

Christ is Risen! So What?

The ending of Mark's Gospel is one of the strangest, most perplexing bits of writing in the New Testament. Readers have worried over it for some 1900 years. Sometime early in the history of its use by the Church, well-meaning editors tried to give it what they considered more appropriate endings but neither the so-called "shorter ending" nor the even more controversial "longer ending" actually appear in the most ancient manuscripts of the book. Throughout this telling of the Good News of Jesus Christ, Mark has employed a headlong, abrupt style but the ending is abrupt even for him. There is no ascension, no post-resurrection teaching for the disciples from Jesus, not even an appearance of the Risen Lord. There is only the announcement of his resurrection by a mysterious figure and confusion from the women who hear it. In fact, even our scholastically careful New Revised Standard Version smoothes out some of the jarring nature of Mark's ending. In that translation, the last verse, as we just heard reads, "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." But in fact, the last clause in Greek reads, "they were afraid for..." ending mid-sentence as if the Evangelist had suddenly been compelled to abandon his work. Some of you, like me, may be reminded of the film "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" in which the wall carvings the knights are reading to discover the hiding place of the grail end in the death rattle of the carver: "He who is valiant and pure of spirit may find the holy grail in the Castle of Aaaauggghhh..." But even if we accept the judgment of the translators that the preposition can rightly be flipped ahead of the verb, we still have an ending that settles nothing, rather like another famous piece of filmed fiction, the last episode of "The Sopranos."

So what are we to make of this curious end to the shortest of the Gospels? We are left with the bare facts of the matter. Jesus was most certainly dead. This was attested by the reliable witness of the centurion in charge of the execution given to the man who represented the power of the Senate and People of Rome in that province, Governor Pontius Pilate. Jesus had been buried in that tomb, witnessed by a member of the Sanhedrin and by two of the women who have now found the body gone. The women are told by "a young man, dressed in a white robe," that Jesus has been raised and will meet them in Galilee; "there you will see him, just as he told you." The news is joyful but also terrifying; the women are awestruck, for they know they have encountered the work of Almighty God.

This is the first "so what" that I wish to address this morning. If we accept, as those amazed women did, as millions of Christians have in the two millennia since, that Jesus of Nazareth was raised from the dead on that morning of the first day of the week so long ago, then we must surely also accept that it was God, Creator and Sustainer of All, that did this thing. And if God did this for Jesus, then certain other things are true, for God, in raising Jesus, has given God's seal of approval to the life and work and teachings of Jesus. What Jesus said and what Jesus did have been validated, proven as true, by the God of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebekah, of Jacob and Leah and Rachel. When we say, "Christ is Risen! Alleluia!," we are committing ourselves to his teachings, worshipping his person, claiming his promises for ourselves and accepting the calling which he extends to us.

Now for me to fully unpack all of those ideas would take an exegesis of both Old and New Testament and many, many hours and I'll bet that most of us here today have some hopes of roasts and good spring vegetables to follow up from this morning's hard boiled eggs and pancakes with syrup and covertly eaten chocolate bunnies. And, as it says in the Gospel

Christ is Risen! So What?

according to Lyle Lovett, “God knows if a preacher preaches long enough, even he’ll get hungry too.” So, if you don’t mind, I’ll just skim the surface of the Good News this morning and we can come back here again next week and hear some more. Amen?

First, in raising Jesus from the dead, God has validated what Jesus taught. As I think of the teachings of Jesus and the condition of our world, one of his lessons that seems most relevant is that we must expand our concept of who we call neighbor. On Thursday, as we looked at Jesus’ commandment to his disciples that they love one another, I reminded those of you who were here that this commandment was a reinterpretation of part of God’s law given to Moses, Leviticus 19:18, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus touches on this commandment in each of the Gospels and in the narrative of Luke, it is the occasion for his telling the parable of the Good Samaritan. Part of the truth that Jesus reveals in that story is that we must be ready to accept and to extend the love we are required to share with neighbors even to members of the most despised groups we may encounter, whether those individuals be different from us in religion, national origin, skin tone, sexual orientation, politics or in any way. We must be ready to love even Yankee fans or basketball carpetbaggers from Oklahoma. Even these are children of God and our neighbors. Jesus says we must love even our enemies, that we must bless those who curse us, returning good for evil. In this way, we reflect the nature of our Father in Heaven, who loves us even when we are in rebellion, even when we are responsible for causing pain in others. Jesus teaches us to love because we are loved, because we are all Children of the Father, the beloved of God who knows us even to the hairs on our heads. Jesus teaches us to love and not to judge, for only God may judge and God Himself stands ready to forgive and to redeem any who will allow grace into their lives. In this world of wrath and division, Jesus teaches peace and fellowship and by raising Jesus, God shows that this teaching reflects the heart of God.

By raising Jesus on the first Easter morning, God says to us, “the life of this man was fully and uniquely worthy. This life more than any other is the life humankind was created for. This is what it means to be made in the image of God.” As we look back on the life of Jesus from the vantage point of the Resurrection, we embrace the truth that Jesus and the Father were one, that in Jesus, we beheld the glory of the only begotten of the Father, the Word made flesh. And because in Jesus we recognize the creative power of God made incarnate, we see again just how deeply God is invested in God’s creation, just how much God loves us to cause God to enter into human life as an extraordinarily ordinary man, who was tempted as we are, who loved and laughed and wept and suffered and died. Because, in the light of the Resurrection, we see that unity between Father and Son, we recognize God in the picture of Jesus kneeling at his friend’s feet to wash them, taking on the work of the lowest among them to show his (and his Father’s) love and honor for them. Because Jesus was raised from death by God, Jesus who was rejected, despised by those he came to save, Jesus who bore the signs of God’s curse by being hanged on a tree, we see that there is no one who can fall so far in the eyes of society that they are outside of the love and grace of God. If even this man, this poor carpenter, this humiliated victim, can be raised to the right hand of God, then what cannot God do for us? Jesus is our proof that nothing can separate us from the love of God. By showing how completely the powers of First Century Palestine misunderstood Jesus, by showing the blindness of both Rome and Jerusalem, both temporal power and religious power, God empowers us to question any authority that differs from God’s Word. Charles Campbell writes, “If stones are rolled away without human effort, if Jesus really is raised from the dead, what other human assumptions about wisdom and folly,

Christ is Risen! So What?

power and weakness, will likewise be proved false? If the very power of death has been overcome, what other kinds of power and domination will likewise be overthrown?" And by raising Jesus, God shows him as Messiah, the Promised One whose reign will know no end, reassuring us that not only our present but also our future are in the hands of this one who loves us enough to die for us.

In other words, by raising Jesus from the dead, God is validating the promises of Jesus, letting us know beyond doubt that we can trust in what Jesus has said. The word to the women at the tomb is "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." And although Mark does not continue the story, we know from other sources that indeed they found the Risen Lord back in their old familiar places, waiting for them on the shore with breakfast when they went fishing. It is the same way we find Jesus now, more often than not. We find Jesus in the day-to-day workings of our lives, when we watch for him. We find him in the embrace of a loved one and in a friend's kind word. We find him in the beauty of creation. We find him in the satisfaction of a hard job well done. He will whisper to us when we are lonely, he will stand with us when we are frightened or sad. He is in this place where we come together to worship; he is in our homes where dishes wait to be done; he is in our workplaces and in our cars. He goes before us and nothing that we can feel, love, anger, abandonment, joy or sorrow, is unknown to him. Dr. Cynthia Campbell, President of McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, writes, "The risen Christ was not at the tomb but going ahead of his friends. And that's where we see him today: out ahead of us. Where charity and love prevail over injustice and violence; where compassion and hope replace cynicism and despair; where peace and love take root in lives that are empty and lost; where human beings know joy and justice, dignity and delight: there is the risen Christ, beckoning to us." And while we see Jesus in the places where God is changing lives, I believe we also see Jesus and hear him calling to us in the places where lives wait to be changed. John Steinbeck wrote it of his "Grapes of Wrath" protagonist, Tom Joad, but I think it's equally true of Jesus: "I'll be all around in the dark - I'll be everywhere. Wherever you can look - wherever there's a fight, so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever there's a cop beatin' up a guy, I'll be there. I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad. I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready, and when the people are eatin' the stuff they raise and livin' in the houses they build - I'll be there, too." It is like the promise of God through the prophet Micah, "They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. Every man will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, and no one will make them afraid, for the LORD Almighty has spoken." The resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday is our reminder that God is with us, wherever we are and whatever we are experiencing. And the resurrection of Jesus serves as the inauguration of the Kingdom of God, the first glimpse of the future of Shalom that awaits creation.

And now for the final "so what?" Because God raised up Jesus as the first fruits from the dead, he is the pattern for our lives, the template we were created to follow. When we give our lives over to Jesus, we die to our old sins and are raised to a new life in him. This is the truth to which Paul referred when he wrote to the Christians in Colossae, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Paul goes on to list the things of earth that are to have died with our

Christ is Risen! So What?

old lives: adultery and all unfaithfulness, evil desire, greed, idolatry, anger, malice, slander. But he spends more time pointing to the things that mark us along with Jesus as God's chosen ones, the ones who are set apart for God and beloved by God. These are the things that Paul says we are to set our minds on and it bears noting that the Greek phrase carries with it the tense that indicates continued action. We are to continually seek these things, to never fail to "...clothe (ourselves) with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." My brothers and sisters, we are called to live lives that reflect the life of the Risen One and we are called to share the Good News of his resurrection and the life it has brought us with everyone around us; to share that word of freedom by our words and our deeds.

"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, they were afraid for..." Afraid for what? We do not know. The Gospel according to Mark has no ending. Perhaps that is just as the author intended it for after all his writing starts with, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." The work of Jesus has begun but it is not yet finished. He is still at work in our lives, still at work working through us who are now the Body of Christ continuing the work of bringing the Kingdom into fruition. Charles Campbell puts it this way: "Jesus is loose in the world. He is not in our present as a lifeless corpse or in our past as a distant memory. Rather, he goes ahead of us into the future to meet us there and claim us, not on our terms, but on his. We can no longer deal with Jesus as a dead body, safely buried in a tomb, but now we encounter him as a living reality. There is no escaping him, no containing him, no forgetting him." This is truly the Good News of Easter for all of us. Alleluia! Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!