

Before the Last Amen

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Text: Mark 16:1-8

The only thing harder than figuring out how to begin a sermon is figuring out how to end it. The beginning of the sermon is supposed to capture the hearer's attention, maybe with an anecdote, or a provocative statement. But the ending of the sermon has a more ambitious goal. The ending of the sermon is supposed to tie things up in a neat little package; it's supposed to provide closure. It's what your English teacher told you about writing a good essay. First you tell your readers or your listeners what you're going to say, then you say it, and then you remind them of what you've said.

Many preachers, me included, wrap up their sermons with an "Amen." The word "amen" is, properly speaking, a prayer about a prayer. It means "so be it." It comes from a Semitic root that has to do with firmness and certainty. The literal translation of "amen" is something like the common slang expression, "for sure!" But while some of those "amens" that close my sermons are properly prayers, as when I've just exhorted people, and myself, to do something or to try be a new person in Christ, some of the amens, truth be told, function more like a period at the end of a long sentence. I'm telling the congregation, "There, I've said it; full stop; the end. Amen."

It probably won't surprise you to hear that many preachers, again including me, have trouble ending their sermons. There's always that one more thing to say, that sense that something remains unresolved, or inadequately expressed. Getting to that last "amen" can be real torture, for the preacher and yes, I know, sometimes for the congregation. But we're in good company. If we look at the Gospels as extended sermons on the meaning of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, we might reasonably conclude that Matthew, Luke and John, like any contemporary preacher, had trouble getting to the "amen." They just couldn't let things end with the resurrection. Matthew has the resurrected Christ meeting with his eleven remaining disciples on a mountaintop and delivering that famous great commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. . . And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Luke has him strolling with two of his followers on the road to Emmaus and then communing with them over a simple meal. And then he attaches a whole book, "The

Acts of the Apostles,” as a kind of extended epilogue to his biography of Jesus. And John’s narrative of the events following the resurrection includes two meetings with his frightened disciples in a darkened room in Jerusalem and then a morning meal with them on the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

But if Matthew, Luke and John have difficulty reaching closure in their accounts of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection, Mark seems to suffer from what the psychologists call “premature closure.” Listen again to how Mark’s gospel ends. After the two Marys and Salome discovered the empty tomb, after they encountered the young man in white who told them that Jesus wasn’t to be found in the tomb, that he had gone ahead of them to Galilee, after he told them to tell the other disciples what they had found, or rather what they hadn’t found in the tomb--and here’s where the quote picks up—“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.” And there, on that puzzling, almost eerie note, Mark’s gospel ends.

We’re not the only ones to be bothered by this abrupt, and, frankly, inconclusive conclusion. If you look at this passage in your pew Bibles, you’ll see that various scribes over the ages provided alternative endings, endings that were based either upon what they had read in the other gospels or what they had heard elsewhere. But in these versions the style is so different from the rest of the Gospel of Mark that most scholars have concluded that they were, indeed, later additions, made by people who felt that the original Mark ended unsatisfactorily, inconclusively. The original Mark leaves things hanging, stopping literally in mid-sentence, almost as if Mark had been dragged away from his desk before he could write the ending that he intended to write, or at least the one that we expect to read.

Easter Sunday cries out for finality. We’ve been on a long journey, for heaven’s sake. We’ve travelled with Jesus from the Mount of Transfiguration in Galilee to the Hill of the Skull in Jerusalem. We’ve done Ash Wednesday, Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Like the impatient kid in the backseat of the family car, we ask impatiently, “Are we there yet?” And Mark doesn’t really answer the question. He leaves us with a question mark.

For all of our desire for closure, for a satisfying ending, Easter isn’t a conclusion; it’s a promise. Even in those gospels that provide what seem to be endings, those endings are as open-ended as those famous last words from the book, *Gone with the Wind*. “After all, tomorrow is another day.” Matthew’s ending isn’t so much an ending as it is our marching orders, “Go into all the world.” Jesus will be with us to the end of the age, but the rest is up to us. Luke doesn’t so much provide an ending to his account of Jesus’ life as he begins his history of the life of the church, a history that is bound only by Luke’s own lifespan, so it’s a history that leaves us with Paul, the first missionary, imprisoned in Rome and the future of the church in doubt. And John’s story of Jesus ends not

with a big philosophical explanation, as we might have expected from his big philosophical beginning, “In the beginning was the Word,” but rather John ends with Jesus’ simple and straightforward command, “Follow me.”

Mark’s non-ending to his gospel is consistent with the way he started it, “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” There’s no birth story as in Matthew and Luke; no prologue as in John. After his opening promise, Mark simply tells us that Jesus proclaimed that good news first in Galilee. After his death and resurrection, the angel told those frightened women that the resurrected Christ had gone ahead of them to Galilee—again. Galilee is where the action is, not Jerusalem, the Holy City, the place where all the important political and religious people lived, the place that crucified Jesus. Galilee wasn’t at the center of power, it was out there in the sticks. Podunk. But Galilee is where Jesus went to proclaim the Good News because Galilee is where we are. The beginning of the Good News, in other words, is never paired with the end of the Good News, because Jesus’ resurrection tells us that there is no end to the grace of God. There is a beginning of the Good News, but there is no end.

So, if you want finality, if you want to reach the end of the journey, don’t look in this Gospel. Finality is what Jesus’ killers sought. They wanted to kill him. They wanted to kill the love that he embodied in the world. But the resurrection tells us that while you can try to kill love, you can’t keep it dead and buried. The resurrection isn’t an accomplished fact; it’s an ongoing process. The resurrection tells us that there are no real endings, only apparent ones. There are only horizons, for the horizon only marks the limit of our vision.

The risen Christ is a presence, not a memory. The risen Christ is that presence that animates, or should animate, a church that seeks to follow him to Galilee. I’ve seen that presence in the lives of people who, at some level at least, must have felt that they had reached an ending, but then discovered that they were merely experiencing premature closure, a brief sojourn in the tomb they’d made for themselves. I’ve seen it in the life of a young person who messed up, but was given a second chance and took that chance to rebuild her life. I’ve seen it in an old person who found himself in a nursing home where way too many of the residents think that they’ve reached the end and are just waiting to die. His mission, his new life, was to make people smile, and to find joy in the life they’ve been given. I’ve seen that presence in volunteers who share their dogs with people in nursing homes and children in the cancer ward. I’ve seen it in a Palestinian Christian grandmother who sat down and wrote a book about non-violence because she had experienced the pain of violence and the limits of retaliation, the limits of that which seeks the death, the end, of the other, and thereby brings the death of self.

Those women who came to the tomb, it turned out, didn’t follow up on their original intention; they didn’t keep the shocking news to themselves. They couldn’t. They couldn’t say that final “amen,” because the resurrected

Christ simply can't be confined in the tomb of our silence. You can kill him, but you can't keep him buried forever. He has gone ahead of us, to Galilee. As the Easter hymn proclaims,

Made like him, like him we rise. Alleluia!

Ours the cross, the grave, the skies. Alleluia!

Will we follow him? After all, it's our resurrection, too.

No "amen."