the gospel that we shall be reading all of 2012 until Advent next year.

And no, this does not mean the Bible Study class is excused from mass this year.

Having worked our way through Mark, we were all a bit surprised by its abrupt ending.

As you know, all of the gospels have stories of the disciples meeting with Jesus, seeing Jesus, talking with and eating with Jesus, after he is raised from the dead – all of the gospels, that is, expect for the original ending in the gospel of Mark.

The original ending of the Gospel of Mark goes like this, as it tells of the women arriving at the tomb, intending to anoint the body of Jesus:

“As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. 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. 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.”

THE END.

No appearances by Jesus, no walks on the road to Emmaus, no doubting Thomas, no breakfast on the beach: just “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

THE END.

How's that for an unsatisfying ending?

Several years ago, a student acted out a one-man play of the Gospel of Mark.

He had prepared for years, memorizing the lines, working out the characters, finding just the right tone.

It was a very good play, very raw, very emotional, and he performed it first in a large church in front of a packed audience.

When he got to the end of the play, and delivered the last line: "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid," the audience sat there in breathless expectation, as if to say, "yes, go on!"

Now the student, for all his preparation, had not completely thought this through.

He sort of shifted from foot to foot, and after several very long seconds, abruptly shouted: "Amen!" and ran off the stage.

The relieved audience burst into applause.

The student later talked about how he felt pressure to add to the ending of Mark.

That pressure is nothing new.

If you look at your Bible today, and turn to the ending of Mark's gospel, you'll see what I mean.

As it stands now, Mark's gospel doesn't end like a cliffhanger at all.

In its current form, Mark's gospel has a bunch of stories about the Risen Jesus showing himself, walking with his disciples and sending them all out into the world.

But that is not how Mark ended his gospel.

The same pressure that young man felt at the end of his play actually led ancient scribes in the early church to create two different endings to Mark, endings that borrowed directly from the later gospels of Luke and Matthew.

From the earliest days of the church, it seems, Mark's original ending left people mystified.

So what about our student and his play?

Well, he was determined to be true to Mark's original gospel, and so, the next time he performed the play, he resisted the temptation to try to fix the dangling ending.

After saying the last line, he paused a few dramatic seconds, then, silently walked off the stage.

This time there was no applause.

There was only discomfort and uncertainty as the audience first sat in silence, and then made its way to the exit, feeling the anxiety of this non-ending. T. Long, *Preaching From Memory To Hope*, 128.

You may be asking yourselves, why is he talking about endings when the first line in today's gospel lesson is: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"?

Why talk about endings when, today, we are at the very beginning?

It's because Mark's abrupt, dangling ending was all about sending his hearers, his readers, back to the beginning of his gospel.

Because the light of the empty tomb, when it shines on locust eating John the Baptizer, baptizing in the middle of the Jordan; when that light shines on the unknown carpenter from Galilee; when it shines on followers who continually misunderstand; that light of the empty tomb changes everything.

When Mark starts his gospel by writing simply, "This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," he doesn't mean just Chapter 1, verse 1, rather he means that his whole gospel is *just the beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ.

The empty tomb begins a story that needs to be completed: completed by the women who ran; completed by the apostles at Pentecost, completed by the church down through the ages, completed by you and I.

And how do we begin to complete it?

Remember the words at the tomb: we go back to Galilee, back to the place where Jesus began his mission.

We go back to the beginning of the gospel, to announcement, to hope, to repentance.

And maybe *this* time, knowing what we know now, we will better understand what John the Baptist and Jesus are talking about.

This time we will indeed repent; this time we will indeed believe the good news.

We return to reread the story, to start again with fresh ears and new eyes and open hearts.

Chapter 1, verse 1 of Mark welcomes back those who come from the empty tomb, seeking Jesus alive and anew.

And perhaps most of all, it is this.

To be at a beginning is to find that we are no longer prisoners of the past.

That's the message of John the Baptist.

It's why he attracted the tax collectors and prostitutes, why he attracted those who know they need a new day, a fresh start.

It's why those so invested in the status quo reject John, reject Jesus.

To be at a beginning is to find that we are no longer prisoners of the past.

We need not be bound to our idolatries or regrets, our greed or our fears.

We can begin again. David Lose.

And that beginning is the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God!

+amen

