

“The Story is Never Complete”

A Sermon Shared with St. Andrew's United Church
on Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: I Corinthians 15:1-11
Mark 16:1-8

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

This is Easter Sunday, and the story of the end of Jesus' life on earth is here.

The end did not come with his teachings and healings. The end did not come with his trial and crucifixion.

The end did not arrive with his burial in a tomb.

The end came, as Mark and other writers tell us, with his resurrection to new life and his appearances to the disciples.

Well, some of the gospel writers tell us that is what happened. And even Mark's gospel has a series of appearances to Peter and to the 12, and even to the 500 apostles. But most scholars believe that Mark's gospel originally ended with verse 8 of chapter 16. It was the address to the women, and their inability to act, that ends the gospel story of the earliest gospel to be written.

Now think about that. What story do you want to have – a story of appearances after death to give people hope that Jesus is alive, or a small group of people (who just happen to be women) who have no energy or interest in speaking about the fact Jesus is alive – they are beaten down emotionally by all that has taken place and they go home. And in fairness to them, at least they showed up. Woody Allen is given credit for the saying “80% of life is simply showing up.” These women showed up – a far greater testimony than the disciples who ran and hid.

Is this a highlight or lowlight? Ecstasy or sadness? Empowered for the future or buried by the past and full of inertia in the present?

Most of us have no energy for new life and renewed enthusiasm if we have been beaten down and discouraged in the past. When life grants us lemons, we rarely have the energy or inclination to make lemonade.

Those who gathered at the tomb on that Easter morning were tired and discouraged. The disciples were not even around, as I said. They had fled. These women knew what they doing – they came ready for the proper preparation of the body, but they could do nothing, for there was no body there.

Have you ever been in a situation where the unfolding of the events was so far against what you expected that you did not know what to do, or how to react?

It may be a major event like a disaster, a major explosion or accident or crisis, or possibly facing an exam in school where all of the questions were the very things you did not study, and felt were not discussed in class. What do I do now?

We have all experienced those relatively minor events in life where we sense we have been tricked, betrayed, or simply misled. But what about the major events like the women facing the death of Jesus and the pain of his crucifixion?

This weekend I have been receiving updates from a friend, a former parishioner whose son is sitting in his own vigil with his partner as her elder daughter is struggling to live. Nine years of drug use, alcohol consumption, poor eating habits, and other abuses of the body have left her clinging to life. When this friend last spoke to her son's partner, asking how her daughter was doing, she replied: "Everything seems to be shutting down. It is so hard waiting for the end." Body shutting down, organs not responding, life dwindling and the future bleak. And she is only 25.

A horrific event for anyone to face, and yet Jesus himself by our best calculations was probably 33 at his crucifixion. A young man himself, but he did not do things to destroy his physical life, and yet faced a disastrous physical ending of torture and pain that no one deserves.

But with Jesus, even as it is for the young woman I mentioned and her family, there is no end. Even at death our associations with others live on. Our memories are filled with their lives and their experiences. There is no end to the death and grieving process. Yet we also continue to celebrate lives we have known every day, even as we mourn the passing of lives of people we have known every day. That's the way life is. Trying to bring an end to grief and loss only makes us dwell on it all the more.

The story of Jesus, Mark reminds us, is a story that never ends.

There are many stories with that title in folk lore around the world.

One of my favourite stories comes from Czechoslovakia. It is a story for children. A shepherd takes his sheep across a stream and onto a far hillside every day, then brings them home at night. This one day, however, it was already dark when he began to bring them back, and due to recent rains the brook had swollen so that it was not safe to bring them back through the brook after dark. There was only a small foot bridge to bring them home, and so the shepherd began the long trek home by guiding the sheep, one by one, across the foot bridge. The story teller then says: "Let's begin the story again once all of the sheep have crossed the footbridge." (silence)

You see, there were so many sheep it took a long time for the sheep to cross. But they will get there soon. (silence)

The story teller has many such pauses, and finally admits that it took all night for the sheep to get across the bridge, and then it was morning, and time to bring them across the bridge again to the hillside where they grazed each day.

Over thirty years ago the book *Never Ending Story*, a fantasy thriller, was turned into a blockbuster movie. The movie almost did not reach the light of the screen, for the original author of the book, Michael Ende, tried to get a court injunction to stop the movie as the ending was not in the original novel. It was a completely new addition to the story to give the movie what the director saw as an appropriate ending.

Ende would have none of it. He fought through the courts to have this movie stopped, but lost.

The screenplay writer who was part of the re-write remarked that the success of *A Never Ending Story* was clear: "It was not just a novel that people read because it was suspenseful or full of fantasy, so – it was more than that. It was a novel that gave people an idea of the meaning of life."

Surely that is why Mark knew he did not need to wrap up the story of Jesus' life in a neat package, find a simple ending that brings everything together. The story of Jesus' life, teachings and influence is a never ending story. Why, even Luke, who followed up his Gospel with a story of the early church in the book of Acts, did not have a packaged end to volume two of his works.

There is no simple end. Each one of us is invited to add to the story, to help complete the message, to live the faith that Jesus shared, and make sure the story does not end – ever.

Thanks be to God who gives us such hope and optimism to be life changers and life bearers for those around us. May it, indeed, never end.

The story of Jesus' life and death is a never ending story. That is because the impact he has had on the world and the people in it, the power of his message and its ability to transform others, lives on.

The stories of Easter usually have experiences of the risen Christ, but Mark, it is widely assumed by modern scholars, originally ended his gospel at chapter 16, verse 8. A message is given to select women, but no appearance of Jesus, no surprise encounter, no shocking engagement of one once dead.

Why would Mark end his gospel in that way? Some suggest that since his gospel was the first one written, he did not have access to stories that were heard later as people shared their experiences and their interactions after the crucifixion.

We have learned on several fronts that people often wait years to share an experience of riveting importance to them. They may wait 4, 8, even 20 or more years before sharing an experience of abuse, or a time of personal trauma, or a story of conflict or a memory of wartime. And while experiences of the risen Christ were hardly equal to personal trauma due to abuse, attack, or war, the whole experience would be traumatic.

But I have a different theory as to why Mark left out such stories, even if he knew about them, in his original gospel draft. He wanted to remind us that no story is ever complete.

There is always a follow up reality, and a subsequent experience, that adds to the story to be shared. A good story never ends.

Now Hollywood measures a good movie these days as one with an open ending that will allow for the possibility of a sequel.

But Mark was not interested in religious sequels, or added stories. That was the purview of Luke. He followed up his gospel with a chapter two on the experiences of the early church under Peter and Paul – known as the Acts of the Apostles. Even with that book, though, Luke could hardly say his rendering of the early church was complete – it formed only the first chapter of what the church was to become (and is) today.

But Mark has no interest in sequels and making a multitude of movies, as far as I can determine. He wanted all of us to know that a story is never complete, and is always open to new scenes, new experiences, and new realities.

How a story impacts the world, and our lives, is up to us.