

“When the End is Not the End”

Mark 16: 1-8

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A Sermon Preached by Reverend Debbie S. Osterhoudt

I was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. So, I am a Southern girl. And as a Southern girl and a native Atlantan, Margaret Mitchell’s epic story of the south, “Gone with the Wind,” was as familiar to me as much of my family history. As a teenager, I probably read the thick tome maybe 3 or 4 times, cover to cover. And I have viewed the movie, starring Vivian Leigh and Clark Gable, at least 2 dozen times. And the end of the story always leaves me with the sensation that the end is really not the end. And the conclusion to the story is always a little unsettling or surprising. Because, as you may remember, Rhett Butler finally walks out on Scarlett O’Hara - after they have journeyed together through the violence of the Civil War, the burning of Atlanta and the poverty of Reconstruction. And Scarlett’s last lines in response to Rhett’s departure are: “I won’t think about this today; I will worry about it tomorrow.” (Or words to that effect.) The reader is left asking: “Well, what happens tomorrow? What will Scarlett do? Will Rhett return?” The end is really not the end.

The conclusion to Mark’s gospel is also a surprise ending of major proportions. Most of us are so familiar with the story that its ending has lost that surprise. The

account of the resurrection of Jesus in Mark's gospel is surprisingly short and abrupt. It lacks the intriguing details or reassuring discourses the other Gospels use to clarify the nature of the resurrection. In this record of what is the greatest moment for Christian faith, there is no theological elaboration or liturgical flourish. It is a report of the discovery of an empty tomb. And the three women who have seen the empty tomb and encountered the "young man dressed in a white robe" leave in terror and amazement. And they did not become heralds of the risen Lord - at least not as reported by Mark. "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The end simply does not seem to be the end. Early readers were aware of the unsettling conclusion of Mark's account of the resurrection and so they quickly concocted two endings to remedy the situation. However, most Biblical scholars today believe that Mark intended to conclude his gospel at verse 8.

So, let's look closely at Mark's account of the risen Lord. My hope is that this story will become so familiar, so integrated with who we are, that it will shape how we perceive and respond to the world in our daily lives.

There are basically three scenes to Mark's resurrection story.

Scene One: The principal characters are three women - the faithful disciples who have NOT run away and the same disciples who witnessed the agony of the crucifixion. They also stood close by and watched as Jesus' bruised, bloody and lifeless body was taken off the cross and laid in a tomb (actually a cave or sorts), ready for burial. On the one hand their witness assures the continuity of the risen Lord with the crucified Jesus.

On the other hand, by bringing spices to anoint Jesus' dead body, these women seek to perform one last service to him.

The report of their arrival at the tomb that Sunday morning (very early on the first day of the week) is dominated by their concern about the stone. "Who will roll away the stone?" Their question indicates that they are looking for some sort of human support or help. A practical question which assumes that their world exists just as they experience it or perceive it. Jesus is dead. A stone blocks their way to his body. Who will roll away the stone?

But the Easter story is God's great re-writing of all human history. The world is not always as we human beings perceive it or even experience it. The women discover, to their utter amazement, that the stone has been rolled back. Not by human efforts, but by the power of God. And so, they enter the tomb.

Scene Two: Upon entering the tomb the women encounter a "young man" dressed in a white robe. He speaks what is the heart of Mark's gospel: "He is risen, he is not here." The message brings a dramatic reversal to the tragic narrative which had seemed to end in the abandonment and death of the Son of God. Looking among the dead for the one who was crucified, the women are assured that they are looking in the wrong place. "The place where they laid him" is empty. All efforts to possess Jesus and contain him is futile. To see Jesus, the women and the disciples must look ahead. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you." The falling away of the disciples and the denial of Peter are not the end

of God's plans for them. In this command of the angel to the women lies the promise of forgiveness and restitution, of renewed call and a fresh start for disciples chastened by failure and empowered by the resurrection.

In other words, God is on the loose and on the move. Death will not contain the life-giving Spirit of the living God. Stones placed in front of caves will not prevent God from moving in. The world is not as we perceive it for the world belongs to God. And with God, nothing, absolutely nothing is impossible. And what God wills for creation is life and joy and community and all of our attempts to deny, destroy, control God's power for life are futile. Who will roll back the stone? Not any human force. But God will, and does, bring new life out of death.

Scene Three: The women are obviously terrified. Their perception of reality has been turned on its head. They are so terrified, they cannot even speak. Understandable. Now there is a healthy kind of fear and an unhealthy kind of fear. The unhealthy kind of fear, or faintheartedness, keeps us from using our gifts, taking needed risks, and moving ahead into the future. We live, in essence, as functional atheists, excessively worrying or obsessing over what might be wrong or could happen in our world and our lives. A healthy kind of fear has a protective function in the face of real threat. It motivates us to act, propelling or nudging us forward.

A story retold but the source is unknown: One day I was standing on a road. This road is known by many names: Life, Growth, Achievement, Faith, Happiness...I was just standing there, looking at something on the road up ahead. The thing I saw was a huge,

mean-looking bull. And this bull was blocking my path. I knew that to keep moving ahead I was going to have to get past that bull. It scared me just to think about it. For a long, long time I stood still, looking at the bull, hoping and praying it would somehow move from my path so I could continue along the road. However, nothing changed, except I heard a distant voice whisper, “Do whatever it is you have to do in order to continue along the journey.”

That was the day I decided to take a deep breath, gather all the strength I could muster, and take the bull by the horns. I knew that in so doing I would have to accept whatever consequences followed - good, bad, or indifferent. Having decided to be completely responsible for whatever happened to me, I set aside my doubts and fears and marched right up to that bull, grabbed those horns, and said, “All right, bull. You have got to get out of my way or fight with me - which will it be?”

Well, you will never believe what happened next! That crazy bull sat down right on the road, sighed and spoke to me. “What took you so long getting here?” he asked. “I have been standing here waiting to offer you a ride. Hop up on my back and show me where it is you want to go.” What was thought to be an insurmountable problem turned out to be a great blessing instead. All I needed was the courage to discover the blessing.

Fear can propel us forward or paralyze us.

It becomes apparent that the terror these women experience moves them forward. Obviously for the story of the resurrection to become known, they eventually did as the

angel instructed - went to Galilee and shared their story with the disciples. But Mark does not tell us that directly. We are left hanging with the fear and possibility of new life breaking through stones which close off tombs and death being overcome by resurrection. And we are not sure whether we want to move forward or remain at the empty tomb, fear overwhelming us - Scarlett seems to have been in the same place. Maybe the fear is intended to move you and I forward. Do we really want new life enough to grasp that possibility?

Jesus goes ahead of us to Galilee, just as he went ahead of the women. Easter morning propels us out of the graveyard toward Galilee where he promises to meet us. We too are filled with fear, amazement, and questions, and are called to follow, nevertheless.

Frederick Buechner once wrote: "We want to know who Jesus is before we follow him, and that is understandable enough except that the truth of the matter is that it is only by first following him that we can begin to find out who he is."

The women approached the tomb thinking that the story had ended, and that it was all over between them and Jesus. To their surprise, and even to their great fear, they found that things were not over. Things were just beginning. The last word had yet to be spoken. And the last word was God's. The ending was not really the ending.