

April 1, 2018
Easter Sunday

“What Next?”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 10:34-43 ~ Mark 16:1-8

I had a doctor’s appointment not long ago. I got there early, but the doctor was running late. So, I had a long wait, even longer than usual. I almost always carry a book with me to pass the time, but I forgot that day, so I cast about the office and found a magazine that was several months old. I discovered a short story that looked interesting so I began to read. It was a page turner, a gripping story, not so short ... continued in the back pages ... but I was engrossed and the doctor wasn’t calling, so I read on. Nearing the end, I turned the page to read the thrilling climax ... and somebody had torn out the last page! Maybe it had an ad for weight loss supplements that they just had to try. But I was left hanging, wondering what came next ... and how the story would end.

The gospel of Mark ... the first gospel ever written ... leaves us hanging in the same way. After sixteen chapters of a gripping tale about the man from Nazareth who healed the sick ... and disputed with the religious leaders ... and was brutally crucified ... it literally ends ... almost in mid-sentence. O yes, there’s a dramatic announcement from a young man dressed in white ... that the Nazarene has been raised from the dead ... that he is going on ahead to Galilee where he will meet his disciples. The women are instructed to tell them so. But Mark says instead, “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*” (Mark 16:8). So, we are left hanging and wondering ... now what? What comes next? How does the story end? The Gospel of Mark is an unfinished tale.

Even the early church found this unsatisfying ... and decided the original ending must have been lost along the way ... maybe somebody tore out the last page to leave a note for the secretary ... or maybe left the original ending in the copy machine. Two longer endings for Mark appeared in later manuscripts ... with stories ... like the other gospels ... of the risen Christ appearing to the disciples and giving them marching orders to go out and start the church. But these new endings added to Mark were clearly compilations from the other gospels ... written by scribes who just weren’t satisfied with what they considered an unfinished gospel. How could you preach that fear filled message on Easter Sunday morning? It just wouldn’t do.

But is it possible that Mark intended his story of Jesus to end just that way ... with an announcement of resurrection but no appearances ... with awe and wonder but no clear confirmation that the news was true. It has all the feeling of one of those “more to come” news stories ... like an account that might have appeared in the Jerusalem Gazette on Monday morning, the day after. Some enterprising reporter decides to follow up on the big story from the Friday before ... finds that woman from Magdala he had met at the crucifixion ... promises not to quote her, questions her, pesters her, finally forces her to talk so he’ll just go away. The headline reads, “Women Find Tomb Empty. Mysterious Stranger Claims Jesus Raised” Sensational, but preposterous. The editor prints it because it’s a slow news day ... but buries it

on the back pages. Even Fox News declines to pick up the story because Caesar is hinting at some new invasion that day, and a wild rumor from this hysterical woman doesn't compete for air play.

The unfinished story is a common literary device that authors use to mess with your mind. Think of the classic story of "The Lady or the Tiger?" You're left to imagine the ending yourself, to consider the possibilities, to form your own conclusions. You worry and worry over it. The unfinished ending is a very effective trick in the writer's tool box. Besides, life is untidy like that. Most of our stories are left unfinished, without closure, no "happily ever after," no cleanly wrapped package all tied up with a bow. Maybe Mark is just a very clever author, realistic, in the modern sense of the word.

But surely, literary art is the last concern Mark has when he ends his gospel so abruptly. No, I think Mark may actually consider the story unfinished himself ... "to be completed" by our stories ... yours and mine. He wants us to walk with those women in grief and despair ... to recognize ourselves burdened by grief and wondering, "Who will roll away the stone? Who will roll away the stone from the tomb of our dead hopes ... where we keep returning to ask "why not?" and "what if?" Who will roll away the stone from the tomb of our dead dreams ... where we keep returning to remember the "good old days" that are gone for good? Who will roll away the stone from the tomb of our bitterness ... those bad memories we can never change ... but still can't get over so we keep going back to visit the body of grief that tortures our souls? Who will roll away the stone from the tomb of our dead set ideas, fixed judgments, and absolute certainties ... made rigid by the rigor mortis of our stubborn will? We get so stuck visiting the tombs of our past that we fail to see the future dawning before us ... let alone to move into it with courage and hope.

I think that Mark wants us to walk with these women to the tombs ... and feel their surprise when we find the stone has already been rolled back for us ... and the body is not there. He wants us to hear the announcement from the young man dressed in his Easter baptismal robe ... "He has been raised; he is not here. He is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there." He wants us to feel the excitement ... to open ourselves to the amazing possibility that God is not finished but is doing something wonderful and new ... so we are not finished ... that we have new tomorrows to anticipate ... filled with hope and rejoicing. Mark wants us to turn from what was ... to what will yet be ... by the hand of a good and loving God who has plans for us, O yes!

But Mark, who is so cynical throughout his gospel about the disciple's reactions to Jesus ... their resistance, their befuddlement, their hard-headedness and hard-heartedness ... already knows how we are likely to react. Like these women. What do they do when they are the very first to receive the good news ... the amazing news ... the best news anybody ever heard in all the history of humankind? "They went out and fled...; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Aren't those sad, sad words for this Easter morning? "... for they were afraid."

It turns his whole gospel into a tragedy, if you ask me. Mark pictures this ... that the greatest story ever told never gets told, because "they were afraid." The church ... the living body of Christ ... still loving God's world through local gatherings all around the world ... never even gets started, because "they were afraid." The hospitals built to heal the sick ... the soup kitchens set up to feed the hungry ... the homes raised up to care for orphans are never raised at all, because "they were afraid." The astounding acts of reconciliation ... the too long in coming and

certainly not completed ... yet still breakthroughs on slavery and race and civil rights for all God's children can never happen at all because "they were afraid." The calls for peace between warring factions ... the people who at least try to love their enemies and turn them into friends never have a chance because "they were afraid." The community which risks itself to demand that the voices of the poor, the sick, the despised and rejected, the students who demand saner gun laws ... be heard by the rich and powerful ... the leaders in the land ... because God loves the outcast, too, never even forms because "they were afraid." And the world just keeps on warring and hating and degrading down to violence as it always has because "they were afraid." I can't imagine an epitaph for any generation in the pages of history that could be much worse than this: "They didn't believe, they didn't risk, they didn't even try, because they were afraid."

Maybe Mark was cynical himself ... weary with the church of his generation ... just thirty years or so after Christ's resurrection had made all things possible ... all things new. Already they were bound up in doctrinal struggles and questionable compromises with their culture. Already they were living as if they were a people who had no hope and had not heard the good news. Maybe he was afraid that the church was going to fail the Lord who gave his life to love them ... and called them out of the darkness into life. Maybe he feared they might choose the tomb over the scary possibility that the Savior was indeed alive and going before them ... the Lord on the loose who might just pop up anywhere ... in any difficult situation and ask hard things of them ... like facing their demons and overcoming their fears ... forgiving and loving their enemies ... building bridges instead of walls ... or even something as simple as telling somebody else that Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. You read Mark and you realize: Jesus may be risen, but the women are still in the tomb! Can you imagine? Here we are dead and buried in a cold, dark cave. Jesus rolls away the stone and says, "I have risen from the dead and so can you. Rise and come out and follow me into a future beyond your wildest dreams!" And we say, "No thank you! We're fine here." Jesus says, "No, no, come on along. Your whole life waits ahead." "No, no, I'm fine here, thanks. Close the door please." Jesus pleads, "Won't you just give it a try? What have you got to lose? Look ... there's life and light out here." "Go away," we say. "Just go away. You've got the wrong person." Mark knew it was easier for some people ... because they are afraid ... to stay in their tombs and roll the big safe stone back into place ... than to follow a risen Savior into a new and unknown future of possibility and power.

Therefore, Mark wrote his gospel as a tragedy ... and ended it with a picture that poses a question for the church down through the ages right up to today ... will we trust ourselves to this risen Christ ... or follow our fears? Will we tell the good news to all people ... shout it out from the roof-tops ... call others to join us in it ... and move with courage to meet the risen Christ waiting for us in the Galilee of our tomorrow ... or will we keep mum ... play it safe ... fly below the radar ... and ignore the gift of new life Christ offers us? When he appears to us in the locked-up rooms of our cynicism and despair ... will we rise to greet him and follow him into the light ... or will we just pretend not to see him and go on as before? I don't think Mark doubts that Christ is risen and calls us to follow. I think he doubts that we will rise and follow him. But Easter isn't real for us, is it, until we believe it ourselves ... until we meet the risen Christ in our own experience and follow him? Mark leaves us wondering because he is left wondering ... because God is left wondering what comes next ... how will we respond ... how will the story end?

Richard Lischer tells how one Easter evening he and his wife were driving through one of the poorest and most depressed areas in eastern North Carolina. They passed a doublewide trailer in the woods where someone had taken a piece of poster board, made a sign and planted it on the driveway down by the main road where everyone would see. With magic marker, in inelegant script, they had written, "The grave could not hold him." Writes Lischer,

"The sign read like roadside poetry at its best. It drew us and all passersby into an implicit conspiracy against the powers of death. 'Psst. The grave could not hold him. Pass it on.' Because he is risen and now ascended, the Lord rules everything. The Lord is now free to be everywhere."

Lischer is right. The good news of Easter is "The grave could not hold him." "The Lord *does* rule everything. The Lord is now free to be everywhere." But we are not free unless we can step out of our tombs. We are not free unless we can let go of what's past. We are not free unless we can move beyond our bitterness. We are not free until we can hear the announcement ... and rise to meet him in the glories he has waiting ahead. We are not free until we can trust and obey and bear witness with our own lives that Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen. Alleluia!

May we pray?

For all the ways we refuse to let you roll the stone away from our tombs of bitterness, cynicism, and despair; for all the ways we make idols of our past by nursing our wounds and fueling our prejudices and grieving our disappointments; for all the ways we refuse to rise by responding to your invitation to new life with "I can't." and "I won't," O Lord, forgive us. But roll back the stone and give us courage today. Lead us out of our stubborn hold on death, help us to let go of what was and take hold of what will be. Let us rise to meet you as you lead us into life abundant and eternal and free. Easter in us today, dear Lord, and let your story find happy fulfillment in our souls. Amen.