

Chris Currie

Text: Mark 16:1-8

Sermon: An Unending Ending

March 31, 2024

16 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶ But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." ⁸ So 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.

That really should have been the end of it. A couple of peasant women go to care for a dead body and they witness an empty tomb and receive news that makes no sense to them. But then Mark tells us, after taking it all in, 'they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.' That should be the end of it; they witness something so bizarre, so abnormal, so unlike the regular happenings of our lives, they are scared and they don't want to talk about it. They throw up their hands and just keep it to themselves. It's almost if Mark is daring us to think and believe that the story ended here.

About a quarter century ago, 76 million people, nearly more than for the Super Bowl that year, tuned into the last episode of 'Seinfeld.' Co-creator Larry David came back to work with Jerry Seinfeld to write the final episode. The event was hyped for months ahead of time as TV critic Tom Shales wrote: 'According to just about every magazine on every newsstand in the country, we are a nation united in inconsolable grief over the impending demise of 'Seinfeld,' the NBC sitcom that ends its nine-year network run.' The controversial ending episode concluded with all the central characters in prison found guilty of their 'callous indifference and utter disregard for everything that is good and decent.' And immediately, blowback about the final ending followed, even leading Jerry Seinfeld to express regrets as recently as 2017, saying, 'I sometimes think we really shouldn't have even done a finale...There was a lot of pressure on us at the time to do one big last show, but big is always bad in comedy.' On the last episode of David Letterman's Late Show in

2015, actress Julia Louis-Dreyfus joked, “Thanks for letting me take part in another hugely disappointing series finale.’ No one was happy with the ending.¹

Mark may have had the same kind of reaction. Today we ended our reading at verse 8 which scholars have determined was most likely the original ending, but at least two additional and alternative endings were added shortly thereafter to the end of Mark’s gospel, a shorter ending where we learn that the women do share what they have witnessed to Peter and the disciples and then also a longer ending where Jesus makes multiple appearances, appearing to Mary Magdalene and then to two disciples walking and then later appearing to the disciples and upbraiding them for their lack of faith and then Jesus commissions them before ascending to God. Both endings seem to not be happy with where Mark left off. So what is so wrong with the first ending and why might later editors come along like the ‘Seinfeld’ critics centuries after them, and say we have to do something about this ending...it’s awkward, it’s inconclusive, and it leaves everything up in the air. It’s more of a Soprano’s ending, with the screen going black right at the climactic moment, and all of us are left wondering what is going to happen next.

Theologian and teacher of preaching Tom Long warns us about downsizing the power of the Resurrection and confining it merely to the rites of spring and the blooming of lilies, the emergence of butterflies, and the hopping of bunnies. Our Easter sermons, he reminds us, can sound too much like halftime locker room pep talks...‘Life may be hard,’ we say. ‘We may be down, but it’s only halftime. Remember Jesus was down, too. He had his cross to bear, but he was rewarded by the triumph of Easter. So, keep giving your all, and never give up! This,’ he writes, ‘is coach Joel Osteen on easter, and the message is, ‘This is your best life now! Be the best person you can be in this world!’ And what this misses, Long reminds us, is that ‘Easter is not a way to get along better in the world [just] as it is,’ but it is the passing of this world and the inauguration of a new world right in our midst. Long declares to us that ‘Easter destroys the perceived world at hand, and before we sing about the joy of Easter’s new reality, it is crucial to feel the shock and to see the destructive power of the Resurrection on the old reality.’²

Disruptive. Shocking. Frightening. We just wanted to feel good. Or maybe just have something to take the edge of this world. But not a complete intervention and transformation of all that we thought we knew, a happening that is

¹ Frederic Frommer, ‘25 Years Later, America still loves ‘Seinfeld’ but some hate how it ended,’ *The Washington Post*, Retropolis.

² Tom Long, ‘The Shock of Easter,’ *Journal for Preachers*, (Easter 2024), 6.

going to re-arrange everything, including us. Long cites a distinguished New Testament scholar who confessed that the early witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus didn't arrive at the empty tomb and immediately 'respond by exclaiming 'Holy Awe!', how wonderful, but more likely they exclaimed 'Holy Expletive!' What now?' Who are we? What do we do? How do we live when the world we thought we knew has passed away in a flash of lightning' and something new and groundbreaking and earth shattering has begun? Or take it directly from Mark v. 8: 'for terror and amazement seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.'

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's dramatic refusal to allow the world of brutality, the world of dog-eat-dog and kill or be killed, the world of dehumanization and degradation and disposability of human beings have the last word. God raises Jesus from the dead in defiance of a world that is happy for a Messiah like Jesus to get thrown under the bus or a world resigned for Jesus to die at the hands of empirical machinery and the powers and principalities. No, God says, in Jesus' resurrection, the world of death, the world of inhumane cruelty, the world of status quo in all matters, the world that thrives and even makes money off degrading, devaluing, and destroying human life and all life, that world is put to death by Easter and a new world has been inaugurated and made possible by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. A world where enemies are reconciled, a world where prodigal sons and prodigal daughters are not only welcomed home but exalted, a world where the meek are called blessed and where the sick, the unclean, the impaired, the ill repute are not only called clean and made fully alive but freed to thrive before God alongside the multitudes of all their siblings. 'There it is,' Tom Long reminds us, 'the shock of Easter. It's not a trivial message that a few potted lilies decorating the church on Easter might inspire us to make life (a little) better by-and-by. It is the much more radical world that [the] new life we yearn for has come to us as an act of God, that worlds have collided and that the world of death, the world where some are enslaved and others are enslavers,' the world of cynicism and the lowest common denominator that world has been destroyed and at the very same time a new world in which all God's children can flourish and be fully alive is being put in its place.³

Back to Mark's controversial ending. What if that was the whole point? Not to leave us feeling resolved and wrapped up and complete with everything brought together, but to remind us that the resurrection of Jesus Christ does as much tearing down as it does raising up, that fear and amazement should seize us everytime we pick up these

³ Tom Long, 'The Shock of Easter,' *Journal for Preachers*, (Easter 2024), 9.

resurrection accounts and read them, that Easter does as much melting of the solid ground we thought we were standing on as it does placing the risen Christ in our presence.⁴ Maybe Mark is actually doing some of that at the end of this gospel. Maybe Mark is provoking us, forcing us to live in the awkwardness of what we cannot logically explain or comprehend, maybe Mark is painting us a picture of discipleship that should be constantly shifting between fear and amazement, disruption and disbelief at what has just happened, terror and joy that God is able through this person to unravel one world and bring a new one to life out of a lifeless corpse crucified and left for dead. That God is able to take our lives and weave something beautiful in the midst of our own brokenness and unraveling.

Maybe Mark is asking us, dressed in our Easter best and ready for all the threads to be tied up, how is it going to end? What are you going to do about it? Say nothing to no one and continue to live in the privacy of all that has taken place. Keep it to yourself and keep it from becoming more than an ornamental part of your life? Resist that it may transform your life in ways you don't get to control? It would be easier to just turn it into a generic message about positivity and the changing of the seasons. Or just tell nothing to anyone and keep it to ourselves as a work of strange fiction. We could deal with that. But death and resurrection...the death of one world and the inauguration of a new one...shock and disruption to our protected and preferred patterns...a life of flourishing that also challenges much of what we hold dear. Just say nothing to no one, Mark taunts us, I can understand why you are afraid. Keep it to yourself. Just try to bury it or re-entomb it. I dare you, Mark is saying. I dare you. I dare you to think you can end the story.

⁴ Tom Long, 'The Shock of Easter,' *Journal for Preachers*, (Easter 2024), 6-7.