

Kerry Mansir  
Christ Church Gardiner  
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Mark, our earliest Gospel writer, recording the events in the life and death of Jesus for future generations. was a great storyteller. Don't you just love a good story? I have great storytellers in my family. My brothers can bring a room to laughter with some tale of an altercation at a sports event or a misstep in a social situation. My dad takes longer to get going, but once he does, sit tight, you'll want to hear what he has to say.

Storytelling has never been my gift. Just ask my husband or my kids. I just can't get to the point quickly enough. I need to give you the back story of all the characters and how they were feeling at that moment, and did you know that this other thing happened you should probably know about first, and pretty soon I have lost my thread and the story is dead. There's a reason I preach with a manuscript and not extemporaneously. You're welcome.

Mark, however, the author of our Gospel this morning, knew how to tell a story. If you read all of Mark's Gospel at once, you will see how he moves the action along quickly. Jesus and the disciples are always on the move. Jesus heals. And then, he casts out demons. And then, he feeds people. And then, he argues with the Pharisees. And then, he tells parables. One thing follows the other without a lot of commentary. You are on the edge of your seat for the next, "And then..."

This final passage of Mark's Gospel is no different—the action sweeps us along. The women—Mary and Mary and Salome are on their way to the tomb with spices for anointing. They worried to themselves about how they would roll away the stone at the entrance, but that didn't slow them down. They would figure it out when they arrived. But to their surprise, when they got to the tomb, the stone is already rolled back. They enter and are told by a young man in a white robe that Jesus isn't there—that he has been raised. Then he instructs them to go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going on to Galilee and that they will see him there.

And then strangely, Mark ends his Gospel like this, "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." Then how does anyone ever find out about the resurrection, we may wonder.

Now most Bibles offer two alternative endings to Mark's Gospel after this chapter, but neither are thought to be original to Mark. So without those extra alternative endings, Mark's Gospel doesn't give us a resurrection story. Mark gives us a story of an empty tomb and amazement and fear and disbelief.

We get a climax but no resolution. There is no closing of the circle that we so desperately want. We don't know what these women and the other disciples do next. There is no resurrection appearance of Jesus, no grand reunion in Galilee.

Perhaps this was Mark's intention all along. He draws the audience in and allows the story to become about them. About us. What will we do with the promise that has been proclaimed—that Jesus will not be found in the tomb but has gone ahead of us to Galilee? Where is our Galilee?

Will we go out to meet Jesus there? Will we tell others his story? Or will we find ourselves stuck in wonder, confusion, and even fear?

How will we answer the "And then?" part of Mark's story? Because that's where we find ourselves—living in an unfinished story that began when the Spirit of God, like a mighty wind, swept over the waters of the earth. A story that took a twist no one was expecting when that same God took on human flesh 2000 years ago and lived among us. A story that shocks us still with a God willing to take on the suffering of the world on the cross, only to defeat death and rise again. A story that continues in us as we await the Kingdom of God. We are the, "And then?". What will we do with this unfinished story?<sup>i</sup>

N.T. Wright, one of the greatest modern scholars on the resurrection explains the significance of our encounters with Christ and our part in the unfinished story like this.

What you do in the Lord is not in vain. You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that's about to roll over a cliff...You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God's new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness...every act of care and nurture, of comfort and support, for one's fellow human beings...; and of course every prayer...every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.<sup>ii</sup>

What if we believed that our lives had this kind of power? If we believed our own individual stories are linked to this grand story of God's saving grace for the world? That we are not called to wait idly for the Kingdom of God to break through, but that we are called to actively build the Kingdom of God. Not alone or by our own power, but by the example of Jesus, by the guiding of the Holy Spirit, and with the love of God, our Mother and Father, strengthening us along the way.

The women at the tomb found themselves in a moment of crisis where everything had changed. I suppose they thought they had already moved through the moment of crisis at the crucifixion. But just when they had accepted Jesus's death, they discover, well they aren't even exactly sure what they have discovered. An empty tomb for sure. And besides that, a promise from a stranger. A promise that they will see Jesus again. The trajectory of their entire lives depends upon what they do next—will they open themselves to the promise or get stuck in the fear?

This past year has felt like one of crisis for many of us. And there has been plenty of fear. We continue to experience the global crisis of the pandemic and on top of that we have crises of political divisiveness, racial reckoning, climate change fears, and

economic instability for so many. COVID has brought death rates we could not imagine a little over a year ago. And even deaths that weren't COVID related have been more difficult this year because often, we have not been able to sit at the side of the dying or grieve with each other as we used to. Some of you lost a church in this past year. That's a sort of death, as well. Some of us have felt relationships stretched and tested by political and moral disagreements. There is no question we have lived through a challenging year that will have long-term consequences.

But we still get to write our place in the story, just like the women at the tomb. We can get stuck in the death and darkness or we can choose to believe in the promise of resurrection. We can live our own resurrection stories—ones of new life, light, growth. We can write chapters of love, gratitude and kindness. We can care and nurture, comfort and support our friends, and even our enemies. We can live into the resurrecting power of God and live into the new creation God desires. How will we write the next part of the story? How will we answer, "And then?"

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<sup>i</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Inspired*, 2018; page 217

<sup>ii</sup> N.T Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 208 (see Chap. 6, N. 3). —quoted in Evans, *Inspired*