

Faith Mennonite Church  
April 8, 2012 - Easter  
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### **The Story after "The End"**

*Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Mark 16:1-8*

*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 16:8*

Last December I was in a meeting of the Minnesota Council of Churches where Peter Rogness, the bishop of the St. Paul Synod of the ELCA, shared a story. The story occurred early in his ministry when he was a young pastor in a parish in Wisconsin. He and his wife had invited her parents to celebrate Easter with them. Peter's father-in-law was a retired Lutheran minister and Peter imagined that the best compliment he could pay his father-in-law would be to invite him to preach on Easter Sunday. His father-in-law accepted the invitation and all went well on Easter morning.

Once home from church, Peter was feeling happy and expected his father-in-law to comment on his generosity in sharing the pulpit on the high holy day of the Christian year. To his dismay, as they sat down to Easter dinner, his father-in-law sighed and confessed: "Easter has always been my least favorite day to preach. What does one say to top the story as it's told in the Gospels and how does one compete for attention with the lofty choir music, the triumphant melodies from the organ, the colorful flowers, and the beautiful Easter dresses of little girls?"

Perhaps that is the explanation for the abrupt ending of the resurrection story in the gospel of Mark! Because we have four gospel accounts of the resurrection, each with their own details and narration of how the women and disciples responded to the news of Jesus' return to life, we're always caught short, at least a bit, by Mark's abrupt ending: "and they said nothing for they were afraid." Of course, Mark's gospel *is* the most succinct of all the gospels. Yet ordinary readers and learned scholars alike have wondered and puzzled at the meaning of a story that ends in fear and silence rather than sharing the good news. (Albeit, our Bibles do carry two alternate endings, which portray an ongoing story, but the oldest manuscripts end where our reading ended this morning.)

Does this mean that for the community from which this gospel emerged, the story ended in fear? Hardly! Indeed, many scholars believe this gospel was written for, or from within, the church in Rome which suffered the persecution of Emperor Nero, 25-30 years after Jesus' death. Mark's gospel records not a story that ended, but a story that in some ways repeated itself precisely because of the resurrection. There would have been no Christians to persecute had the story, the good news of the resurrection and the end of cycles of violence, simply ended. Mark's gospel is testimony to the power of the resurrection to encourage and inspire a community that has lived the passion of Christ not only in memory but in the reality of their own lives.

*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.*

We can only understand this concluding verse of Mark in the context of the whole gospel. The Gospel of Mark is sometimes called the "secret gospel" because throughout the narrative Jesus

repeatedly says to those whom he heals, "do not tell anyone." In the passion narrative that we read last Sunday, there are two portions that indicate that Jesus and his followers communicated carefully and sometimes in code as clandestine, persecuted groups have to do. Remember how he sent a couple disciples to get the donkey he would ride into Jerusalem; some previous arrangements seem to have been made. In the same way, Jesus instructed his disciples to follow a man carrying a water jar to the house where they will eat the Passover meal. Men didn't carry water jugs on their heads; that was women's work. This was another coded message. Jesus' life and death, and the lives and deaths of his community of followers took place in repressive, conflicted political environments. Fearing and saying nothing is not an indication of cynicism or disbelief as we might project onto the text from our modern context—a first-world problem, as my son would say—but rather it speaks to a reality in which people's beliefs and actions can literally cause them their very lives. This reality is still far too common in many parts of our world.

If we focus only on the final verse of Mark we risk overlooking the surprises that are contained in Mark's resurrection account and the passion that precedes it. Surprising faith, surprising trust, surprising mercy and forgiveness are all elements of this story.

First, of course, is the surprise of the presence of women, those persistent women who hardly show up in the gospel until the very end, but then we're told they were following all along, and what's more, they were helping to support Jesus. They followed to the bitter end, to the cross, at the burial, and returning to the tomb three days later. Of course, like carrying water, this too was women's work: it was women who verified the death of a person and prepared bodies for burial. Women's word may not have had much weight in other areas of first-century Palestinian life, but society did trust them to verify when someone was dead.

But announcing a resurrection was another matter. Truth-telling is one of the first casualties in a repressive setting. How challenging then to be tasked with sharing a truth that is both out of the ordinary and that will unmask the power of both the religious establishment and the Roman empire! Crucifixion, the ultimate tool to punish and terrorize, would be rendered powerless by a story of resurrection. One way, of course, for the powerful to control the resurrection spin would be to say that Jesus never actually died. Help for the women on this count comes from a surprising, unlikely source: the centurion, the empire's official witness at the crucifixion, steps up to verify to Pilate that Jesus did indeed die. Moments earlier, at the time of death, this same centurion proclaimed Jesus to be the "God's son" the singular person in all of Mark's gospel to make this affirmation.

Another surprise in Mark's gospel comes at the burial as another new character in the story, Joseph of Arimathea, enters the scene. He is described as a "respected member of the council who was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God" (15:43). Yet the previous chapter indicated that the council voted unanimously for Jesus' death. Whether or not he was present at the vote, his presence at the cross and tomb, is a powerful, surprising witness of courage and commitment.

Perhaps the biggest surprise comes in the message of the man in the tomb. The surprise is not in his message of resurrection and that Jesus would meet them in Galilee, for that was a simple

reiteration of what Jesus had told them on three different occasions before he had died. No the surprise comes when he says: "Go tell the disciples and Peter." And Peter... Peter, the one who followed close on the night of Jesus' trial, yet vehemently denied knowing him. The one who stood *close* but not *with* Jesus when he most desperately needed a friend. The surprise is that God does not hold anyone guilty for Jesus' death. Not Peter and by extension the disciples who all deserted, not Joseph of Arimathea and the Jewish council, not the centurion and the Roman empire. For Jesus' death and resurrection freed them all, as it frees us, from sin and darkness so that we can live in the light of God's presence.

It may have taken the women a bit of time to comprehend that. It must have been a huge hurdle, going to tell Peter that he was still in the game and that Jesus loved him as much as ever. We so want to have someone to blame...we're so inclined to cling to our pain. But the tomb is empty! We won't find Jesus there. We'll only find him in Galilee, in all of the places where he taught, and healed, and fed people, and announced the kingdom.

And that, my friends, is where the story of the empty tomb continues today: in all the ordinary and dangerous places where people, ourselves included, refuse to let doubt and death and pain have the final word. This week Gerald and I heard a presentation of resurrection in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where more than 6 million people have been killed since 1998<sup>1</sup> and countless women have been raped as a host of armed groups vie for power in the country's eastern region that is packed with precious minerals. In the midst of terror that exceeds the Jewish holocaust in Europe both in terms of length of time and number of deaths, brave Congolese women and parish priests have formed support systems for communities fleeing violence and for victims of rape. At the same time they have taken on the arduous work to responsibly reintegrate perpetrators, many of them mere boys, back into the community.

The story continues in Colombia and Central America where Mennonite churches have developed organizations and networks that offer training within churches and in neighborhood organizations and schools to promote a vision of peace and practical peacemaking tools. When I was in Honduras in January, which is now rated the most violent country in the world due to the homicide rate because of violence from gangs and drug trafficking, a friend told me: "we take precautions but we will not let the violence paralyze us."

The story continues in the classrooms where some of us teach...in the offices and organizations where we work...in the STAR and Creating a Culture of Peace workshops that some of our members facilitate...in the time we spend volunteering in homeless shelters or rebuilding the homes and lives of victims of disaster...and in our homes as we instill values of life and hope, resisting strong cultural pressures to conform and to fear. The story continued in a profound way on Maundy Thursday this week, when Arlene Geissinger underwent surgery to transfer a kidney, a gift of life to Marilyn Miller, a gift of reconciliation between our congregations.

We have not gathered this morning to simply remember the resurrection as a one-time, past event. We gather as an on-going sign of the resurrection. Christ is risen! Christ goes before us each day. Let us follow in trust and hope.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.enoughproject.org/blogs/congo-death-toll-rivaling-holocaust>