

***Again and Again: The Sun Rises***

***Mark 16:1-8***

***April 4, 2021***

What kind of ending is that? The Greek literally reads, “And having gone out they fled from the tomb, seized by terror and amazement; to none nothing was spoken; afraid they were for...” The late Fred Craddock asked, “Is this any way to run a resurrection?” Who would leave the greatest story ever told, the good news that God triumphs over death, unfinished, with a dangling preposition to boot? The writer of the Gospel of Mark does exactly that. On Easter Sunday, we expect a glorious story of the risen Christ, but did you notice that in Mark’s Gospel, there is no appearance of the risen Christ? There is no Great Commission, no road to Emmaus, no fish breakfast on the beach with the risen Jesus. There is only a promise that he is going ahead of his followers to Galilee where they will see him. The three women who have come to care for his body run away in fear, keeping silence.

Why does Mark’s gospel end so abruptly? Some were troubled by this ending. Along the way while transcribing the gospel, a monk may have said, “I can write a better ending!” and did – but those additional verses are not in the original manuscripts.

It should not be surprising that Mark is not very good at endings, for he is not very good at beginnings either. Mark’s Gospel has no reference to Jesus’ birth, like Matthew’s genealogy, or Luke’s nativity setting, or John’s profound theological hymn. He starts with thirteen words: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Then he moves on to John the Baptist. Mark is not an eloquent gospel; it reports the story with a sense of urgency and leaves us dangling, thirsting for more.

At some point in the hours after visiting the empty tomb, the women must have shaken off enough fear to speak to someone. The messenger instructs them to tell the disciples. Who are the disciples? James and John, Andrew and Simon Peter, who is specifically named, the same Peter who just hours before denied Jesus three times.

The disciples are to go to Galilee, for Jesus will meet them there, just as he told them. Circle back to where this story began, back to the place where Jesus grew up, where he gathered those closest to him, and where he began to teach, preach, and heal. There you will meet Jesus and, again and again, experience a new beginning. The gospel starts with the words, “The beginning of the good

news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” Mark’s sixteen chapters with its seemingly abrupt end is only the beginning of the glorious good news of Jesus Christ. The story has not concluded with Jesus’ death. It is only the prelude, for the end of Jesus’ earthly life launches the community of faith empowered by the Holy Spirit. God is doing something new, something unheard of to this point. The crucified one is now the risen one, but risen to a new life, not simply to more of the same life. Mark’s gospel is open-ended, with an ellipsis indicating that more of the story is yet to be told.... It is the responsibility of his followers to continue the story.

It turns out that Mark isn’t terrible at endings; he’s brilliant. By ending his account in this way, he invites us into the story, to pick up where these women left off, and indeed to go and tell that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised, and is going ahead to meet us in our ordinary lives. The end is also a new beginning, a fresh start, the next chapter, an adventure yet to unfold.

Life is something like this. We don’t like change. We don’t relish endings, for they entail the loss of something beloved and familiar. We would rather things stay the same, just as they have always been. We’re often tempted to fix “bad endings” – which is understandable, even reasonable, but it is not always our call. Even when we think we’re in control, some things take a different turn than we would like. However, we worship the God who meets us precisely at the point where things seem the worst, not merely to fix things, but to redeem them and us! Again and again, God turns what looks like an ending into a new beginning. Again and again, God takes what looks like a failure and offers it back to us as an opportunity.

The pandemic has brought so much loss, pain, and suffering, and yet it has brought opportunity as well. As we venture down the path of reopening slowly and safely, we realize that nothing will be the same again. New protocols must be maintained for the safety of all. Businesses, schools, and even churches are reinventing themselves for this new era. We will be disappointed if we expect to return to the former ways. We will be surprised as we open ourselves to the new ways that can delight us. Our faith in the God of resurrection equips us to be open to the changes that are swirling all around us. Easter teaches us never to put a period where God puts a comma. Again and again, God shows up to make a way, to point us to the future, and to accompany us into the unknown.

The Gospel of Mark makes a point of saying that Jesus is going ahead of the disciples to Galilee. The risen Christ goes ahead of us to open up new possibilities. The risen Christ goes ahead of us through suffering and pain, leading

us into a vista filled with new life. He goes ahead as the forerunner redeeming our suffering, blessing it, and bringing new beginnings out of endings. What seems to us to be a conclusion is actually the opening of new possibilities.

When circumstances close doors, Christ goes ahead to open windows.

When our path stops in a dead end, Christ goes ahead to build a new road.

When life leads us into troubled waters, Christ goes ahead to calm the storm.

What situation in your life is making you anxious? What are you afraid for? What questions haunt you about the future? When I've run into roadblocks and lived through endings, I have found help in Flora Wuellner's prayer, "With Christ into the Uncertain Future." When worried about a situation or fearful and afraid, Flora suggests that we visualize the room or place or setting. It may be a doctor's office, your boss's office, your living room, an airplane, a courtroom. Imagine Christ's presence in that place. Picture Christ walking in with strength and confidence. Watch Jesus move around in that place, touching it, lifting his hands in blessing and healing. Feel his presence and light fill every corner of the room. Now visualize Christ coming to meet you at the door. He is there to assure you that as you enter you will find yourself wrapped in his presence, comfort, strength, and guidance.

This prayer helps us to catch a glimpse of the new beginning God is preparing for us. It awakens us to the fact that God goes ahead of us to fill the future with love and grace. While our world is marked by endings, God is still at work creating, redeeming, conquering, healing, reshaping. Beyond despair and pain, with God there are possibilities and horizons unlimited.

Mark didn't need a resurrection appearance of Jesus. He sent the disciples back to the beginning to remember the promise of resurrection that Jesus offered again and again. Jesus met them where they began, and together they embarked upon a new beginning. So it is with us. Again and again, the sun rises, a new day dawns, Jesus goes ahead to lead us into a fresh new start.

God of Resurrection, we rejoice to awaken to the sunrise on Easter morning and sing your praise. Our hearts ache to hear the astounding good news that you continue to transform the former things into fresh visions. We lift to you the losses of this past year. Enter in to our grief with your resurrection power, massaging our wounds and beckoning us toward new possibilities.

We are grateful for the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. In his embodiment of your unconditional love, Jesus embraced the

oppressed. His healing touch brought wholeness to those who were shunned. May the presence of Christ give hope to people of color experiencing racism; to the unsheltered; to the hungry and hopeless. Inspire the Body of Christ on earth today to reach out in compassion and kindness. In the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., guide us to act nonviolently on behalf of human dignity for all.

We pray for all living with health challenges. May they find comfort and trust in Christ's healing touch. Gently hold those who are making the passage to life eternal with you. Strengthen those who care for loved ones. Encourage all overwhelmed by despair and concern for the future. Brighten their outlook with the promise that You abide with us always.

May we seize the potential of reopening to experiment, try new ways, and live into wholesome community that respects the well-being of all. Broaden our perspective to consider the needs of all.

Grow our faith in you, O God, and in the promise that in the end is our beginning, for you are always making all things new. In the name of the Christ of faith, we pray. Amen.

Rev. Lori Sawdon  
First United Methodist Church, Santa Rosa, CA