

The Resurrection: How Does the Story End?

Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last month, at the March meeting of Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery, one of the candidates for ministry had a line in his Statement of Faith about Adam and Eve and how sin entered into the human realm through those first two humans. When it came time for the Presbytery to examine him, he was asked (not by me) if he believed that the story of Adam and Eve was literal history, or if perhaps it was intended as a metaphorical and symbolic way to help explain creation. His particular answer isn't necessary for our conversation this morning.

As it turns out, a good many mainline Christians today, including many who consider themselves to be quite traditional, believe that the creation stories are to be interpreted metaphorically, not literally. We still hear, of course, about those who believe the earth was created in six 24-hour days because the Bible says so. Those who are called "Young Earthers" therefore believe the earth is around 6000 years old or so, regardless of what science says. **Attached to such a literalistic belief is usually a profound fear to believe anything differently.** We're currently seeing this fear to believe anything differently in the debate sweeping the country over marriage equality.

For those of us who find ourselves more on the progressive end of the theological spectrum, more and more Old Testament stories tended to find their way into that **metaphorical-rather-than-literal category. That didn't mean, however, that they lost their meaning!** For many of us that includes elements of the stories involving Noah and the flood, Jonah and the whale, Daniel in the lion's den, even Moses and the burning bush and others. Then we found, usually at a later date in our journey of faith, elements of many New Testament stories that could also be understood as using metaphorical language. For a good number of us left-of-center folks, that now includes the story of the Virgin Birth and the birth narratives themselves. It also includes some, if not all, of the miracle stories. Again, with no loss of meaning and the truths these stories are trying to reveal.

A few weeks ago, while I was talking with a Presbyterian pastor colleague here in Tulsa, he brought up the discussion at that March presbytery meeting and the issue of Adam and Eve, and if sin really did enter into the human race through those two specific people. After affirming his own understanding that the creation stories were originally meant as metaphorical, not literal history, I asked a question that stumped him for a moment, a question that he had never quite seriously considered before. I want to ask of you the same question on this Easter Sunday. I am curious as to your response.

If more and more biblical stories can be seen as intentionally metaphorical in nature and composition, without losing their meaning, what about the story of the Resurrection? Can this story maintain its meaning and implications far beyond the perceived necessity of it being literal history?

I've shared with you in the past that when I interviewed for the position of pastor at a progressive and inclusive Presbyterian congregation in Dallas back in 1997, 18 years ago, I was asked how I would react if an elder on the Session didn't believe the Resurrection story literally, that Jesus wasn't bodily and physically raised from the dead. My response back then was probably similar to the one experienced by my colleague a couple of weeks ago, and perhaps by some of you here today.

I responded to that question by stating that I had no reason to not understand the story of the Resurrection as anything *but* as literal history. I had never been introduced to an alternative metaphorical understanding. But knowing how my own theological perspectives and biblical interpretations had changed over the years, especially since seminary, I added that if another church leader did not believe the story of the Resurrection literally, then I could live with that.

It is a fact, of ALL the stories in the Bible, the one that people have the hardest time letting go of as being literal history is the story of the empty tomb and Jesus being bodily and physically raised (resuscitated) from the dead. For many, including myself at one point, there is a profound fear of believing any differently. But what was once unfathomable for me to even consider, eventually became a non-issue. Yet, a lot of progressive theology and updated biblical interpretation has flowed under the bridge in the past 20 years. That's why more and more progressives have decided to not let themselves get bogged down in whether something happened as a literal historical fact or not in order for it to still have profound meaning to their life of faith. In fact, **insisting that biblical stories have to be believed literally has become a major stumbling block to many, especially the younger generations, to the point where a growing number of Americans don't want anything to do with organized religion in the 21st century.**

Saying that, simply trying to keep folks interested in going to church is in no way shape or form the reason why biblical scholars started approaching the scripture, especially the four gospels, with an eye toward metaphorical language rather than literal language. And one reason, for example, is that **each of the four gospels report a different set of details in their narrative of the empty tomb.** None of them agree, for instance, as to who and how many folks actually made their way to the tomb, what they saw when they got there, or what happened afterwards. Was it one angel or two, or a person dressed in white? Three women or two or just Mary Magdalene? Stone rolled away by an angel or an earthquake? Jesus there in the garden or not there at all? While biblical literalists have a fit with those questions, a growing number of Christians are asking, **does it really matter? Well, it does matter, but not in a literal way. The folks who wrote the four gospels were very perceptive in their precision of what they included in their gospel and why. So instead of worrying about the literalness of any given story, it becomes much more important for us to ask why the author has written the story the way he has – for that is where the truths lie.**

We, of course, can't always answer those questions. So the art of biblical interpretation is about making the most informed and educated guess we can. So let's take the Easter story that we are probably the least familiar with, the one from the Gospel of Mark that we heard this morning. Did you notice how abruptly the story ends? Talk about a cliffhanger. The story just stops with no apparent ending, leaving the reader hoping for a sequel. But to no avail.

Verse 8 of Mark 16 concludes the entire gospel with: "And they [the women] went out and fled from the tomb; for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for **they were afraid.**" **What kind of an ending is that?** Perhaps the most important story of the Christian faith just stops. The ending just hangs out there, unresolved.

In English language versions of the Bible, there are an additional twelve verses that have been added after verse 8. Sometimes they are located down in the footnotes at the bottom of the page, with the statement that the earliest Greek manuscripts do not include those additional verses. Or, like in our Pew Bibles, they have included those additional verses in brackets under the headings "The Shorter Ending of Mark," and "The Longer Ending of Mark." Have you ever noticed that before? Most all biblical scholars agree that these **extra verses**, due in part to their strikingly different literary style in the original Greek text, were **added to the end of the Gospel of Mark sometime in the second century by the early Church, or some editor, who felt they needed to add a more appropriate conclusion to this story**. Or as those of us old enough to remember the late radio commentator, Paul Harvey, "And now for the rest of the story."

So unless in the unlikely case that last page of this gospel simply got lost, we must assume that **Mark intended his gospel to end in such an abrupt and open-ended way**. Perhaps the author was taking a cue from Jesus himself. Of all the sayings attributed to Jesus in the gospels, biblical scholars believe that the parables are the most authentic as originating with Jesus himself. And if you look closely, many of Jesus' parables are open ended, like in the Parable of the Prodigal Son that ends abruptly with the older brother standing out in the field. Will he follow his father's request and join the party being thrown for his younger prodigal brother or not. Jesus intended us to put ourselves in the shoes of the older brother and answer that question for ourselves.

So perhaps the gospel writer Mark seeks to have us put ourselves in the shoes of the women who found the tomb empty on that Easter morning. If we, like them, are filled with amazement and fear after hearing this story, what would we do next? Undoubtedly this was a transforming moment in the lives of those women, and for Christians ever since. **How does the story of Easter transform you and me?** This question adds weight and meaning to the abrupt, open-ended conclusion to Mark's gospel.

The Easter story is God's Good News Story, therefore it has been suggested that **in such a story, "afraid" is not ultimately the last word. Perhaps Mark simply began the story of the Resurrection, knowing the ending has not yet been fully written**. Cynthia Campbell, president of McCormick (Presbyterian) Theological Seminary in Chicago suggests, "It just keeps going and going, from one life to another, touching and transforming us one by one." The ending to this gospel, then, is lived out by people of faith – people like you and me – who overcome their fear and then live and share their experience of Christ's continuing presence.

Approached this way, then, **Mark is an intentionally "unfinished Gospel." There is an unwritten chapter left for you and me to write our own record of how God has rolled away the stones from that which entombs us**. Campbell asks where we see Christ today. She answers: "out ahead of us. Where charity and love prevail over injustice and violence; where compassion and hope replace cynicism and despair; where peace and love take root in lives that are empty and lost; where human beings know joy and justice, dignity and delight: there is the risen Christ", calling us to follow and participate in the resurrection.

Regardless, therefore, of whether the original story was literal history or intentionally metaphorical in nature, this is the good news that gives meaning to the proclamation: Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! For the presence of God that was embodied in Jesus is still alive and with us – and will always be with us!

Amen.