

The End?
Mark 16:1-8
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Please pray with me:

*God of life,
on Whom even death has no hold –
Let us hear these words in the power of your Spirit,
so that your Word might startle us back into a fuller life than we know.
Through Christ, our Lord, amen.*

When I officiate weddings, I like to point out the elephant in the room from the start. So I always start my wedding homily by saying:

“Look, it’s been my experience that most people don’t really care what I have to say on the wedding day. All they really want is for me to get to the part where these two kiss. I get it. I want to see them kiss, too...” And then I say, “BUUTTTT...” and I try to convince the “dearly beloved” that are gathered there that day that I do have something to say worth hearing.

It usually doesn’t work. They just sort of power down while I’m talking, and then reboot when I get to the part where the couple kisses.

Preaching on Easter Sunday is kinda like that. It’s been my experience that most people don’t really care what I have to say on Easter. All they really want is for me to say “Christ is Risen!” and then let them get back to the music. I get it. I want to get back to the music, too. BUUTTTT... It’s Easter! We really should say something, right??

And given how pivotal Easter is to the gospel, it’s hard to imagine ever being done thinking and talking about Easter. So, let’s go over it again:

Last Friday, Jesus – the one in whom we were hoping – was crucified. And you cannot read that story as the disciples experienced it, unless you were thinking that last Friday we were at *the end* of the story.

Last Friday, someone was killed on inner-city streets, like Jesus. Last Friday, someone lost a home or a marriage or a battle to cancer. Last Friday, so many more people lost their lives in Ukraine and Gaza.

And if we take Good Friday as seriously as those who experienced all of those losses, we have to be thinking, “This is not the end that we had been hoping for, but at least it *was* the end.”

As a pastor, I discovered early on that when people have been going through difficult times, there is often some measure of relief that comes with just getting to *the end* of it. But stories that have no ending are unbearable.

And then we get to today — after *the ending* — to the part of the story where there's only supposed to be some acknowledgements; the part where the credits are supposed to roll. But Mark continues to tell us about Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, and Salome, who made their way to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus.

When they got there, they discovered that the stone — the *large* stone in front of the tomb — had been rolled back, and Jesus was *not* inside it. Instead, they encountered a young man in a white robe, who said to them, “He has been raised; he is not here... Go and tell his disciples that he's gone on ahead of you to Galilee, where it all began. You will see him there.”

And then the very next sentence — the very *last* sentence in the Gospel according to Mark — was: “So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.” *The end.*

What?! You call that an ending?? Mark, finish the story!

Tell us about Mary having a conversation with the guy she thought was just the gardener, but it was actually the risen Jesus. Or tell us about the two people on the road to Emmaus, but then this stranger comes alongside them, and they don't know it, but it's the risen Jesus. Or tell us that great story about doubting Thomas being invited to put his two fingers in the wounds of the risen Jesus. *Finish* the story like Matthew with “the Great Commission” or like Luke with the Ascension. Give us an ending! A happy ending, a sad ending — we can take it either way, but you've got to finish the story.

Well, we are not the first people to be troubled by Mark's refusal to write any more words. Most of our scholars agree that Mark's gospel ended with our passage today at verse eight. But very early on, longer manuscripts began to appear that had added on depictions of post-Easter appearances, like the ones we find in the other gospels.

So, from very near the beginning, the church has hated stories that have no ending.

Does the story end with lament or joy? Does there ever come a time when the nations of the earth grow weary of violent empire building or not? Do people actually encounter the risen Jesus and are transformed by that encounter or are they stuck in Good Friday?

Mark refuses to answer those questions. He just gives us this young man in a white robe, who says “He's been risen... and he's gone on to Galilee... that's where you'll see him.” And then Mark wraps up by saying, “And the women fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” Well there go the lilies and the bunnies.

Mark wants to leave us wide-eyed and hauling our way out of a cemetery. It sound more like a scene made for Halloween than for Easter. And that's because, according to Mark, Good Friday is not the frightening part of the story. That's just death and loss. We know that part all too well.

No, the frightening part *is* Easter – because Easter proclaims that death is not *the end*. And if that's true, then Good Friday is not *the end* of the story. And if that's true, then Easter is just the beginning.

We are coming up on the 79th Anniversary of the death of the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For those of you who don't know, Bonhoeffer stood against Hitler and his holocaust of the Jewish people. But he also refused to leave Germany – even though he knew his stance would cost him his life.

So, on April 9, 1945 – at the age of just 39 years old – in the Flossenbürg concentration camp, the Nazis hanged him. When the guard came to take him away, he whispered to his friends in his cell, "This is the end; for me, the beginning of life."

Sometimes, what *looks* like an ending is just the beginning. Sometimes, what *feels* for all the world like the end is just the beginning.

It's hard to believe, but this is my tenth Easter as pastor of First Baptist Church of Colorado Springs. Before serving here, I was an associate pastor. And there are some tangible things that I still recall with great fondness about being called as senior pastor of this church.

For one, I was given an actual office. That might seem silly to you, but in church life associate pastors are often tucked away in some random storage closet on the far side of the church and told that it's an "office." But not matter what the sign on the door may say, a storage closet is a storage closet. But not here. Here I was given a *real* office.

For instance, in my office I have my own private restroom – thank you, Dempsey Currie. And when I first arrived, the church even put in a brand new toilet just for me – my own personal throne.

And best of all, my new office has windows – and lots of them! My old office was four windowless walls with only fluorescent lights overhead. There were days that I could actually feel those fluorescent lights sucking the Christian right out of me.

And if all of that weren't enough, when I first arrived here at First Baptist, the church even provided a plant for me – a philodendron plant. You know, one of those leafy, vine-y sort of plants that are nearly impossible to kill, which made it a perfect choice for me.

There it was the day I walked in, sitting on the mantel with a glass watering jar next to it. I don't know if that plant was a hold over from a previous pastor or an orphan from

some recently deceased church member's home, or if it was an intentionally *new* plant for your *new* pastor — but there it was, my new partner in ministry.

It didn't take long for that plant to become special to me — because it became a metaphor for me about the excitement of my new ministry, about the step of faith this church had taken in calling me, and about the new chapter we were embarking on together. It became a symbol of new life. And because of how much optimism and expectation it came to represent, I named that little plant. Do you know what I named it? I named that plant *Hope*.

Hope for a good ministry. *Hope* for a new day. *Hope* for a bright future together. *Hope* for new life and growth.

And then, I took a vacation and forgot to ask anyone to check in on "Hope." And when I got back, it was dead. Leaves wilted and brown, vines drooping lifelessly to the ground. I had killed *Hope*.

I tried to revive it, but to no avail. I put it in the window and I gave it an extra drink of water. But, it looked terrible. Suddenly, my new office felt like a tomb. The plant looked so bad that one day I walked into my office, and it was gone. I was left to assume that our custodian had come in, taken one look at it, called the time of death, and removed the corpse for me. She had tagged it and bagged it and hauled it off. All that remained after that day was a water stain on the mantel where it had sat.

It's weird, but I took that loss really hard. I had come to see that plant as a sign of my new ministry here and it had taken me less than a year to kill it. What kind of omen was that? What could it mean? Was it all "hope"-less?

Well, a year or so went by, and I slowly stopped thinking about that plant so much. And then one day, do you know what happened? I opened my office door, and there it was — back on the mantel right where it used to sit! I couldn't believe it. At the time, it was just the humble beginnings of new growth, but there it was.

It turned out that unbeknownst to me, our custodian *had* taken that plant. But she hadn't thrown it out, as I had assumed. She'd taken that plant that I had killed and nurtured it back to life.

Now, do you know what I call that plant these days? I call it *Hope*. I still call it *Hope*.

And, ultimately, *that* is the story of Easter —
that God calls us out of hopelessness and into hope;
that in God's hands, what we think is the end
might just only be the beginning.

Happy Easter, First Baptist Church. Now let's get back to the music.
Amen.