

“We Almost . . . Published Glad Tidings”

4 April 2021: Easter Day (Year B)
Salado UMC, Salado, Texas 76571
Preaching Text: Mark 16:1-8

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**“A sudden bold and unexpected question doth many times surprise a man and lay him open”
Sir Francis Bacon (1561 - 1626).**

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Many people like puzzles—at least to a point. The *New York Times* Daily Crossword Puzzle is a puzzle that many Americans daily anticipate. Rubik’s cube is a puzzle that has notoriety as well. Yusheng Du (3.47) holds the current World record. He shaved off 0.75 seconds from the previous record set by Feliks Zemdegis (4.22). His record is the one and only sub 4 second solution achieved in competition.

The liturgical day of Easter represents more than any other day in the Christian year the unlocking of a mysterious puzzle that we all find ourselves in as living human creatures. The puzzle of which I speak is the puzzle that we call the meaning of life. Thoughtful people recognize that when Paul speaks of “the law of sin and of death” (Romans 8:2), he speaks to all of us. People, who are not yet satisfied with the person that they are, and understand human mortality, grasp that these circumstances continuously hang over our heads. How can we be fully human knowing that we sin against God, others, and ourselves? How can we be fully human knowing that soon we will all die? The resurrection addresses these questions. The resurrection affirms that there is more to human life than merely summed up by the phrase “here today and gone tomorrow.” Mark’s Gospel offers a vision of Christ’s resurrection on the “first day of the week.” Hear the Gospel lesson:

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.” 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 (Mark 16:1-8).

When we speak of puzzles, Mark’s Gospel has its share. First, there is what some readers call the “messianic secret.” In several places in Mark, Jesus tells his disciples not to reveal what they had seen or heard. Mark 7:36 reads: “Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it.” Later, in Mark 9:9, we read: “As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead.” Some suggest that the answer to this “messianic secret” puzzle is that Jesus used a form of “reverse psychology.” By telling followers not to share their experiences, Jesus nearly guaranteed that they would. Yet, the rationale was simpler and less crafty. Jesus knew that prior to his resurrection the disciples were simply not ready to share good news this good.

Another puzzling aspect of Mark’ Gospel is the odd event that occurs after all Jesus disciples fled from the danger surrounding Jesus’ arrest. In a bizarre story, we read: “A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked” (Mark 14:51-52). No one has ever figured out exactly who this character in Mark’s Gospel is. Still, some scholars believe it was the evangelist himself. Could Mark have written himself into his Gospel much like Rembrandt painted himself into some of his paintings?

Although the briefest Gospel, Mark is even so clearly an artist. Several features of Mark’s Gospel bear mention. First, most biblical scholars believe that Mark’s story of Jesus was the first of the four Gospels to relate Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Second, Mark displays urgency as he describes Jesus’ ministry. Unlike Matthew and Luke, who relate the origins of Jesus in a manger and a trip to Egypt with the Holy Family, Mark begins with John the Baptizer baptizing Jesus in the Jordan. Also, the word “immediately” appears in the Bible’s NRSV translation ninety-seven times. Out of these instances, Mark supplies the term “immediately” a whopping twenty-seven times (see Mark 1:12, 18, 20, 42; 2:12; 3:6; 4:15-17 for a few examples). To read Mark straight through from beginning to end is nothing

if not a breathless exercise. Mark's mission is to narrate Jesus' story as thoroughly and quickly as possible.

Yet, the most peculiar of all Mark's puzzles is the ending. There are three distinctive conclusions to Mark's Gospel. If you own a good study Bible you may look it up for yourself. The manuscripts call these endings the "shorter ending," the "longer ending" and finally what we read a few minutes ago—"the traditional ending." The traditional ending is most likely the authentic ending. This traditional ending is the one we find in the Gospel's oldest manuscripts.

You might do well to ask why three endings of a Gospel? My guess is that in the first few decades of the church, as it read and worshipped, using the emerging letters of Paul and the writings about Jesus some of which eventually became the Gospels, churches noted the abrupt ending of Mark. This ending was so painful that the early church resolved to write another, more complete, and satisfying ending. The shorter and longer endings of Mark were more in accord with the synoptic Gospels. Thus, contained in some of the very early manuscripts are two such attempts, alongside the traditional, although painful, ending. What really happened we can never know. We have long lost the truth to history.

So, this is how Mark concludes the Gospel: "So they [Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8).

In a way, Mark offers modern believers a wonderful and blessed opportunity. By leaving the ending of Mark's Gospel as it is, we contemporary people have the opportunity to complete the gospel story in our own way. Rather than flee from the open tomb this Easter morning, we can rather go forth and write another ending. Our ending of Mark's Gospel story might be with our own unique proclamation that Jesus Christ has risen. Go and write your gospel. Jesus has risen indeed! Amen.

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