



Just the Beginning

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, 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 And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” ⁴ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back— it was very large. ⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Introduction

It’s Easter morning and I want to begin with a story. But I’m a bit gun-shy. The last time I told you a story, it didn’t go so well. I botched it up pretty badly by leaving everyone hanging in mid-air as I moved on to my next point.

It was a bad move on my part; I admit that. I simply lost sight of the fact that our minds are hard-wired for closure to stories. We don’t do well with open endings: stories that don’t reach any resolution, the kind that take you right to the edge of a precipice, then suddenly fade to black and roll the credits.

Interestingly, Mark’s gospel story, the one that’s just been read, leaves us hanging in mid-air. In fact, his story may leave us with the biggest open ending ever written!

The passage you just heard is the end of Mark’s gospel. How does it conclude? Early on that first Easter morning, three faithful women stumble upon one big surprise: an open tomb, with a mammoth stone simply rolled away. Inside, they find, not the body of Jesus, but an angelic looking man, who catches them off guard with the news, “He has risen.” Startled and speechless, the women hightail it out of there, like they’re fleeing the scene of a crime. And so Mark’s story about Jesus of Nazareth comes to an end: “for they were afraid” (v. 8).

Now, I suspect if you wanted to share good news about a man who’d been raised from the dead, you probably wouldn’t end your story the way Mark did. No doubt, you’d do what a few of the well-meaning readers of Mark’s gospel did many centuries ago: You’d want to round-off

the story a bit. You'd tell what happen to the three frightened women, share about the risen Jesus appearing to them and to others, include something about Christ's words to his disciples, just the kind of things you find in the other three gospels—and in the extended versions of Mark's gospel. In fact, we have those longer endings printed in our Bibles.

Just the Beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God

But not Mark the gospel-writer. He's given us a real cliffhanger of a story. His biography of Jesus of Nazareth begins with a bang: not a genealogy or story about Jesus' birth, but a strange man appearing in the wilderness declaring Jesus' coming (1:1-8). His whole story moves at breakneck speeds; Jesus doesn't wait around for anything. It's as though he's sprinting to his own death, running toward his own crucifixion.

But the most dramatic part of the whole story is the ending: Mark leaves us with an *open ending*. The other three Gospels provide post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. But not Mark's Gospel. We're left with an empty tomb, an absent Jesus, and three frightened women, who flee the tomb in fear, as though they're running from the scene of a crime. Mark leaves us hanging in mid-air, with no closure, without any resolution.

Just the Beginning of the Restoration of Broken Lives

But what if Jesus' resurrection isn't the end; it's just the beginning. What if the empty tomb isn't the end of the story, but just the beginning? What if the angel's announcement, "He has risen," wasn't meant to bring this story to a neat and tidy conclusion, but to launch the greatest story ever told?

We know, of course, that the story *doesn't* end with three frightened women running for cover. No, the good news of Easter is that the risen Christ catches up with these three—and many others. In fact, because Jesus was loosed from the grave, he is now let loose in the world and in the lives of people.

The risen Christ catches up to these three frightened women, and turns their fear into faith by calling them each by name. The risen Christ catches up with turncoat Peter, and extends grace and mercy to one who betrayed him. The risen Christ catches up with a doubting Thomas, and isn't afraid to let Thomas touch his side to see it's real. And the risen Christ catches up with the angry Pharisee named Saul, who he transforms into a valiant missionary named Paul.

The risen Christ is going ahead of his followers, so that he meets them when they arrive. They don't find him. He finds them. Easter isn't about women finding empty tomb, but risen Christ finding them. The good news that begins with Easter isn't that seekers find a Savior. It's that a risen Savior finds sinful people and brings them into his life.

The risen Christ has caught up with the individuals we baptized this morning. For centuries, Christians have baptized on Easter morning. It's a vivid testimony to the fact that Christ is alive and at large in the world.

But has the risen Christ caught up with you?

Behold, I Am Making All Things New

Jesus' resurrection marks the beginning, not only of the restoration of individual lives; but also the beginning of *the renewal of the entire creation*.

By raising Jesus Christ from the dead, God has torn open a huge hole in human history; not just human history, but the history of the whole of creation. And what burst forth through that gaping hole is nothing less than *a new creation*. "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore" (Rev. 1:18). I am, Jesus says, "the beginning of God's [new] creation" (Rev. 3:14).

Because Jesus Christ has risen, this means one day the entire earth—indeed, the whole cosmos—will one day experience a similar renovation and renewal. Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the dawn of the new creation; he is the first beam of light as it bends over the top of the bluish-gray horizon. The night is parting; a new day is coming. This is what the Risen Christ says, "Behold, I am making all things new" (Rev. 21:1-5).

Aslan Is On The Move

I suspect there are a few fans of C. S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*. You'll remember, then, from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, how everything begins to change once Aslan the great Lion returns to Narnia. Indeed, to the chagrin of the White Witch, the signs of Spring are everywhere. Narnia is being renewed.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is like the return of Aslan to Narnia. And as Mr. Beaver excitedly tells Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy: "Aslan is on the move."

"Oh, yes! Tell us about Aslan!" said several voices at once; for once again that strange feeling—like the first signs of spring, like good news, had come over them.

"Who is Aslan?" asked Susan.

"Aslan?" said Mr. Beaver. "Why, don't you know? He's the King. He's the Lord of the whole wood, but not often here, you understand. Never in my time or my father's time. but the word has reached us that he has come back. He is in Narnia at this moment. He'll settle the White Queen all right. It is he, not you, that will save Mr. Tumnus."

"She won't turn him into stone too?" said Edmund.

“Lord love you, Son of Adam, what a simple thing to say!” answered Mr. Beaver with a great laugh. “Turn him into stone? If she can stand on her two feet and look him in the face it’ll be the most she can do and more than I expect of her. No, no. He’ll put all to rights as it says in an old rhyme in these parts:

Wrong will be right, when Aslan comes in sight,
At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more,
When he bares his teeth, winter meets its death,
And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again.

Just the Beginning Means Assurance, Expectation & Hope

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, isn’t the end of the story; it’s just the beginning. This world-altering event of Easter marked just the first chapter in the greatest story ever told—a story that continues today.

You and I, then, ought to expect to meet the risen Christ. You see, the open ending to Mark’s gospel is an *open invitation* to each one of us to meet the risen Lord. This was the angel’s encouragement to the three women: “But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you” (v. 7). The same holds true for you and me, some two thousand years later.

The only difference is we don’t need to make a pilgrimage to Galilee, or take a long road trip to the other side of the earth; or hike some great distance into the woods or high atop some mountain. If we want to meet the risen Christ, we must simply look to him by faith. In fact, you can meet him right here, right now, right where you’re seated.

But, secondly, you and I ought to be confident about the future God has for us—indeed, the future God has for the entire world—regardless of what comes our way.

Jesus Christ is and always will be the crucified one—even after Easter. This means that in this life, we cannot expect our path to be paved ease and comfort, peace and security; at least, not if we’re going to be true to this crucified and risen Lord.

But we can be confident that the way of the cross is the way to life; and we can be confident that nothing will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

For Me the Beginning of Life

Today is Sunday, April 8, 2012. It's Easter morning—the Day of Resurrection! A day of celebration for believers around the world.

Sixty-seven years ago today, Sunday, April 8, 1945, a young German pastor named Dietrich Bonhoeffer stood in a small schoolroom in Schönberg, Germany, to preside over his final worship service.

He read two passages of Scripture. The first from Isaiah 53:5, a profound Good Friday text that reads, “With his stripes we are healed,” and 1 Peter 1:3, a dazzling Easter text, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” They also sang Luther’s *Eine feste Burg*, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God.”

Yet no sooner had Bonhoeffer offered the closing prayer, than the door to their room swung open and two menacing looking men busted in and said: “Prisoner Bonhoeffer. Get ready to come with us.”

Everyone, including Bonhoeffer, knew exactly what those words, “Come with us,” meant. They were summoning Bonhoeffer for execution. Just four days earlier, Adolf Hitler had issued an order for the conspirators to be destroyed. His end had come.

The two men escorted Bonhoeffer out of the room. And less than twenty-four hours later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to the end of his life.

One of the men in the room that day, Payne Best, said that they all said their last goodbyes to Bonhoeffer, who then pulled Best himself aside, and said to him: “This is the end. For me the beginning of life.”¹

Less than twenty-four hours later Bonhoeffer was executed by firing squad. And just two weeks later, the Allied forces liberated the prison camp where he was executed. And one week after that, Adolf Hitler took his own life, and brought the war with Germany to an end.

Yet what Bonhoeffer understood was the reality of the resurrection. Which meant that, just like Jesus himself, Bonhoeffer’s own death was not the end. It was just the beginning.

Conclusion

The empty tomb, and the risen Christ, this isn’t the end of the gospel story. It’s just the beginning. Jesus’ resurrection isn’t merely a fact of history; it’s a present reality. This is the glorious news of Easter.

¹ See Eric Metaxas, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, pp. 527-528.

“The Christian faith is the most exciting drama that ever staggered the imagination of man.”² And the best thing about this drama is that it’s true. It really happened.

And it continues to happen. Every single day, the risen Christ meets people who perhaps least expect it: showing up on the doorstep of their lives, inviting himself into their hearts, making his place of residency.

Yet there’s more to come! Our risen Lord isn’t done putting the world to rights. With Christ’s resurrection we’ve seen just the breaking of the dawn of new creation, the first light shining over the eastern horizon, signaling that the Son is on the rise. Indeed, as the Apostle Paul reminds us,

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ... When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:25-28).

Amen.

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² Dorothy Sayers, *Greatest Drama*, cited in Porter, *Malcolm Muggeridge*, p. 49.