

First Presbyterian Church
Mark 16:1-8, “Surprise Ending”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 4/4/2021 -- Easter Sunday

Watching a movie with my wife Sonja is one of my favorite things to do in the whole world, but there’s one thing ... just one thing! ... that *does* drive me a little bit crazy.

You see, she’s read so many novels – the old ones, especially – that she knows the way stories go.

And she can usually work out the likely plot twists and the ending of a film before its even halfway done.

So if she’s not being careful,

she’ll just let me know when she’s figured something out, and then when it happens just that way I’m left going,

“What’s the deal? Can we not just wait until the *movie* tells us what happens?

It was supposed to be a surprise ending!”

The life of Jesus has a famous surprise ending – one that Jesus himself lets us in on along the way by predicting that he will die but rise again on the third day.

But Mark’s resurrection account reminds us that even those of us who are able to work out what’s going to happen in a story can be thrown off of our expectations from time to time.

In Mark, the surprise ending of Easter has a surprise ending all its own!

Our passage begins on Sunday morning, very early.

Jesus has been in the tomb since Friday afternoon or evening, three days by the ancient way of counting.

On Saturday night, after the Sabbath had ended at sunset,

three women went to purchase spices used in preparing a body for burial. They were Mary Magdalene

(who supported Jesus’ ministry financially in the early days),

Mary the mother of James and Joses

(which sounds an awful lot like “Jesus” leading some to think this is the mother of our Lord)

and Salome (who we don’t know much about.)

These three were also noted for sticking it out through
the whole of Jesus' crucifixion after the male disciples had fled,
and now on Sunday morning they are seeking
to perform a labor of love—
they hope to wrap the decaying body of Jesus in traditional spices.

They wonder, "How are we going to get to Jesus' body?
Who will roll away the stone?"
But even so, they go. They take the next faithful step,
even though they can't see how their task
can be accomplished.

These three women demonstrate an understanding
of discipleship at a deeper level than the 12 disciples themselves.

And when they got there? The stone had been rolled away!
And there was a young man inside the tomb,
and based on what he says,
we have to assume he was an angel.

But this is not the dazzling angels we encounter in other parts of the Bible,
this messenger is a young man, wearing white,
seated in the righthand corner of a tomb complex hewn
out of a mountainside.

The young messenger gives them the good news:
"Don't be alarmed – Jesus is risen, he is not here!
Go tell the disciples that he'll meet you all in Galilee,
just as he promised."

Well—you don't have to be Sonja to figure out this one.
They weren't just going to kill him off – he's the main character!
You can't fool me with this kind of a plot twist.

Ah, but then Mark starts to throw in some genuine surprises:

The first thing that happens is the reaction of these women:
"Trembling and bewildered,
the women went out and fled from the tomb.
They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."

These incredible women of faith don't do what the angel says –
they keep silent about the news of Jesus' resurrection!

The second thing that happens *isn't even something that happens!*

Between verses 8 and 9,
most translations put up a road block.

The road block has a sign that says,

**“The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses
do not have Mark 16:9-20.”**

It's like a flashing yellow light at an intersection
that tells us, “Proceed at your own risk.”

It's almost like the Disneyland ride, “Pirates of the Caribbean”

where you go past the sign that says,
“Abandon all hope, ye who enter here.”

What in the world is this warning doing in my Bible?

The vast majority of scholars (even the ones who believe in the resurrection)
are in agreement that Mark didn't write verses 9-20.

They appear sometime in the early second century,
the language used is very different,
and the titles for Jesus are different
(he becomes “Lord Jesus”).

In all honesty, it's just not the ending Mark would have written.

Which means we're left with,

“They said nothing to anyone. They were afraid for...”
as the end of Mark's original story.

Now *that* is a true surprise ending.

What in Easter are we supposed to do with that?

What are we supposed to make of the reaction
of these faithful women who stuck by Jesus side?

These women, on their way to wrap a *dead body* in spices.

They had no preparation for a story like this.

Remember, they'd never heard an Easter sermon before.

They were prepared for grief and mourning in the aftermath of Jesus' death.
But they didn't know what to do, or how to act in a world
where the tomb of Jesus is empty.
They were left...trembling and bewildered.

So they ran away—and they didn't say anything to anyone.

They were afraid because the resurrection of Jesus
is more than a happy story with a tidy conclusion
that fits nicely into an encyclopedia entry.

These women were not just confronted
with the fact that *a human being* had been raised from the dead.
It was the fact that *this human being*,
the one who had been publicly proclaimed
as the Messiah, had been raised from the dead.

If the Messiah has been raised from the dead, there's a new King in town,
and they were to be this King's servants as opposed to Pilate's.

Because of who Jesus was, his resurrection asked them to respond
with *action* in a world that they were unfamiliar with—
the world of God's reality, the world of God's Kingdom come.

What I love about Mark's surprise ending is that it invites our stories
to become entwined with the story that God is telling.
The Bible is a book where we not only find *information*
about the resurrection,
but where we are called to live
in light of the resurrection.

News like that could leave anyone trembling and bewildered.

So how do we go beyond acknowledging the resurrection as a bit of trivia,
and actually move into *living* and *acting*
as those who are resurrection people?

How do we act in the world where Jesus the Messiah
has been raised from the dead?

If we live to protect ourselves for our own comfort,
we will never step out by faith into the world of the empty tomb.

Which is exactly why those women were afraid.

Was this young man lying to them? Was this a ruse?

Or was it true – in which case they would need to engage with
the same forces who had put Jesus
in that tomb to begin with.

And we who live by faith today must engage with those forces as well.

The resurrection is not just life changing, it's world changing.

It's a call to action as people with a new identity,
in a world with new rules, and we don't know exactly
how our task will be accomplished.

If you take all that seriously, it's a lot.

It's enough to make me go out from here trembling and bewildered.

In the resurrection, we are called to something disturbing:

The acceptance of our own death, if that is the will of God,
but it's death with a surprise ending.

We know by faith that our death will not be final.

So today, in spite of what the resurrection means,

let's not be afraid, let's not tremble,
let's not cling to things that will fade away.

Let's finish Mark's resurrection story our own way.

Let's open ourselves to a deep joy that comes from God's own heart.

Let's live today and the next day and all the days that are left
assured that whatever happens, we belong to God.