

Sermon: Going Ahead  
New North Church, Hingham  
Rev. Steven M. Aucella  
4 April 2021

Based on **Isaiah 25:6-9; Mark 16:1-8**

It's been a *long* week, and now we find ourselves at what looks to be the end of the story. Let's review:

At the beginning of March, we heard a reading from John's Gospel in which Jesus said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." But he was speaking of the temple of his body.

Mark was careful in establishing a timeline in his narrative, and so it was 9:00 in the morning when they crucified him. At noon, a darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. At 3:00, Jesus died.

When evening had come, making this the second day, the day before the sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea – a respected member of the council that had recently condemned Jesus to death – asked for and was granted Jesus' body, and he laid it in a tomb. Two women named Mary witnessed this.

When the sabbath was over, very early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene, Salome, and another Mary, this one the mother of James, went to the tomb and found it empty, except for a young man who said, "Do not be alarmed." It appeared to them that Jesus had indeed been raised up. So, he was right: three days.

But, compared to the other three Gospels, this is one lousy ending.

For as long as people have been telling stories, we have enjoyed and valued conclusive endings. If you are of a certain age, you might remember a TV series called *M\*A\*S\*H*, which was based on a movie of the same name. Here's a spoiler alert: in the last scene in the last episode, a beloved character died. No one saw that coming, not even the cast members in the scene. It wasn't the ending anyone wanted, but it was an ending.

Compare that with the ending of the gangster series called *The Sopranos*. In the final scene in the final episode, did Tony get killed or not? It was an ambiguous and totally unsatisfying ending, and it spawned all sorts of unhelpful rumors and sequel ideas.

Same thing with Mark's ending. No one knew what to make of it – the women fled in terror and amazement and said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. And that's the end? Many people thought that that was not the ending the 'good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God' deserved.

They thought Mark's Gospel should have a better ending, and so, between the second century and some time in the fourth century, two new endings were added to it: one was called The Shorter Ending of Mark and the other was called, naturally enough, the Longer Ending. Neither one clarifies what Mark intended, but they were endings.

The world today is full of skeptics. We're suspicious of every good intention. You could rescue a cat from a tree, and someone would question your motive.

The end of Mark's Gospel raises all sorts of questions. What were these women really up to? Granted, they witnessed Jesus' burial and his stunning disappearance, but where were the men? Who was the guy in the tomb, telling the women where Jesus had gotten to? Did he make it all up?

Terror and amazement seem like valid emotions given the circumstances, but the women told no one what they had seen. Of course, they must have eventually told someone, or else Mark would have no story, but why not mention that in the story? What if no one ever told the story? Would we have ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth?

But we do have the story.

Why were Jesus and his disciples in Jerusalem in the first place? They were there to celebrate the Passover. And what is the Passover all about? Telling the story.

In a recent blog article, Bari Weiss wrote that, in every generation, Passover obligates each Jew 'to see himself or herself as though he or she *personally* went forth from Egypt.'<sup>1</sup> In the same way, Christians are obligated to see ourselves in the various characters of the Passion story and to walk the way of Jesus. In that way, we gain insight and understanding into ourselves. Rather than ask, 'What would Jesus do,' how about, 'What would *we* do?' Would I react as Peter did, for example?

Several times during the narrative, Mark suggests the possibility that Jesus will escape. Each time, Mark gives us the opportunity to imagine a different outcome, but each time, it's a false hope and the crucifixion remains real.

In Gethsemane, Jesus asked God if it were possible to avoid all of this, to remove the cup from him, since all things were possible with God. But it was God's will.

At the arrest, the possibility of escape takes the form of armed resistance, but Jesus stops his defenders, saying, let the Scripture be fulfilled.

At his trial, the council had no legal case, and everyone knew it. Even the witnesses were false, so maybe the council will have to release Jesus after all. And then, the chief priest asked, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Throughout Mark's Gospel, Jesus has warned people to not speak of him as the Messiah. But here, at exactly the wrong time, he himself confirms that he is, and thus condemns himself. He could have kept quiet and gotten away.

Later, Pilate, who knew Jesus was innocent, proposed releasing him, but the crowd, riled up by the chief priests, chose to release the murderer Barabbas instead.

And finally, on the cross, Jesus has one last chance for a miraculous rescue when challenged to save himself at the last minute, which he refused to do. All possible avenues for escape are now closed. The point is, try as we might, there is no way to avoid the cross; there can be no triumph without suffering.

But as he goes to his earthly death, Jesus lays claim to all the titles people have claimed for him along the way: Christ, Son of God, and Son of Man. Even the Roman centurion acknowledged that "truly this man was God's Son."

So, what we have here is a story without an end. Jesus was right about the three days, and now he's gone ahead of us, 'God on the loose,' as one scholar put it. Mark's conclusion makes perfect sense if we think of it as a beginning.

In verse one, Mark declared his work to be the good news *about* Jesus Christ. 'The good news' was certainly about Jesus but not *for* him or what happens to him. The good news is what Jesus' ministry causes to happen for *others*. His life and ministry are the good news that God put into the world for others, including us.

Mark left the story open-ended, and we are called to finish it, or to at least write the next chapter. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Bari Weiss, "What It Takes to Go From Slavery to Freedom," [bariweiss.substack.com/p/what-it-takes-to-go-from-slavery](https://bariweiss.substack.com/p/what-it-takes-to-go-from-slavery), accessed 26 March 2021.