

Mark 16: 1-8
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Have you ever read a novel to the end and been disappointed? Not so much because you didn't like the story, but because the ending just left you feeling - well, cheated or upset. You were going along quite happily through the text and got to the last twenty pages or so and began to realize, "Uh oh. This isn't looking good. Not good at all."

Something akin to dread or frustration starts creeping up. And when you finish the last sentence, you realize that the final chapter has just ruined the whole book for you.

Writing endings to texts is some of the hardest work novelists do. When a writer gets to the end, they've already written the climax. There's not a lot of tension left to play with. They are in a fine balancing act between resolving things for the us and summing it up too simply. Nothing turns a reader off more than to feel like in the last lap you've suddenly been fed a big dish of saccharine or have just watched the author leap off the nearest cliff with no net to catch them at the bottom.

Friends, if listening to the finishing verses of the gospel of Mark this morning leaves you feeling like you've just been cheated out of a great resurrection hurrah, well, it's because you have.

“They made their way out and fled from the tomb bewildered and trembling; but they said nothing to anyone, because they were so afraid.”

Mark takes the empty tomb and turns the resurrection into something eerie and foreboding. It's not even like he's doing some tricky maneuver in order to set us up for the sequel. Nope. We don't even get to run off the cliff in an exhilarating brief burst of flight.

Instead chapter 16 feels more like post traumatic stress. We've gotten through the worst of it, the major trauma is behind us, but everyone who's left doesn't feel like talking about what happened. There's no sense of victory or even relief at having survived.

The women slink away from the good news and tell no one.

This ending has been so dissatisfying to folks that two different closings have been written for Mark at various points in its history. Endings that scholars can now identify as add-ons. Attempts to make it better. To feel better about how Mark depicts the resurrection. But the “real” ending stops here:

“they said nothing to anyone, because they were so afraid.”

Except.

Except we have evidence that is not where it ends. Right? Clearly that sentence couldn't be literally true. Given the logic of it, the three women had to have told *someone* since we just read

testimony of what happened. Somewhere, somehow this story did get told, and was eventually written down for us.

We have inherited the fruits of at least one of those women sharing. The story of the empty tomb did indeed live on. No matter what Mark says about those three shocked and confused women, there *is* something more - wiggling its fingers at us from the margins of the page.

It seems as though: (to quote Pierre Talec)

. . . the horizon is still quite dark.

but hope is about to dawn.
The seed of salvation is sprouting,
as earth makes ready.¹

During Lent this year, we have reconnected with stories of covenant - God's promise.

Abraham and Sarah, Noah, the Hebrews's 10 commandments, Jeremiah.

In each of these stories, we encounter God approaching humanity and all creation again and again - in hope and promise.

But let us remember that each of these covenants came out of a dark horizon. They were not birthed in the full light of day. Abraham and Sarah laughed at God. They had uprooted their homes, family, their lives all on a promise of progeny. And 25 years later

¹ Pierre Talec, as quoted in *Imaging the Word, Volume , Page .*

they were still childless. I have to assume there was a doubt and despair for them on many days.

Jeremiah was speaking to a people that had witnessed the destruction of their very identity. The temple destroyed and their leaders flung into exile. Certainly questions about their relationship with God were bubbling up like a pot about to boil over.

And so it is fitting that this telling of the resurrection, this Markan version of the ultimate act of God's love and promise with humanity, is set in similar circumstances.

The followers of Jesus have watched the meaning of their lives get nailed on a cross. Their own safety was highly at risk. They were hiding in rooms and caves, hoping that no one from the steaming crowds would remember that just a few short days ago they were close to Jesus' side.

And the empty tomb didn't mean anything at first other than Jesus' body was missing. the horizon is quite dark -

but hope is about to dawn.

Hope is about to dawn. That's what we celebrate this morning. Eventually hoped dawned on a small band of people 2 millennia ago. They were taken by surprise, their wildest hopes met by God's great promise.

But even more important for us today, is that the covenant established between God and humanity at that moment of resurrection - the moment when life won over death, when goodness was stronger than evil -

that covenant relationship set within the resurrection is *still* the premise on which we stake our lives.

So that even when our horizon feels darker than the middle of the night. Even when we have spent our last ounce of energy trying to keep it together. Even when betrayal stalks us every step. Even when violence threatens to consume any small thread of peace. The women at the tomb remind us to take heart.

Take heart in the truth that we might flee in fear of danger, or loneliness or humiliation.

We might run from the moment as fast as our legs or life can take us. But the women who fled from that first tomb have been remembered in the gospel of Mark - the *good news* of Mark.

The tomb was empty. But their fleeing was not the end of the story. Hope was about to dawn.

And dawn it did, upon those first disciples who could only imagine loss and fear after the horrors of the crucifixion. The life of Jesus dawned upon them again and gave them a whole new sense of what it meant to be in relationship with this God.

The seed of salvation is sprouting,
as earth makes ready.

The story of earth since then has been the story of that seed sprouting. The seed of Jesus's love and God's mercy.

My family and I just recently planted our vegetable garden. We have some bean and pea seeds. And now we water and wait. And trust that there's something going on down under that top layer of soil.

There have been years in our gardening when seeds spring up and give us an abundant crop - where we're handing out sweet peas as fast as we can pick them. And there have been other years when little comes up. Maybe we planted too early and frost bit them down or a critter ate our plantings for dinner one dark night.

But the truth is that even after a stark year, one that makes us stop to wonder why bother with all the work a garden creates, if all it means is *this* measely bunch of raggedy vegetables, even after a year like that we plant in hope the following spring.

That is the way with God's seed of salvation - God's promise of life made new. Sometimes we're toying with a storyline that has no hope in it. We're troubled and frustrated and feeling

cheated - staring at an empty tomb. Yet, even in those moments lies a seed of something else underneath.

The resurrection does not promise that we bounce up and out of the trauma of our lives. But it does promise that even when we are face to face with an empty tomb, even when we have no harvest to share, there is something more to the story. Hidden behind what we think is the ending.

Resurrection: The promise of God's love goes on - to shape the next new thing for us and for this world. And in that hope we leave the empty tomb - searching for words that reshape emptiness from a story of loss into one of new life. Amen.