

Christ has risen, Christ has risen indeed!

That is the message we are left with as Mark's gospel comes to a close in today's lesson. Jesus has risen and conquered death. The gloom of Good Friday has given way to the promise of Easter morn. But unlike the other gospels, Mark kind of leaves us hanging, doesn't it? In Matthew, Luke, and John, the story continues. We have Jesus appearing to the disciples on multiple occasions, with more details and guidance from the disciples beloved Rabbi. But in Mark, the women at the tomb are informed that he has risen, and they are instructed to tell the others, and that's it, end of story. There's no doubting Thomas tale, there's no gathering in Galilee and glorious ascension. Boom, Christ is risen, head back to Galilee. Done.

Mic drop and walk off stage.

So why does Mark's gospel leaving us hanging this way?

Well, it helps to look a little at the background of the gospels. While I'm not going to delve too deeply into biblical scholarship this morning, it's universally accepted among scholars that Mark is the oldest of the four gospels. It's also pretty well accepted that the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, all have at their core an older base document that each expanded on in their own way. However, Mark seems to have stuck pretty much in flavor to that original document. It's the briefest, most concise of those gospels. Mark gets right to the point about the divine nature of Jesus as the "Son of Man" in the first chapter and keeps that focus to the bitter end. Using that focus, it has been speculated that the author of Mark was focused on an audience of Christians

that was primarily Jewish in makeup, but probably not in Jerusalem, more likely in Galilee or Syria. He doesn't focus so much on Jesus as God, but as the Son of Man from the Jewish prophetic writings, both human and divine. Mark's lack of emphasis of a Second Coming also makes it clear that the target audience was somewhere outside of Jerusalem. That crowd, under the leadership of James, was very focused on an imminent, cataclysmic return of Christ. After all, they were really under the gun. By the time these scriptures were written, Jerusalem was being brutally suppressed by the Roman military might. Both Jews and Christians were being killed in great numbers, culminating in the destruction of the Temple and much of the city in 70 AD. They were desperate for divine intervention and their theology reflects that. But not so much in Mark. Mark talks much more about kin-dom of God that draws near. Mark's kin-dom is felt in the here and now, not in some future event. There is certainly an expectation of Christ's return in Mark, but it's not as emphasized as in the other gospels.

So why does Mark leave us hanging without a detailed conclusion to the story? Well, from a literary point of view, one has options when ending a story that one is telling. One option is to offer a neat conclusion, where all details are accounted for and there are no loose ends. Another is to leave an open-ended narrative, where the reader is left to finish the story from their own point of view and incorporate their own experiences. The latter choice can certainly speak more powerfully to the individual reader. It draws the reader into the story from their own perspective and allows them to creatively imagine what the conclusion

could be. The writer often leaves clues about what that conclusion may entail but puts it in the reader's hands to figure out the details from their own perspective. Mark makes clear that the story of Jesus does not end with his death; God has done something entirely new and unheard of to this point. The crucified criminal is now the chosen, risen one of God, raised to new life, not simply more of the same life. In this perspective there is a sense of completion, but it's an open-ended kind of closure. But we still aren't given the details of what happens next. Jesus has risen and continues on, but what does that mean, and particularly, what does that mean for our lives? We're left to dig, to struggle with the questions to understand what this Jesus is all about, what it all means. But this ending does give us some guidance. We're told with the women at the tomb that we are to return to Galilee to meet him.

Galilee, the backward part of Palestine filled with the marginalized, the outcasts, the downtrodden. That place where nothing good ever comes out of. Galilee was the place and context where everything began for Jesus and the disciples. Galilee was the beginning without clear boundaries. The future was open at the beginning, and it's open now. This concept of new beginnings without the boundaries we are used to is one of the deep truths that Mark has for us. The God who did a new thing in Jesus is the one who is working a future, here and now, for his disciples. The lack of a detailed ending to the story reflects the trust that is it God who is at work. God is not done, God didn't exit stage left with the crucifixion. God is not done with this world and God's community in it. Is God ever done? Not if the goal is

God's kingdom coming to fruition here on Earth. Mark's gospel does make clear that God was at work in Jesus, is still working through Jesus, and any completion of the story will come through that ongoing work. The future is God's; God does things from the future that burst into our present. That's the hope of the resurrection: God working in the present moment from the vantage point of the future. Death did not defeat Jesus and it won't defeat us. We have the same future with God that is assured and testified to here in the present, through the glory of Easter Sunday.

But that still leaves us with an open-ended story. How does the story end? As the readers, that's for us to determine. How do our perspectives and experiences imagine the details of the final chapter? Where do we find our Galilee's, those formative places where our own journeys began and how do we find our way back to that place which had no clear boundaries, that place that was full of possibilities. Our God, after all, is not one who observes the boundaries we erect for ourselves. "It can't be done" are foreign words to the God of Creation and Resurrection, as are phrases like "it's not in the budget" and "that's not how we do things." There's a reason Jesus said to "suffer the little children to pass" and "unless we become like children." Children are in the Galilee parts of their lives. They look at the world as God does, with endless possibilities, not through lenses that only see limitations. They still have hope, hope that we often lose as we allow ourselves to be molded by the world around us, losing our sight of the hope and promise we felt in the beginning, in our own Galilees. But whether we choose to go to

Galilee as disciples of Jesus or stay mired in self-imposed limitation, God keeps bringing God's kin-dom closer, keeps seeking like-minded Galileans to join in God's work in bringing that future to the here and now.

So how will you finish the tale?

Will you seek and join the God of endless possibilities, bringing hope to a world that sees none, or will you let it end with the crucifixion and the empty tomb?

As we prepare to join together in the table fellowship of communion, may we reflect on where we see the story going, and what our part in the tale will be.

For we are not just readers, but active characters in God's ongoing manuscript.

And that...is the rest of the story. Amen.

Service of Communion

Words of Preparation

The invitation

All of us who are in love and fellowship in the family of God, who do truly and earnestly repent of our sins, who humbly put our trust in Christ, and who desire Christ's help that we might walk in newness of life, are invited to draw near to God and receive this holy communion to our comfort, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The Bread

Luke tells us that Jesus "took a loaf of bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them saying, 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"

Prayer of Blessing

Holy God,

We pray your blessing on this sacred symbol of Christ's broken body. May we receive and partake of this bread in faith, recalling the life and death of Jesus Christ. Increase our gratitude and our obedience. In the name of Christ we pray, Amen.

Partaking of the Bread

"The bread which we break is the communion of the body of Christ."

The Cup

We are told that Jesus said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood. Do this as often as you drink it in remembrance of me." And we are reminded, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

Prayer of Blessing

Holy and loving God, we pray your blessings upon this sacred symbol of the blood of Jesus the Christ. Our hearts are lifted in thanksgiving for love poured out. As in faith we drink this cup may your forgiveness and your divine spirit be poured afresh into our lives through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Partaking of the Cup

"The cup which we bless is the communion of the blood of Christ."

Prayer of Thanksgiving

O God, you are never far from us. Your reach out and touch us through your Spirit, through symbols, and through the hands of those we love. We are deeply grateful to have a place at your table and to share in this sacred food. By your grace may we continue on our pilgrimage, carrying into life the saving love of Christ, in whose name we pray, Amen.

Hymn – For Christ and the church 416

BENEDICTION [responsive]

Christ appeared to the disciples.

Christ appeared to us.

Christ will appear again.

Let this mystery be one we live.

Fashion us with Christ's hands.

Form us with Christ's heart.

Shape us with Christ's hope.

Let this resurrection be in our lives:

Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Christ is risen indeed! Allelujah!