

**Mark 16: 1-8 "Finishing the Story" Rev. Janet Chapman 3/31/24**

The past couple months in the church office have been a bit of a challenge as our office manager's hard drive decided to retire unexpectedly. To say the least, we gave it no retirement benefits and sent it on its way. Getting the new system on board with the various software and network capabilities has demanded a great deal of patience and time, with the last of it, we hope, being completed this week. Because what else does a church office have to do during Holy Week? It's good that Julie was on top of it rather than me because I'm convinced her many years in the military have taught her immense patience. A story is told of another department in a large insurance company which was working on year-end financial reports when their computers went down. An emergency call was put out to the systems analyst. Busy with other troubleshooting, the analyst didn't appear until three hours later. Yet even then, several clerks cheered, "Yay, he's here! Our savior!" Without a word, the systems analyst turned around to leave. Panicked, the manager cried out in alarm, "Where are you going?" "I'm leaving," said the analyst with a smile. "I remember what they did to the last savior."

It is true- this week in the life of Jesus started with cheers for his arrival in Jerusalem, shouts of hallelujah and palm branches being waved in his honor, then it quickly went downhill. Hung on a cross to die, it appeared that Jesus' legacy had come to an end on Friday afternoon. Being placed in a sealed cave owned by Joseph of Arimathea until the Sabbath was over, our story this morning begins with three women on their way to anoint the body for permanent burial. It is just after sunrise and they wonder to themselves who will roll the stone away. But when they get there, they find that it has already been rolled away, and when they peek inside they see a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side. "Don't be alarmed," he says... probably an important thing to say at that moment... "You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He's not here. He's been raised from the dead. Look, here is the place where they laid him." Sure enough, there is the empty place where they laid him. He goes on, "Go and tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." But instead of going and

telling the disciples, these women went out and fled from the tomb, as it says, “overcome with terror and dread, they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.”

The end. Seriously, verse 8 is the end of the story in the Gospel of Mark which most Bibles take note of, adding that the rest of the text, verses 9-20 was added later on. The earliest Gospel to be written, the one in which Matthew and Luke relied upon for many of their stories, has no appearances of the Risen Christ within it. Unlike the magnificent resurrection stories found in Matthew, Luke and John, here you don’t see the Risen Christ interacting with any of the disciples. There’s not even an angel reflected, at least not by that name anyway. For that reason, Mark is never the first choice for Easter sermons, even though every three years, Mark’s stories are chosen as the primary Gospel texts for Sunday worship. This, in fact, is Mark’s year but scholars instead lean heavily on John, which was heard at this morning’s Sunrise service, because it is an amazing and satisfying story. You may remember it - it is the story where Mary finds the tomb empty, runs to get Peter and John who also see an empty tomb and the shroud of linen that wrapped Jesus’ body, and then they return home while Mary stays at the cave. Two angels appear and ask why Mary is crying then the Risen Christ appears and does the same. When Christ says her name, Mary Magdalene instantly recognizes him. Christ tells her to go and tell the good news to his brothers and she does just that. She proclaims, “I have seen the Lord,” and in doing so becomes the very first preacher of the gospel, a woman no less. It is the greatest story ever told. In contrast, in Mark’s version, a young man in a white robe tells the women at the tomb that Jesus isn’t there. He tells them that Jesus has been raised from the dead and they should go tell the others, but here in Mark, the women don’t do as they are told. There are overcome with terror and dread.

What kind of Easter story is that – maybe you can see why we don’t usually use this version of the story? It seems incomplete, unfinished, and so, through the years, well-meaning Christian writers have tried to finish Mark’s Gospel for him. In my Bible, there is something called the shorter ending of Mark, which just adds verse 9 and doesn’t even sound like anything else you read in Mark, which may be why some Bibles go so far as to completely leave it out. The verse says, “They promptly reported all of the young man’s instructions to

those who were with Peter. Afterward, through the work of his disciples, Jesus sent out, from the east to the west, the sacred and undying message of eternal salvation. Amen.” Then there is another verse 9 which starts off the longer version, which is found in most all Bibles. It looks as if it has been pieced together from all the other Gospel accounts. There is a section which resembles John’s resurrection story I shared earlier; then there is a section where Jesus appears to two disciples walking in the country, much like on the road to Emmaus from Luke; there’s a section where Jesus tells the disciples to go into all the world and proclaim the good news, which sounds very much like the end of Matthew’s Gospel and is called the Great Commission. And then there is a section in which he says something about picking up serpents and drinking poison that doesn’t sound any of the other gospels at all, it doesn’t even sound like Jesus. All of these come from some folks who just tried to help finish Mark’s Gospel for him because it seemed incomplete.

But why? Why would Mark end his Gospel with verse 8? Jim Somerville has a theory which he explains with the story of composer Franz Liszt. Franz’ clever wife used to get him out of bed in the morning by playing the first 7 notes of a scale on the downstairs piano: do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti,...And then she would go back to the kitchen to finish cooking breakfast. Poor Franz would try to ignore it but finally he would have to throw on his robe, stumble down the stairs, and play that last note: do! But at least by then, his breakfast would be ready. There is something in all of us – not just composers- that craves resolutions, completion, something that cannot abide the unfinished work. If you don’t believe it trying singing the first part of “Christ the Lord is Risen Toiday,” but leave off the last note of the Alleluia, like this “Christ the Lord is Risen today! A-a-a-le-lu-u... Do you see how you just have to put that final note on it, how you have to resolve the tension in some way. Maybe that is what Mark was doing. Could Mark be telling the story of Easter with the ending left off so that, just like Franz Liszt, Mark’s readers and hearers would have to tumble out of bed on Easter morning and finish the story? If these women in Mark’s story wouldn’t tell anyone Christ had risen, then somebody would have to do it, and that somebody (Mark might say with a wink) is you.

Mark spends most of his Gospel telling people to keep his identity a secret. It's not until Jesus and the three disciples go up on a mountain and Jesus whole demeanor changes, it is transfigures, it shines like a brilliant star as he stands talking to the two deceased patriarchs Moses and Elijah. The three disciples are seeing the impossible before their eyes and as they head down the mountain after that divine encounter, Jesus says "Don't tell anyone what you've seen until the Son of Man has risen from the dead." He could have gone on to say, "But when that day comes, tell everyone, tell the world who I am." Mark has Jesus saying again and again, "Don't tell anyone," but now that Christ is risen, there is not reason not to tell. So the young man says, "Go! Tell everybody!" But instead they fled from the tomb because terror had seized them and they said nothing to anybody. A-a-a-le-lu-u... It's strange, isn't it? When Jesus told the leper not to tell anyone that he had been cleansed, the leper went out and proclaimed it freely, spreading the word so effectively that Jesus could no longer go into a town openly, but had to stay out in the country. When Jesus healed the man who couldn't hear or speak, he told the crowd to keep it quiet, "but the more he ordered them to do so, the more they proclaimed it with astonishment saying, 'He has done everything well!'" So, when Jesus healed people and told them to say nothing, they said everything, but when these women were asked to tell everything, they said nothing. Which means that if this story is going to be resolved, if it's ever going to have a happy ending, it will be up to us, to you and I to finish the story. So, sing it with me: "Christ the Lord is risen today! A-a-a-le-lu-u-ia!" Amen.