

## **Not the End of the Story: An Easter Sermon**

preached at Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church

Edmonton, Alberta

by Carol Penner

April 20, 2014

Text: Mark 16:1-8

As a worship planner, it's a hard call to go with only Mark's resurrection story on Easter Sunday morning. We've had a service today with lots of joy and alleluias and rejoicing, but that is not the tone of gospel reading. The young man who announces the good news is likely joyful, but the women, Mary, Mary and Salome, don't respond with joy, or belief. In fact the gospel ends with them fleeing the scene, terrified and saying nothing to anyone. Mary, Mary and Salome don't meet the risen Christ in this gospel, no one meets the risen Christ. This is not the end of the story, is it? Why would Mark end his gospel this way?

Resurrection is news. It's big news. I know that some of you have sat with death. Death is our intimate companion as human beings. Some of you who are young do understand this, but I know that all of you older people know death. You have watched death claim a couple of generations of loved ones before you, you know it is coming for you. You know death at the centre of your soul. Death is the one certainty in life for everyone. On Good Friday we stayed with Jesus and witnessed his death. The pain, the horror, the dead lifeless breathless body. We know death and its victory over everyone. To be assured that Jesus has conquered death is huge, it brings out alleluias from the deepest parts of us!

That's why on Easter Sunday morning, we are happy! We come to church expecting to hear the story of Mary falling at Jesus' feet, or Jesus on the beach with the disciples, or the Great Commission, or Jesus ascending into heaven, all the pieces of the Easter story that the other gospels carry. But none of that is here in Mark's account. Mark's gospel ends with verse 8. It ends with the women fleeing, terrified, and not saying a word to anyone.

Now some of you who have your Bibles with you are thinking, "But verse 8 is not the end of the story, there's a bunch more verses in my Bible!" Our discomfort with the shortness of Mark's resurrection account is not unique to us. Before the New Testament was even formed, when letters and gospels were circulating from church to church, people were copying out these gospels by hand. And at least two different copiers, one of them as early as the second half of the second century, looking at Mark's gospel, thought to themselves, "This is not the end of the story!" They decided to add more to it. And the copies of scripture with their additional endings in it, were used in some parts of the Christian church for many years.

And if you read these additions, you can see they tie things up quite nicely. Appearance of the risen Christ to Mary and the other disciples... Check! The Great Commission...Check! Jesus rises up to heaven....Check! All neat and tidy. It just happens not to be the end of Mark's gospel story.

Our biblical scholars today, with the help of archaeologists, have many very old manuscripts. And the earliest manuscripts consistently always end Mark at verse 8. So that is what we read today. Why would Mark end his gospel this way? What would this ending have meant to the people he was writing to?

Because of course Mark didn't envision that we would be sitting here in North America almost 2000 years later reading his words. Mark was writing a story for churches he knew. Most scholars think that he was writing around 60 AD, maybe thirty years after the death of Jesus. The disciples had gone out and preached the gospel, they had made disciples, they had started churches, and there were thousands of Christians meeting in various areas all over the Mediterranean world. Paul was writing his letters in the 50s, so you know he was travelling everywhere starting churches, and there were many missionaries like Paul.

Mark decides to write his account of the good news of Jesus Christ. At this point there aren't other gospels written. People have been learning about Jesus from the apostles talking about him. The writer of this gospel had no idea that other people would write their accounts of Jesus. He just wrote his story of Jesus, with a certain audience in mind.

He starts his gospel by saying that he is writing about the good news of Jesus Christ. Mark does not begin his gospel by saying that the good news is that Jesus was risen from the dead. He begins the good news with Jesus' birth, and goes on to the good news of the kingdom of God and the good news of healing the sick and the good news of feeding the hungry and the good news preached to the poor. Somehow even Jesus' death is good news for us. And his resurrection is good news. The whole story of Jesus is the good news that Mark wants to share with the church he is writing to.

The church he was writing to was very much in need of good news, because it was going through a very very bad time. The church was experiencing a severe persecution. Of course the early church experienced persecution from the Jewish community for a time...think of Paul breathing threats against the people talking about Jesus. But that persecution was mild compared to what they were facing when this gospel was written. By this time, Christians came to the attention of those in power. More particularly, they came to the attention of the Roman emperor Nero.

Nero was a Roman emperor who ruled from 54 to 68. The word Nero is more familiar to us today as the name of a software program, I had this program on my computer to burn CD-roms. The main thing the emperor Nero was famous for was the burning of Rome, in fact many believed that he started the fire, so that he could expand his palace. But the fire burned a huge part of Rome to the ground, and the people were furious. Romans were looking for someone to blame for the fire, and Nero deflected blame from himself to Christians. He was the first emperor to persecute Christians; martyring them in horrible and public ways. Early Christian writers point to Nero as the emperor that ordered the execution of both Peter and Paul. This vicious persecution spread throughout the empire.

This is the time that Mark is likely writing his gospel. It has become even more dangerous, it has become more risky to be a Christian than it ever had been before. The early church, just getting its feet under it, is rattled. They are wondering about being faithful, they are wondering how to be followers of Jesus in this dangerous new time.

Now Mark's good news for the early church includes the information that the disciples had a hard time believing Jesus. We have been journeying with the gospel of Mark for the past few months, and you'll remember that the disciples rarely understand what Jesus was doing, in fact they desert him at his moment of need. This gospel tells us that the male disciples flee in the garden of Gethsemane, and the same word, flee, is used to describe how the women react when they see the empty tomb. The women are described as trembling. Shaking. They are afraid.

But the good news that this gospel writer is sharing about is not dependent on what people do...the good news is about Jesus Christ. About the kingdom that he is proclaiming. A kingdom that cannot be stopped by anything, not the Roman Empire, not even death. Not even by his own followers betraying him.

Can you see how this gospel would resonate with a church that was experiencing great persecution, a church that was afraid? The story of Peter denying Jesus: how poignant that denial will have been for the first hearers of Mark's gospel. They too had to make decisions....with swords pointed at them they had to decide what to say to the question, "Are you a Christian or not?" Many of them may have made a decision like Peter's, to deny Jesus.

Or the words, "Take up your cross and follow me." Nero crucified Christians. Crucifixion was a real possibility for the first readers of this gospel of Mark. Take up your cross and follow me, meant literally that they might find themselves carrying a cross.

The last line of the gospel reads, "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." Many in the early church would identify with the women and their reaction, they too were terrified, they too may have been silent about the good news.

The first people who heard the gospel of Mark read to them, get to the last sentence of the gospel, and like us, they ask, "Is that the end of the story...they say nothing?" The early church knew for a fact that this was not the end of the story. They look at each other. They are living abiding proof that the women, the disciples were not defeated by fear. Before the crucifixion, Jesus had instructed them to go to Galilee when he died. And the disciples did go to Galilee, they did meet the risen Christ, they were clothed with power from on high, and they did go and preach the good news of the kingdom to the poor.

Mark's gospel begins with the words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God". Those early church people, hearing the gospel of Mark for the first time, knew that Jesus was still working among them. They were the next installment of the good news of the kingdom. They were part of the story now, part of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.

I think the gospel of Mark is a powerful invitation for us too. We hear the good news of the kingdom proclaimed, we hear that the tomb is empty. I think we can identify with the people described in this story.

Like the women at the tomb in Mark's gospel, we hear, we are taught that Jesus is risen from the dead, but we never actually see him. It's hard to believe something we haven't seen with our own eyes. We are following Jesus, but like the disciples, we don't understand everything. We can be a little bit dense! We sometimes don't get it, or we don't get all of it.

Like the people in this gospel, I think we are afraid too. Unlike the early church, none of us here are afraid of being crucified if we say we are a Christian, since we have religious freedom in our country. Although there are too many places in the world where people do lose their lives for their faith. But our fear is subtle, so subtle perhaps that we don't even admit it. We can be afraid of believing something that doesn't make sense, such as miracles, and people being raised from the dead. Afraid of being seen as having pre-modern beliefs in our post-modern world. Afraid to talk to people about the meaning of Jesus Christ in our lives.

The gospel of Mark is good news for confused and fearful people. Because it clearly shows that the power of the kingdom isn't stymied, it isn't held back by what we believe. There is no judgment here in this gospel story for people who don't believe the resurrection. There is a remarkable grace in the gospel of Mark for the inability of people to believe things, and for the frailty of fearful human beings. In fact, the gospel of Mark has a view of the human condition that assumes we are not going to get the whole thing, we are unable to see the meaning of things lots of the time. But that doesn't stop the kingdom of God.

Before the crucifixion, Jesus told the disciples to go to Galilee once he was dead. He told them he would meet them there. Galilee was the place of ministry. It's the place where people were healed, the hungry were fed, the good news was proclaimed to the poor.

The gospel of Mark is an invitation to us. Will we go to Galilee, will we be involved in the ministry of Jesus to the poor, to the hungry, to the sick? It is in Galilee that we will see the risen Christ. It is in being with the lowest and the least, that you will be clothed with power from on high.

The gospel of Mark ends with a sentence that is not the end of the story. We are part of that story, that good news of Jesus Christ. Will we remain silent, or will we go to Galilee to meet the risen Christ?

I'll finish with a poem I wrote about the resurrection of Jesus. It's called "Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you."

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.  
Jesus comes to the gate, to the synagogue, to houses prepared for wedding parties,  
to the pools where people wait to be healed, to the temple where lambs are sold,  
to gardens, beautiful in the moonlight. He comes to the governor's palace.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you,  
to new subdivisions and trailer parks, to penthouses and basement apartments,  
to the factory, the hospital and the Cineplex,  
to the big box outlet centre and to churches,  
with the same old same old message, unchanged from the beginning of time.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you with his Good News and...  
Hope erupts! Joy springs forth! The very stones cry out,  
"Hosanna in the highest, blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"  
The crowds jostle and push, they can't get close enough!  
People running alongside flinging down their coats before him!  
Jesus, the parade marshal, waving, smiling. The paparazzi elbow for room,  
looking for that perfect picture for the headline, "The Man Who Would Be King".

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you and gets the red carpet treatment.  
Hosannas ringing in churches, chapels, cathedrals,  
in monasteries, basilicas and tent-meetings.  
King Jesus, honored in a thousand hymns in Canada, Cameroon, Calcutta and Canberra.  
We LOVE this great big powerful capital K King Jesus  
coming in majesty and glory and honour and power and might.

Jesus comes to Jerusalem, to the city nearest you.  
With majesty, he takes a towel and washes feet.  
With glory, he serves bread and wine.  
With honour, he prays to God about his fear.  
With power, he puts on chains.  
With might, he dies on a cross.  
Then Jesus, King of all creation,  
rises from the dead,  
and appears in state  
in the eyes of the prisoner,  
in the eyes of the crack addict,  
in the eyes of the child orphaned by war,  
in the eyes of all who are thirsty.  
This risen Jesus asks you  
for one cup of cold water,

one coat shared with someone who has none,  
one heart, yours,  
and a second mile.  
Jesus comes to Jerusalem, the city nearest you.  
Can you see him?