

“Surprise Endings”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church – Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

Please Read:
I Corinthians 15:1-11
Mark 16:1-8

The Good News of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection is all about surprises... the “aha moment” ... Just when you think all is lost, something happens that changes everything... That’s why many of you come out to hear beautiful music and the Easter story every year... There’s something deep down in all of us, even us crusty old Presbyterians, that loves a happy ending.

There is a genre of film that I love, but not sure what to call it... It’s the category of films in the tradition of *The Sting*. I guess similar movies might include *Ocean’s Eleven*, *The Italian Job*. They are heist movies, but it’s the surprise at the end that’s always so fun... The “I didn’t see *that* coming” twist of the plot line... The narrative takes you to just that place where you believe all is lost... only to find, surprisingly: *that it’s not the end of the story*...

Which is also true in much of life! Like this past year, right? The Pandemic that never ends, the racial injustice and gun violence that never ends... Honestly, it’s hard to know when a story really ends... The gospel writer Mark is an artful good news writer and captures the reality of the first disciples’ experience of Easter.

It was nothing like what we’re doing here today... It was disorganized, disorienting, and disturbing to say the least. Mark writes that “very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, [the three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and Salome] went to the tomb.” They had seen Jesus on the cross. They had seen Jesus brutally executed by crucifixion and die in utter despair. There was no doubt in their minds they were going to the tomb to pay respects and anoint a dead body for final burial.

In the words of G.K. Chesterton, Easter is “the strangest story ever told.” What exactly happened is unclear, but according to Mark the women found the stone covering up the tomb had been rolled back. Upon entering, a young man dressed in white said, “Do not be alarmed...Jesus has been raised; he is not here.” This is the good news, interestingly first preached from inside the tomb! That’s a really important detail in the story because we are not denying the reality and pain of death and suffering. “A new order of existence is inaugurated!”¹ Death is not final. Suffering will not have the last word. The grave is not the end...

Then the young man commands them, “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.” The women (who because they were women did not have credibility in a court of law,) were charged to be the first unlikely witnesses to the other disciples that Jesus was alive, and that they would see him again... just as he had told them. But what did they do? Terror and amazement seized them, Mark writes, and they fled, *saying nothing to anyone because they were afraid*...

It’s an embarrassing closing scene for the church, really. It’s disconcerting that the eleven men, Jesus’ closest disciples, didn’t show up at all, and the three women who mustered the courage to go to the tomb were so afraid they didn’t tell anyone about the resurrection!

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 494.

Scholars wonder if Mark actually meant to end the story here. N.T. Wright is convinced that this couldn't have been the ending of the gospel.² It's so *anti-climactic*! Other scholars find the ending perfectly coherent with the portrayal of the disciples throughout the gospel.³ Either way, the Greek is strange but significant. Eugene Peterson points out that "No writer of Greek in the 1st century would end a sentence with □□□." That's the last word in the Greek of our gospel lesson. "□□□□ is a small, transitional word that leads into something else. It serves as a kind of syntactic hesitation, getting us ready for the next statement..."⁴

But at least in the earliest manuscripts that we have, *there is no next statement...* The resurrection story obviously didn't end with the disciples running away in fear and keeping silent. The apostle Paul says the good news he proclaimed is what he had heard directly from the disciples of Jesus. We read in the other gospel accounts that though the disciples had been afraid and in hiding, *Jesus came to them*. We will talk more about doubting Thomas next Sunday, but even through discouraging doubt and paralyzing fear, new faith is born through an *encounter with the Risen Lord*.

The apostle Paul was met by the risen Christ himself and experienced radical transformation. It was clear to Paul that whatever happened on Easter morning was not just a story, but an *event* that changed everything. It's interesting to note that Paul's summary of the gospel is not the *four spiritual laws*, but the *four historic events* that Jesus *died*, was *buried*, *rose from the dead* and *appeared* to his disciples and to many others.

The main point of all of this is that *the disciples* are not the heroes of the Easter story. *God is the hero*. When the disciples run away, Jesus comes back to them. Even though they hide in fear, Jesus finds them in his love. The grace of God is the recurring theme of the Easter good news: *Unmerited favor*. Grace is related to joy (χ□□□ζ and χ□□□), but apparently both come from an earlier word meaning "surprise." The best gifts are surprises, and your deepest joy comes when you experience the gift of new life when you least expect it!

It was a small circle of friends in Oxford in the 1930's and 40's who called themselves *The Inklings*. J.R.R. Tolkien and Jack Lewis, better known as C. S. Lewis, were part of the group and they shared their writing with one another. It was Lewis who encouraged Tolkien to complete and publish his fantasy stories about little creatures called Hobbits. Tolkien thought nobody would read it, but Lewis thought otherwise. Can you imagine the world without Bilbo Baggins, Frodo and Samwise Gamgee, Gimli and Gandolf? But it was Tolkien who told Lewis, an atheist, why he believed the Christian story of Resurrection.

They went for a walk along the river Isis, and Tolkien said, Jack, "In all of the best fantasy literature, there is a protagonist and an antagonist, and there is always some kind of catastrophe that happens to the hero and it looks like all is lost... But then a eu-catastrophe happens, a good-catastrophe, the great reversal, and the protagonist is saved.

² Nicholas Thomas Wright, *Mark For Everyone* (London: SPCK, 2004), 221.

³ Donald H. Juel, *The Master of Surprise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 115-121.

⁴ Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 195.

You see in Christianity, Jesus is the protagonist, and the Roman oppressors the antagonists, and of course the great catastrophe was that this innocent man Jesus was killed on a cross. But then the great eu-catastrophe happens, the Resurrection, and everything is changed.

Lewis writes later that Tolkien looked him in the eye and said, we all know that's how it works in fantasy literature. But the difference in Christianity is *that it's true*. Surprisingly, it really happened! Lewis writes this is what moved him to faith.

It was a small circle of scared friends of Jesus who were met again by the Risen Lord and were changed from hiding and silent cowards to faithful and outgoing witnesses to the good news of God's love and grace. Friends of Jesus continue to enter into the suffering of others because Jesus came back and showed his disciples his scars and gave the promise that he will never forsake us; he will be with us always. The crucified-risen Lord is on the loose in the world!

Once we have received resurrection new life, no longer can we live simply for ourselves. Paradoxically, when we receive new life, we want to give it away! We want to live for others... even give our lives away! This is the story of so many Christians throughout history, including greats like St. Patrick, Catherine of Sienna, Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Theresa, and Desmond Tutu... Who knows, maybe there are some world-changing disciples of Jesus here today?

So, you see, the way Mark abruptly ends his version of the good news story seems perfectly logical. I believe Mark understands that the surprising Easter story continues anytime someone hears the good news and believes! We peer into an empty tomb, but we see transformed lives who are making a difference in the world. Anytime you see your life as part of the gospel story. Anytime you give sacrificially to bless another, or forgive those who hurt you, anytime you love your neighbor, especially your enemy, *the Easter story comes alive!*

I pray you will come to the table today, friends, just as you are, with your fears and doubts...and see that the Risen Lord comes to you full of grace and truth. And I pray that you will be inspired to go out into the world as a friend of Jesus, living into the surprising story of God's resurrection hope, grace, and love for you... *and for all people.*

In the name of the God who loves us, the Savior who died and was raised for us, and the Spirit who gives us new life even today...Amen.