

Sermon
4 April 2021
West Kirk of Calder/Polbeth Harwood

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Reading: Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday

Easter Sunday is the most significant of all the Sundays! And even more so this year, because we are able to be together here in the church again after such a long time, to celebrate the fact that Jesus is alive!

But before we delve a little deeper into the Easter story, I would like to ask you a question: Do you enjoy losing yourself in a good book, or film?

I'm pretty sure most people do, because stories play such an important part in our lives. We even refer to the events that take place all through our lives, as our life *stories*!

If an author, or film director, know what they are doing, they can pull you into the story so much that you forget about your own life for a while and see what the characters see, even *feel* what the characters feel.

And then, there is probably nothing as satisfying as a happy ending!

But oh, some authors are really *good*! Because if they want to keep you interested even after the story is finished, their last chapter will end in a cliff-hanger!

The good thing about that is that you know there will be a volume 2, or another series on the telly, but oh dearie me, the suspense of not knowing what's going to happen next can sometimes drive me crazy!

A cliff-hanger can make you feel excited and uncertain at the same time! It makes you start counting the days till the next episode starts!

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The Gospel of Mark ends with a cliff-hanger, because originally, the gospel ended with the verses we read together today.

So, Jesus was dead. He died on a Friday, just before the Sabbath started. Jews were not allowed to do any kind of work on the Sabbath, so Jesus was buried on the Friday evening, but his body could not be anointed then, as was the custom, because the Sabbath started at sunset on a Friday, and lasted until an hour after sunset on a Saturday.

Burial took place very soon after people died in those days, because bodies would start decomposing very quickly because of the warm temperature.

Men and woman had clearly indicated different roles to fulfil in society, and it was the responsibility of men to do the actual burial, but the woman had to make sure that the bodies of the deceased were anointed – that they were cleaned and rubbed in with oils and spices to make them smell nice.

This was a very important part of the grieving process, and it was regarded as very shameful to not give a family member a proper burial.

So the women who were very close to Jesus set off to the tomb they saw Jesus was buried in, first thing on the Sunday morning, because the Sabbath was now over.

They had their oils, spices and perfumes ready to perform this last task in love, preparing themselves to say goodbye to Jesus one last time.

But they were concerned about something – how were they going to get the stone rolled away to get inside his tomb?

But when they arrive there, they are astonished to see that the stone has already been rolled away!

So – the difficulty they expected to find – the stone – wasn't there... But instead, they now had a greater challenge to face, because Jesus wasn't in the tomb!

They saw him being laid to rest there with their own eyes a couple of days before, and they just couldn't understand what was happening now!

Inside the tomb they saw a young man dressed in a white robe, who tells them that Jesus is risen.

Mark doesn't bother explaining that this man was an angel, it's as if it's assumed that everybody would know that.

He told them that Jesus was alive and then he commissioned them to go *tell* the disciples and Peter, and that they would see Jesus in Galilee, that he was going on ahead of them.

And then the Gospel ends with these words: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

No THAT’s what I call a cliff-hanger!

Mark is the oldest of all the Gospels, the one that was written first. And originally this gospel ended with the passage we read this morning.

Much later verses 9-20 were added on, probably because some of the early readers of this gospel just couldn’t console themselves with this open ending.

The women’s lives were turned upside down. They went to say goodbye to Jesus for the last time, and pay their respects, but then they get told that he was not dead anymore.

And they were so shocked, that they run away, and told nobody.

The End.

But... *we know* that was not the end.

We know they didn’t keep that news to themselves for very long, because the other Gospel writers tell us what happened next. Volume 2,

3 and 4; or version 2, 3, and 4 of this amazing story fills in the gaps, takes us to that happy ending.

But Mark doesn't. Why?

All through the Gospel of Mark we find a theme of secrecy. Jesus always warns people who figure something out about who he is, to not tell others.

Why exactly Mark ended his Gospel in this way, I don't know. But one thing I do know, is that I find it to be very effective.

This cliff-hanger makes you realise that this is not the end of the story.

That really, the *end* of this story is just the *beginning*! The end of Jesus' life signified the beginning of our lives in relationship with God.

This cliff-hanger makes us look forward to what is yet to come.

And it signifies that the end of life on earth is not the end at all, it is the beginning of another dimension of life – with God.

So to me this is an amazing Gospel.

Mark doesn't give us all the answers we are looking for. He actually leaves us with more questions than answers.

But then – isn't that exactly what life is like?

Because we are not supposed to be able to understand everything. Only God himself knows all the answers.

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The women were looking for something, but they unexpectedly found something different.

And this brings me to the question: What are we looking for in life? And how do we react when we find something different?

The women didn't know what to do, at first they were paralyzed with shock, and then they ran away!

How often do we run away when we are faced with difficult circumstances?

The Gospel of Mark reassures us that if we sometimes find life difficult and don't know what to do, that we are in good company.

We don't always know what the answers are and how to handle difficult situations, and that is okay.

As long as we realise that it doesn't stop there. Because we know the story didn't end there!

And God's story with us will never end.

So, let's live a good story.

Let's be who God made us to be, because our story started where Mark's Gospel ended.

God is not finished with our story. And he never will be.

So let's write our life stories in ink, and not with pencil, because our lives are a testimony to God's love.

Let's draw others into our stories with the way we say things, the way we do things, the way we accept things.

Mark reminds us that the story is not finished yet. We don't *read* about the happy ending, because that is still to come. We don't *read* about it, because we have to *live* it!

Through Jesus, God drew a thick black line through the words: THE END.

Easter is the beginning. Our beginning. And that should make us jump with joy!

Amen