

Not The End

Mark 16:1-8

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When is *an* ending not *the* end?

The actual ending of Mark is as abrupt as its beginning.

At least Matthew and Luke both have the good sense to begin their versions with the birth story of Jesus and to give us a little context. They introduce us to the major actors in the drama and tell us a little family background. In other words, they set the stage for what we're about to witness in the life and ministry of Jesus.

And at the end, they both give us something to stand on after the women discover the empty tomb. In Matthew, the disciples find Jesus on a mountain in Galilee and receive "The Great Commission." And in Luke, believers encounter the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. In other words, the disciples *see* the risen Jesus. They talk to him. They walk with him. They even share a meal with him.

But not Mark. Mark opens not with "little baby" Jesus, but with "grown-up" Jesus. No birth story. No getting lost at the temple. Just fully-grown Jesus as he enters his public ministry. And here at the close, it ends with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome fleeing the tomb, "for terror and amazement seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mk. 16:8).

Now, your Bible might have more after verse 8 in Mark, but if its publisher is being honest with you at all, it has put those sections in brackets and called them the "shorter" and the "longer" endings. That's because, they were much added later by well-meaning Christians who did not like Mark's ending – so they added their own.

And who can blame them? No appearance of Jesus. No touching the nail-scarred hands. No Great Commission. Just an empty tomb, fear, and a whole lot of unanswered questions.

In fact, the last word of verse eight in the original Greek is the word, "for," and it sits there as the very last word as if the writer of Mark never finished the sentence, as if Mark never finished writing the very last paragraph of the gospel. It's almost as if he intentionally left it undone, so that it might be left up to you to finish the story of Jesus with how you live your own.

When is *an* ending not *the* end?

Maybe when it involves the hope that the Church will live the resurrection story long after the book has been finished.

The story as Mark tells it, is elusive, at best.

The women wake early in the morning to go prepare the body with spices for a proper burial. It's a final act of service for the rabbi they followed and for the man they loved. As they walk to the tomb they discuss among themselves how in the world they will get the stone rolled away for the entrance, but when they looked up, it had already been moved.

They step inside the tomb and are startled to find a young man dressed in white. He says, "Don't be alarmed; you're looking for Jesus. But he is risen; he's not here. See? That's the very spot they laid him. Now, go tell the disciples he is going ahead of you to Galilee."

Despite the young man's warning to not be startled, the women are still... well, startled... and afraid... and amazed... but mostly afraid. So they flee the tomb and say nothing to anyone... And that's how Mark's gospel ends — with the Marys and Salome fleeing in fear.

They didn't actually see the resurrection take place, didn't actually see Jesus at all, didn't touch him — touch his nail-scarred hands and feet or where they spear entered his side. They didn't share a meal with him, cook fish with him, break bread with him. We don't even get a report from Mark about if the disciples actually did run into Jesus in Galilee like they guy in the tomb had said.

Like I said, in Mark's gospel, the story is elusive. Just when we think we have our hands on him — have a sure grip on him, a sure understanding of him — Jesus slips through our fingers again and again. And maybe that's what Mark wants us to get.

Now would it surprise to hear that I want to tell you a fishing story to drive this point home? It wouldn't be a high holy day at FBC if I didn't tell a fishing story.

Last summer, I was fishing up in Wyoming with my close friend, Kyle. He's the kind of guy who just attracts people. He's good at everything he does, and some how it inspires you to get better at it, too.

On that particular day, we had a third fisherman in the boat, a retired dentist named Darryl. Darryl is kind of a crusty, old grouch. He worked just long enough as a dentist to afford his fishing adventures in retirement — which are numerous. He's fished in Kamchatka, Cuba, Belize, South America, all over the United States, and does an annual trip to Alaska. He's in a boat on a river over 200 days a year, and is always chasing that elusive "catch of a lifetime."

In other words, he's everything Kyle and I aspire to be!

On this particular day, we were fishing a part of the river that is known for BIG trout, or what we refer to as “slabs.”

The morning had been fairly productive, but none of us had had anything too big on yet. Then, as the boat dropped down through some faster moving water on a side channel, Darryl cast his flies back up behind the boat into a soft eddy... and wham! A fish hit so hard, that we thought he'd just caught a rubber tire or a log floating below the surface. In fact, *Darryl* thought that he'd caught a log for a full minute or so – until the “log” started swimming back up stream.

Kyle positioned the boat to try and help Darryl catch this fish. I stood up to see if I could spot the thing, and there it was – the biggest trout I have ever seen. I apparently said that out loud, too, because Kyle was suddenly much more motivated to get Darryl in a spot where we could land this thing. Darryl played the fish, his fly rod nearly bent in half, and I grabbed the net so we could net this thing as soon as it got close enough to the boat.

Darryl worked this giant brown trout right up to the edge of the boat and lifted up to pull this trout to the surface. I stabbed the net underneath it and lifted it up just out of the water. We all let out a collective gasp as we realized that the fish was so big that it filled the net with both its head poking out one side and its tail poking out the other. And just as I was about to try and lift it into the boat, that giant trout arched its back and flipped itself out of the net, popped off of the fly, and splashed back into the water.

The biggest trout I've ever seen, and I don't even have a photo to prove to you that I saw it... that we caught it... that we even got it in the net. All I have is a story about “the one that got away.”

Now – which do you think was the more likely outcome of that experience for me, Kyle, and Darryl?

Do you think that we decided that seeing that one giant trout is enough and we're handing up our gear and retiring from fishing?

Or do you think that seeing that one giant trout – even though it was the one that got away – has only inspired us to fish even more?

Just telling that story makes me want to go fish that section of river again right now.

And *that* is how Mark's version of the Easter story works, too. It's not meant to make us want to go out and prove the veracity of the resurrection story – because you can't. It will always elude you.

It's meant to make us want to go out and *live* the resurrection. It's meant to make you want to finish the story with how you live your life.

The great spiritual teacher of the Christian faith, Catherine of Siena, once said, "Every step of the way to heaven is heaven."

Her point wasn't about the final destination, but about *the journey*. And so Mark leaves the ball in our court. We must decide with our lives how the story should come out.

You see, the resurrection is not the end. It's just the beginning — because it is an invitation to let every step of the way to heaven be heaven.

Happy Easter, First Baptist Family!

Amen.