

The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Andrew McDonald preaching
“The Unfinished Gospel”
April 12, 2020
Mark 16: 1-8

Easter Sunday

One of the more crucial differences between the ancient world and our contemporary one concerns assumptions about the basic nature of language. For the ancients, language was understood as a force acting on the world, a source of real power. Language could actually change life.

– Mary Ann Tolbert

I love the gospel of Mark. It is the oldest of the four gospels – the one closest to the time of Jesus, and the first one written down. It is written for ordinary people to understand, and it is the most unvarnished, raw, dramatic.

Of the four gospels, Mark has the most challenging ending. It was so challenging, after Mark finished writing, later on an editor came along and seemed to think “This does not make sense.” And added a different ending. Later after that, at least one more editor came along and added a different alternate ending. These editors, you know, were trying to round off the edges, make it smoother, easier to take.

But this morning, I want us to hear the dramatic power of Mark’s original ending. I warn you, it’s startling, and even a little weird. This is not in your Bible: I am giving you a literal translation. But trust me, this is what it says. You will know it’s over when I close the book.

Mark 16: 1-8

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.

And very early on the first day of the week,
when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

They had been saying to one another,
“Who will roll away the stone for us
from the entrance to the tomb?”

When they looked up, they saw that the stone,
which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb,
they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe,
sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.
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!
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."
and they went out, and fled from the tomb,
for terror and astonishment had seized them;
and they said nothing to anyone,
they were afraid for....

The word of the Lord. Amen.

What does that ending do to you? Pay attention. How does it make you feel? Mark moves us quickly through the gospel story, We are almost running, (he says again and again "Immediately" as Jesus moves from place to place.) And while we are in mid-step, leaning forward, one foot in the air Mark stops. Mid-sentence, he stops.

We can't just stay hanging there in midair. We have to finish the stride. Mark confronts us with that question: What is our next step? In which direction will we head?

We know where everyone else in the gospel went. The disciples, that team of rivals, Jesus' hand-picked committee of diversity. With all those different social and cultural backgrounds. Each had the opportunity to show their superiority, But they all fail. Even the best of them: smart as a whip Judas, and courageously staunch Peter. But at the crucial moment, they all fall away.

Then, we have hope near the end, as we see this group of women. The only ones who stick with Jesus throughout the crucifixion. They are the outliers standing at a distance. Observing. Now it appears as if they are going to come through and be faithful at the end! Then, the Scripture says, the angel gives them a message, but! "they said nothing to anyone, they were afraid for...."

There we are. Left hanging mid stride. Where will we direct our next step? To fear? Or to Faith? It pulls us in. The decision is ours.

Do you remember that movie, from a number of years ago, *Glory*. The story of a brigade of African American soldiers in the Civil War. Most were freed slaves, fighting for the Union cause. They were the first black brigade allowed to fight in the Civil War, and they were called to lead the charge against a heavily entrenched fort near Charleston.

In such battles, one soldier is honored to carry the regimental flag. It is a crucial role because in the noise and confusion of battle, following the flag is what guides the troops. The flag bearer is an honored and crucial role. But it makes you the biggest target on the battlefield.

In this particular battle, early on, the Union standard bearer is shot and begins to fall. The man standing next to him sees what has happened, heroically, he reaches out and grabs the flag, and he proceeds to run all the way to the enemy ramparts shouting, "Boys, the old flag never touched the ground."

It is based on a true story. William Harvey Carney, for that action, was the first African American awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. He realized at that crucial moment, If the battle was going to be saved, It was up to HIM to carry flag, to give the signal, to carry the message.

That is where we are at in the end of the Gospel of Mark. The drama is clear: this is a battle against the demonic powers of the world. The battle against evil is still out there, and Mark makes it clear: everyone else has fallen away.

Mark looks directly at us and says: "Everyone else has fallen away. Now, what about you? Will you pick up the flag? Are you going to share the message?"

The angel's message is for us: You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Now, go, tell.

Jesus' death on a cross puts the suffering of the world at the center of our story. Frederick Nietzsche once said that because God is dead, everything is permissible. We live in a time when it really does seem as if people believe God is dead and anything goes.

A decade ago, I took a youth group to Germany. We went to the concentration camp at Dachau. Our guide did not flinch in telling the horrible truth of what happened there. I saw that camp in part through the tears of the teenagers who heard the brutal reality of

what evil, if unchecked, can do in the world.

A lot of people want to blame God for not stopping what we are responsible for. God did not build that death camp. We human beings did. Every day, ordinary people. Scientists, engineers, business people, soldiers, construction workers, physicians, recreation leaders and choir leaders tried to cheer up the guards after a hard day. Human beings made that death camp And a thousand others like it.

Where was God? The answer is: Where was Jesus? Jesus who stands with the prisoners, Jesus, who is nailed on the gallows, who is crucified on the cross. The cross stands as a never-ending reminder revealing what human beings are capable of, and the depths of harm human sin can bring.

It raises the profoundly troubling question: Do we speak up against the dynamics of evil today? Or does sin seem to direct us to step away from the hard truths? Does Fear move us to run away, and leave the crucified one alone?

The gospel takes an unflinching look at human life. And yet, even when all fall away, that is not the end of the story. Mark tells of an unfinished gospel: And we know something happened beyond the page of his story, the resurrected Lord encountered the early Xians. They found their voice: because the church survived.

When we hear that Resurrection Story, again and again, It changes us. We hear the angel again, and the message is for us. "He has risen!" God has raised him. Truth crushed to earth rises again. Jesus has sown the seed of this message through every act, every story, every parable, every word throughout his life.

He has prepared the soil, he has planted the seed, and now he is the catalyst from which, out of the dark earth, new life springs up. Jesus is the catalyst of abundant growth. Before Jesus, there was only potential. Jesus turns the potential into power. We can be part of that. How? "Go, tell."

Speaking in some form is necessary to awaken human consciousness. To speak is to learn. To speak is to live. Speaking is a pre-requisite to new reality.

Mark knew something that we have forgotten. Language is a force that acts upon the world. Language is a source of power. Our words, our stories can change life.

What was it George Burns wife, Gracie said? "Never put a period where God puts a comma."

In the unfinished gospel, now, we have a story to tell. No, most of us are probably not going to stand on the street corner and harangue people. Thank goodness!

But make no mistake, the words we utter in faith have a power to change consciousness. They have the power to change lives. When we speak the faithful word, in a faithful way, at the right time, the hand of God indelibly etches a message of love on the human heart.

The resurrection is the story of the power that God brings to this death camp world. The power to change minds, to rewrite the story of our lives, to make us a people who embody hope, so that no matter what demonic powers we face, we will say it clearly: "This is not how it has to be! This is not the end!"

The resurrection is God's validation of life lived in over-flowing love. It is about freedom:
Not the freedom to do whatever we please,
Not the freedom to enhance our own power.
But the freedom to love in a thousand different ways.
The resurrection is the truth of God that divine compassion is greater than all the suffering that humans can devise.

Where Mark's story ends, our story begins. The next step is ours: Moments when we hear something on the move in the darkness, and we know it is the Risen One. Moments when we see some astounding spark of light/hope, and we reflect that light. Moments in the gloom when a voice speaks your name and gives you a reason to live, a reason to love. Moments when we find our voice and we do as the angel says: "Go tell."

A friend and a colleague of Martin Luther King died this past week: Civil rights leader Rev. Joseph Lowery. I heard him a number of times. He had a wonderful gift for language. If he were ending this sermon, I believe he would say something poetically playful like this:

The resurrection is real.
Go tell means: Express yourself.

Go tell your debtor, you are going to let it slide.
Go tell your dreams, they will not be denied.

Go tell your fears, Christ gave me a new heart.
Go tell your enemies: Let's have a fresh start.

Go tell your demons: They do not define you.

Go tell your love: And let it realign you.

Go tell your hatred: you found the delete key.

Go tell your leg-irons: Jesus set your feet free.

Go tell your nightmares: They are just an illusion.

Go tell your hope: It has given you a new solution.

Then go tell the hard-hearted: Let's plow up that soil.

Go tell injustice: It makes your blood boil.

Go tell the socially distancing: They are not alone; for now

Just enjoy some sweet slumber.

And somebody please, Tell that nasty coronavirus,

Its days are numbered.

I think that is something of what Joseph Lowery would say. But the real question is, now,
What about you?

The unfinished gospel means we have the power

To take the next step;

To speak the life-changing word;

To write the next chapter;

To give the world and everyone around us

The message of hope that will change the world.

It is up to us.

Now: Go tell. Go tell. Go tell. The Lord IS Risen!

Sources:

Mary Ann Tolbert. *Sowing the Word: Mark's Gospel in Literary-Historical Perspective*. Fortress Press.

David Buttrick. *A Captive Voice*. Westminster/John Knox Press.

Joseph Lowery. This is not a direct quote of his words, but his style. You are encouraged to check out some of his speeches on You Tube.