

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN

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Easter

“Life”

Mark 16:1-8

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For years, I’ve wanted Dr. Ben Witherington to come to Second Presbyterian to speak. He is a highly celebrated New Testament scholar who writes and speaks with eloquence and clarity. In a chance conversation I had with church member Carol Widmeyer, I learned that Ben is a close friend of hers. So, seeing a string I could pull, I pulled it. I asked Carol if she could pave the way for me to invite Ben. She paved, I invited, and Ben is now scheduled to be our 2022 Edmunds lecturer.

With Easter before me, I went to Ben’s commentary on Mark to see what he had to say about Mark’s resurrection account. I found out that Ben agrees with the majority opinion that the last verses of Mark’s Gospel, beginning with verse 9, were added to the original Gospel. The verses are, to use Ben’s words, “a patchwork quilt of material taken from Matthew, Acts and other sources.”¹

However, where Ben does *not* agree with the majority is in his opinion that we don’t we have Mark’s original ending. He thinks the ending is lost. He has a theory of how it happened. He thinks that the end of the scroll of the original Gospel wore off. It happens all the time with scrolls, and we have plenty of ancient scrolls to prove it. When a scroll gets rolled and unrolled constantly, it is the beginning and end that take the most abuse.

Ben thinks this is what happened to Mark’s Gospel and that is why it ends so abruptly. Listen to Mark’s account of the resurrection and listen for its abrupt ending.

¹ Witherington, Ben, *The Gospel of Mark; A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, 2001, p. 416.



When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ 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.

Then what?

We know the news spread. The early church sprang to life based on accounts by these women and early disciples. Ben says the whole Gospel has set us up for this moment, when the women get past the shock of the resurrection and spread news that it is truth, that Jesus is risen from the dead.

First of all, these women were models of faith throughout the Gospel.

Then, they were the only ones to show any courage and faithfulness through the trial and crucifixion. These very women are named as those who did not run away but were actually there at the cross, holding vigil with Jesus while he died.

And now, though Jesus is dead and their hopes are crushed,
they courageously come to the grave to anoint his body.

The grave is really a cave with its opening
covered by a stone that can be rolled away.

When they get there, they find the stone has been rolled away.

That would scare me, but it evidently doesn't scare them.

They go inside.

A young man is inside, dressed in white. An angel?

Now they are alarmed, but still they do not run.

The young man speaks and tells 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. ⁷ 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.”

Now *that* is what terrorizes them.

The greatest news that they possibly could hear—
the news that death does not have the final word on Jesus' life—
that is what causes them to flee and not tell anyone.



But the word of the resurrection does get out. The disciples and others do meet up with Jesus and have the interactions that ignite the beginning of the whole church movement. Someone learned about what happened with these women because whoever wrote the Gospel of Mark is telling us. So why does Mark not tell us?

As I told you before, Ben says he did, but it is now lost. He says that we have Part A of a powerful encounter with holiness, and scripture has prepared us to listen for Part B. Here are just a few examples of other encounters with holiness.

Part A:

Moses is terrified when God speaks to him at the burning bush.

Part B:

Moses eventually finds his voice and does what God tells him to do, “Go to Egypt and tell the Pharaoh to ‘let my people go.’”

Part A:

Isaiah is terrified when he goes to the Temple to worship and encounters God filling the place with his presence. He begs God to leave him be.

Part B:

Isaiah eventually finds his voice and does what God tells him to do; go to God’s people and tell them the devastating news that Judah will fall, and they will be sent into Exile.

Part A:

Simon, Andrew, and John are terrified when, after fishing all night and catching nothing, they pull in a huge haul of fish just because Jesus told them to do so. Simon begs Jesus to go away.

Part B:

Those three eventually find their voice, leave their nets behind, and follow Jesus so as to be fishers of other followers.

Part A:

Now women go to a tomb to anoint a body for burial and are terrified when they find it empty and an angel inside calls them to go and tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee. They are terrified at first and flee, telling no one.

Part B:

And then...

It is not there.

The ending that Mark was leading us to his entire Gospel is not there. We are missing the moment that follows when the women leave behind their fear and find their voice in spreading the news that they had to find the courage to believe.



I am not yet sure I agree with Witherington, but he is starting to change my mind. He might be right, and I may have to reconsider those other three Easter sermons on this passage that I have preached at this church.

If he is right, I sure would like to know what Mark wrote and not get stuck.

But you know what? We have three other Gospels—Matthew, Luke, and John—that tell us the stories of the encounters Jesus has with these women and the disciples. Maybe we've been done a favor. Maybe fate or providence has done us a favor by leaving us stuck here at the end of Mark's Gospel because that is where we get stuck in life—stuck between fear pulling us back and hope pulling us forward. For it is true, isn't it? When the door is wide open to life with God, we are often afraid to walk through it.

The Shawshank Redemption might be the most over-used movie for sermon illustrations in the last quarter century. I even mentioned the movie in an earlier sermon this year. I can't help but return to it, though, because it illustrates that moment of fear at the boundary line between death and new life. I want you to consider a moment that two prisoners have when they stand between the pull of fear and the pull of hope.

Brooks has served time for 50 years. He is about to be released, and we see him standing at the prison gates, now finally opened for him to leave. The camera angle is from within the prison as if there is a gravitational pull for him to come back into the prison life he is now afraid to leave. We later learn that Brooks cannot cope with the gift of a new life and chooses the grave. In that half century of incarceration, he had accepted the reality of a caged life; he had given up hope that he could ever live a life beyond those walls.

Then at the end of the movie, we see the moment repeated. Red has served for 40 years and he is standing at the same spot, the prison gates finally open for him to leave. Only this time, the camera angle is from outside the prison as if there is a gravitational pull of hope that will pull him away from prison into a life lived in an entirely different way.

That is where the women find themselves in our passage. They are at the open gate between death and life and, at first, the gravitational force of fear is too much. They are afraid to even hope it can be true.

Maybe you know how that can be?

- To be afraid to be healthy because it would mean giving up both pleasures and excuses.
- To be afraid of a deeper bond with a loved one because it would mean you being more vulnerable.
- To be afraid of being empathetic toward others you oppose or would like to dismiss because then you would be responsible for appreciating their point of view.
- To be afraid of helping others because it would mean surrendering something of yourself and what you own.
- To be afraid of faith itself, because it would rob you of reasons to put yourself first.

This is the Part A of facing the open grave. The pause that Mark gives us with his abrupt ending forces us to consider why we are so afraid.



And then the pause invites us to wonder what would happen if we did as we were told by the voice from the burning bush, the presence in the temple, from the shore and from the grave. Would it be something like:

- The family that gets past hesitation and embraces a community of faith as a way to grow in their love of God.
- The couple that gets past anger and gives up on the competitive game of exchanging gifts of revenge and commits again to the hard sacrifices of love and reconciliation that will not only keep their marriage together but allow it to thrive.
- The mother and child who get past their fear of the abuser and, with nothing but hope, enter the Turning Point Ministry to begin a new life.
- The one who gets past her fear of the challenges of a new job and location and begins the work that will better use her gifts and make real, positive impact in the world.
- The one who overcomes fear of condemnation and rejection and finds his voice, speaking out for the concerns and causes of God's realm.

I can almost hear someone objecting that these life decisions are not what Easter is about. They would point to the moment of death and the promise of the resurrection that takes us from this life to an eternal life with God. And yes, Hallelujah, that is the hope and promise what we celebrate today. It is the hope that tugs at us. Though there seems to be a line we cannot see past, like the horizon line where the sky meets the land or sea, the good news of Easter is that there is life beyond that horizon.

But the moments I describe don't replace that moment of life beyond death, but actually reflect it. The stranger does not say to the women, "Grab hold of my robe and you'll ascend with me to heaven where you will again see Jesus." He says, "Go home. Go back to where it all began for you and the first disciples. Go to Galilee where the adventure of following Jesus first began. Go back to where you live your everyday lives and you will find the risen Jesus and your life of resurrection will be lived with him."

Mark Wheatley says,

"Going to Galilee is walking through the door. It's going home, to those places closest to our hearts, places where we are most vulnerable, most unimpressive, most powerless, and most afraid. It opens us to the possibility that the risen Lord Jesus has already gone there."²

Mark's passage reminds us that death is not the only thing we are afraid of. Sometimes we are afraid of resurrection life with its demands for love, commitment, risk, community, compassion, justice, and reconciliation. But Jesus has beaten us home. We are not alone... not now, not at the grave, and not beyond.

² April 3, 2018, <https://livingchurch.org/covenant/2018/04/03/fear-at-the-resurrection/>

