

Sermon: Where Do We Go from Here?

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

1 April 2018

Based on **Isaiah 25:6-10; Mark 16:1-8**

We began our journey to the Cross on Ash Wednesday which fell on Valentine's Day this year. And today, Easter Sunday, is April Fool's Day.

Man plans, and God laughs.

During our journey, we learned about several different kinds of covenants; we learned about the true cost of discipleship, which can be heavy; and we've seen the many sides of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. We also heard, repeatedly, about God's everlasting steadfast love for all of us. The goal of our journey, and the challenge, has been to achieve some measure of inner transformation, to strengthen our faith, and to gain some insight into how we can put our faith into action in the world outside.

Have you ever read something, and thought, 'This is absolutely true?' For me, Mark's Gospel, when read in its entirety, is one of those things. Today, we read just the very end of his Gospel, as he originally wrote it, and his ending has caused untold distress among the faithful ever since.

There are two other endings of Mark, a shorter and a longer ending. The shorter ending was added in about the fourth century, and the longer ending dates to the late second century. The longer one mixes appearance motifs from the other Gospels plus some new material, in an effort to provide a more satisfactory ending to what is truly a mystifying event. Neither ending was written by Mark. Mark's Gospel ends with the women sayin' nuthin' to nobody, for they were afraid. But somebody squealed.

Mark's later editors must have thought, this can't be right.

But it was right, because that's how Mark wrote it; it's up to us to dig in to see what he might have meant with this abrupt, non-good news ending. We can start by recalibrating what we think Mark's Gospel is. If we think of it as an extended theological parable, then we can begin to wonder what the whole thing means for our faith and for our lives, because a parable is meant to invite interpretation by the hearer.

People tend to think that Mark is pretty hard on the disciples, that group of twelve men hand-picked by Jesus to follow him to learn and do ministry. Along with the disciples, Jesus' group included women and men who supported him, people like the two Mary's, Salome, Joseph of Arimathea, and those others named in the Gospel.

The disciples are supposed to be insiders and we're meant to identify with them, but throughout the story, they show signs of *not* getting it, of being *outsiders*. Jesus has to explain every parable to them, after declaring that only those on the inside can understand them (4:13-14, 33-34). When Jesus questions their faith after calming the storm while they're out in the boat, they ask, 'Who is this...' (4:35-41). They seem to misunderstand everything.

Then, at the Last Supper, Jesus calls them all out: one will betray him; one will deny him; and they all will desert him. This is not how we expect insiders to behave.

That's the last time we see the disciples. Jesus dies alone, without any of them around him. Only the Roman centurion witnessed Jesus' death up close, and he's the last person we would expect to say, 'Truly this man was God's Son!' It looks as if this symbol of the world's only superpower might be an insider without knowing it.

But then there are the women at the Cross, looking on from a distance. Mark says, 'These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem (15:39-41).'

Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the Council and one of those who also waited for the kingdom of God, claimed Jesus' body, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and placed it the tomb. The two Mary's followed him and saw where the body was laid.

When the sabbath was over, they and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him, to finish the job of a proper burial that Joseph started but, in his haste, did not complete. In other words, they didn't go to the tomb expecting to meet the risen Son of God. And when they didn't find his body there, they were afraid. The women's fear overcomes their faith.

The problem here is that, at least six times in Mark's Gospel, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection. Did no one take him seriously? The women ought to have known he wouldn't be in the tomb. How could it be that after all this, no one seems to have understood exactly who Jesus was? Is it possible to have faith and yet not believe?

Even though the women were alarmed to see a young man dressed in white in the tomb, he picks up on that and tells them *not* to be alarmed. Then he points out where Jesus obviously is not and tells them instead where the risen Jesus really is, which they should have known: he is in Galilee, waiting for them, just as he told them he would be. Yet, the women were seized with terror and amazement.

So, what's in Galilee? In one way, it's the old neighborhood. It's where Jesus' ministry started way back when, in places like Cana, Nazareth, Capernaum, and Bethsaida. It represents the everyday world of the women and the disciples; it's also where they are needed. And that's exactly the kind of place in which to find Jesus. It's not what we expected but should have known.

There's more good news. Isaiah tells us that on Mount Sinai – Zion – in God's abundant feast at the end times, the food is rich, but God adds marrow to give it extra flavor; the wine is well-aged, but God makes it run clear. On top of that, as part of the meal, God destroys, or in Hebrew, *swallows up*, the mourning shroud wrapped around us all. But the feast isn't complete until God swallows up Death, the cause of mourning.

God's salvation, Isaiah tells us, is for *all* nations, for *all* people. God's love is available for everyone. God's promises are solid. During Lent, we have heard and talked about God's faithfulness and ever-lasting steadfast love. So, we can count on having a place at the table in that metaphorical feast. But Christians hear echoes of Isaiah's words in the words Jesus spoke at the Last Supper.

Unfortunately, we are stuck somewhere in the middle, with that first Easter with its empty tomb on one end and God's sumptuous feast on the holy mountain at the other. Where we stand, it's hard to make out whether Jesus is on the loose or not, or where we might find him in and amongst all the sorrow in the world. God's feast seems so far away – it is a metaphor, after all – can we ever expect salvation in the here and now, when we seem to need it the most?

There's always some noise in the background: we offer up prayers for Jen and Don and all the rest of the world in all the world's situations. We all seem to be living in Galilee, searching for Jesus in the crowd, looking for him to help us, to heal us, to get us back on track. He can be hard to see in the everyday world. We know he's there, so we have to keep looking.

So, where do we go from here?

The Rev. Richard White, a preacher and Gospel songwriter, in that order, wrote a jaunty little tune called ‘Jesus Dropped the Charges,’ which includes these lyrics, which I’ve mashed up a bit:

‘I was guilty
of all the charges,
doomed and disgraced,
but Jesus dropped the charges,
(and now I’m)
Saved through
grace and faith.’

The Rev. White gets it right – we are saved through grace and faith, all of us. And grace is given to all who want it. We sometimes think of Jesus as our personal Savior, but God will save us, one or ten at a time, through repentance and forgiveness.

The Rev. sings that ‘Jesus, with a special love,
forgave me of every wrong.
He picked me up,
turned me around,
gave me a brand-new song.’

This song of repentance and new life reminds us that we *can* move from fear to faith, to trust and rely on a God who is always there, a God of steadfast abundant love.

The young man in the tomb said, ‘The crucified Christ is risen. He has gone on ahead of us and he is in our midst, just as he told us.’ And it’s absolutely true.

Alleluia.