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Mark 16:1-8

By Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt

**“To Be Continued...”
Easter Sunday**

My wife Judith and I have always been big believers in the importance of reading with children. We started early with our two, reading not just little Golden books and the like but also longer, what we called “chapter”, books.

One of the first chapter books I ever read to our older daughter Rebecca was E.B. White’s classic children’s book, *Stuart Little*. If you’ve read the book, or have seen the movies very loosely based on it, you know that it tells of the adventures of a little mouse that is born to human parents. One of the characters in the book is a tiny bird named Margalo who comes to stay in the house with Stuart and his family. Stuart and Margalo become fast friends. But after some time, Margalo flies away.

Before long, Stuart misses Margalo. He decides he wants to find her, so he leaves home in his tiny mouse car and heads north looking for her. He has more adventures on the way. The book ends with Stuart still heading north and searching for his little bird friend.

Rebecca and I finished that book on a Friday night, not long after she turned four. The next day, she said to me, “We’re not done with *Stuart Little* yet, are we, Dad?” I told her, “Yes, Honey, we finished the book.” “But what about Margalo, Dad? He didn’t find Margalo yet. We must have ‘losed’ a page.” “No,” I said gently, “that’s the way the book ends. Sometimes books end that way.”

For the next five or ten minutes, Rebecca wondered out loud about who took the last page of the book. Maybe the people who checked the book out from the library before us forgot to bring back a page. Maybe her sister Martha tore out the last few pages when we weren’t looking. Maybe our beagle puppy ate the ending when the book was in the kitchen.

I didn’t try to argue with her. After all, I could see why she, being just a child, might be a little confused. It is rare for a children’s book to be so open-ended. Ordinarily, kids books (and adult’s books, too) seem to leave off with everything all wrapped up. Not so with *Stuart Little*.

The vast majority of scholars suggest that the Gospel of Mark originally ended in a similarly open-ended fashion. The women come to the tomb, meet a young man there, hear his words, and flee the tomb, amazed and scared, without saying a word to anyone. Most sources say the “original” manuscript of Mark’s gospel ended right there, where today’s reading ended, at the close of the eighth verse of chapter sixteen.¹

To make the sense that we must have “losed a page” even more pronounced, the Greek text of verse eight actually ends with a preposition: the word “for...” Now even in Greek, ending a sentence with a preposition is bad form! In our English translations of the Bible, that little problem is fixed by changing the word order: “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

That fixed the problem with the sentence, but not with the book. So some time later, the early church added the last twelve verses of Mark. What happened, many commentators surmise, is that leaders in the early church couldn’t stand leaving the story hanging, unresolved. So, in an effort to tidy Mark up, and make it more like the other gospels which came after it, they tacked on an ending. Never mind that it doesn’t sound much like the rest of Mark’s gospel. Never mind that it has encouraged some Christians over the centuries to attempt to

handle poisonous snakes and to drink strychnine. The early church wanted a neat, happy ending, so they added one.

That impulse to wrap things up with a neat little bow is understandable. But I think it's significant that the original ending of Mark's gospel leaves us hanging right there at verse eight. There's a kind of "to be continued, dot, dot, dot," feel to it.

Most of us of a certain age have watched TV shows that end with the words "to be continued" on the screen. They make you want to tune in next week to see how things get resolved. Soap operas cash in on this "to be continued" idea all the time. You know: "Tune in tomorrow to see if Lars finally wins Lorena's heart."

Back when I was in high school, I got addicted to *General Hospital* for a few years.² On the days I didn't have band or debate practice, I'd rush home from school in time to see the last 30 minutes of the show just to see what happened with Luke and Laura. Does anybody remember Luke and Laura? I was hooked. I just had to see how things turned out.

The original ending of the Gospel of Mark leaves us with that same kind of question. We want to know what happened next. How did it turn out? What did the women do? Did they push ahead despite their fear? Did they eventually do as the young man said and tell the disciples that Jesus had been raised? What did the disciples do then? How did they respond to the news of Christ's resurrection? Did they meet the Risen Christ? Or not?

Never mind that the last twelve verses of Mark supply the answer. Verse 8 leaves us with the question: How did it turn out? The women heard a messenger tell them that Christ had risen. Did it make a difference? What did they do with that news? Did they practice resurrection faith or not? I want to know, don't you? The gospel tells us that they left with fear and trembling, but I wonder. Did they also leave with their eyes wide open, thinking they might meet Jesus on the path? Were they like Stuart Little, stopping his tiny car at every bird's song, thinking it might be Margalo?

Faith is like that, especially resurrection faith. Because embracing the good news, "He is risen, he is risen indeed," means that, at some level, we go forth expecting to meet him. And the fact that resurrection isn't all wrapped up in Mark's version of the story doesn't make it any less true. In fact, it makes it more like our own experience of resurrection.

It's not all wrapped up. It's not nice and neat. It would be easier to have our faith in tidy boxes. But we have to live with the fact that going out to meet Christ isn't like making an appointment to get our hair done. He is risen indeed, and he goes forth to meet us, but we are not sure where, or when, or how we will meet him, only that when we set out in the Way of Love we are heading in the right direction. Maybe that's what it means to practice resurrection faith. Maybe resurrection faith is more about living the questions than having all the answers.

Sue Monk Kidd, who wrote *The Secret Life of Bees*, has a wonderful book entitled, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions*.³ Throughout the book, she uses the metaphor of a caterpillar becoming a butterfly through first entering a cocoon to describe a process of spiritual growth and transformation in her own life. Among other things, that process helped her own that she was called to be a writer, not a nurse - and an Episcopalian, and not a Southern Baptist. Those were some pretty big changes!

Of her time in the cocoon, Kidd says, "One way we coax the life of the new self is by living the questions that inhabit our dark night, by dwelling creatively with the unresolved inside of us.

“I lived with questions about who I had been and who I was becoming, and about whether the growth was worth the pain, risk, and upheaval. I lived with questions about how to adopt parts of myself that I had orphaned, how to heal old wounds, how to relate to an expanding vision of God and the world.

“Living with questions can indeed be a miserable experience,” Kidd writes. “We like things fixed, figured out, and nailed down, even if that means being nailed to a false and static existence. Questions terrify us, because they’re like hammers prying up the nails.”

Yet, she goes on: “People who want life hammered down into tight, legalistic certainties seem to me to be the people most insecure inside. Frankly, the folks who frighten me the most are those who are so dead certain about everything, who have all the answers and no questions.

“Have we Christians forgotten the transforming value of a question? When we extinguish questions from our lives, there’s little developing consciousness. We block ourselves from new truths and possibilities.”⁴

To practice resurrection faith is to live the questions. But it is to do more than that. It is also to trust in the face of uncertainty. It is to set out in the direction of love trusting that we will meet the risen Christ on the way. On an ordinary day, it is to get up, pray, shower and shave, and go on about our business looking for signs of the risen Christ in the people and opportunities God sends our way. On the day of our death, or the death of one of our loved ones, it is to trust enough to let go and believe that the risen Christ will meet us even in, or should I say, especially in, this time of transition. On Easter Sunday, it is to look beyond the cultural trappings of the holiday and to respond to the risen Christ in the music, the message, and the movement of the Spirit.

You see, we do a lot of things to celebrate Easter in our culture, but few of them are the real work of Easter that we as people of faith are called to do. Few of them have to do with practicing resurrection faith. How ludicrous it would have been if the Gospel of Mark had ended, “And the women, having heard the news, went home, put their best dresses on, exchanged plastic eggs and Easter candy, and sat down to nice dinner of baked ham (or leg of lamb).” All of that is fine and nice, and it’s a great way to celebrate the coming of spring, and perhaps even Easter. But that’s not practicing resurrection faith.

We know from other sources that the women practiced resurrection faith because they did eventually tell the others that Christ had been raised, and we know that the disciples went on to practice resurrection faith because the church grew. We also know that many of those disciples were willing even to lose their lives for what they believed.

Notice - I said they were willing to lose their lives, not take their lives or other’s lives. It’s important to make that distinction in a world of religious cults and sectarian violence. I think back to the members of the Heaven’s Gate cult who killed themselves back in 1997. What has always distinguished disciples of Jesus Christ from people like those in the Heaven’s Gate cult is this: the disciples, who like the Heaven’s Gate folks believed that this life is not all there is, didn’t just check out. The disciples’ faith didn’t cause them to pack their suitcases and their quarters and lie down and die.

No. The disciples’ resurrection faith caused them to fully engage the world. To try to make it a better place: to live so fully, and to stand for justice so strongly, and to love and forgive and embrace others so deeply that the world just couldn’t stand it and had to be rid of them. That’s resurrection faith.

We know historically that the first disciples of Jesus Christ practiced resurrection faith. The question Mark has posed to every group of would-be disciples since then, is this: “Will YOU? Will WE?”

Reverend Theodore Schroeder, a pastor in the Lutheran church, tells the following story of practicing resurrection faith. I share it with you in his own words.⁵

“I found her in the midnight-darkened hallways of the hospital, bending over her pain. She waited there for the five minutes each hour she was allowed to go in to be with her husband.

“They had never been apart, she told me. In the 55 years they had been married, they had never spent a night apart. Through all the years on the farm, the births and raising of their children, through illnesses they had both suffered, they had never been apart.

“Now he was dying. I think she knew, but the doctor wanted me to tell her that her beloved

Harold could not last the night.

“‘Why don’t you go home,’ I suggested. ‘I’ll sit here for a while.’

“‘I can’t go,’ she said.

“The nurse told us that we could have our five minutes. ‘Don’t forget the gowns and masks, she commanded. ‘We don’t want the infection to spread.’

“Harold didn’t seem to recognize the two, green-shrouded figures that came to his bed--at least not until Maggie took his hand, moved her mask and touched her lips to his cheek. I said a prayer out loud, but all the time she was whispering to him. She kept her head right alongside his on the pillow--talking to him like she belonged there.

“Later, in the hallway, she was weeping. ‘What did you say to Harold?’ I asked--more to cover the silence than to get information.

“‘I told him that I loved him and that I would stay with him.’

“‘You know he’s very ill,’ I said. ‘He may not be with us in the morning.’

“She stared at the floor for a long time. ‘I know,’ she said. ‘He knows he’s dying, too. He’s afraid a little. I can tell by the way he holds my hand. But it’s all right. I know he’s all right now. I told him that it will be Easter in the morning.’

“‘I didn’t know what to say. It was November. Had she forgotten?’

“‘Um... It’s not really Easter,’ I offered.

“‘I know, Pastor,’ she said patiently. ‘But it is for us. We’ve practiced celebrating Easter together for all our years. Now, for Harold and me, tomorrow is our Easter.’”

It strikes me that it’s not just Mark’s gospel that is open-ended. Resurrection faith itself is open-ended. Because resurrection faith means that even the things which we think have it all wrapped up--things like the pull of sin, the finality of death, the power of evil--don’t. Even the things which seem like the end of the story are not finally the end of the story. Resurrection faith knows that the end of the story is life.

*Which means:
When we think it's over,
When we've lost all hope,
When we're ready to give up on this crazy world, or that crazy helping project,
When we feel abandoned,
When someone we dearly love dies,*

The message of resurrection flashes on the screen of our consciousness: "To be continued..." Somehow, some way, life will go on for us and for them.

That is the faith that gave birth to the Christian church. And by leaving his account open-ended, Mark lets us know that the story of Easter isn't over. It has continued from the time of the first believers up through today. In every generation, people come away from the tomb, sometimes more than a little scared, because their lives have been changed forever.

It is up to us how we respond to the miracle of Easter. Is everything all wrapped up on Easter Sunday, after the baked ham, the leg of lamb? Or is Easter only the beginning - or the continuation - of a lifetime of responding to the reality of new life?

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

References

1 This is an almost universally held view among reputable scholars.. See, for instance, *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), p. 1844.

2 Someone came up to me after the second service and said they had a hard time envisioning me watching a soap opera. But, sad to say, the story is true!

3 I have recommended this book to a number of people lately, particularly those going through transitions. Indeed, it is one of the best books on spirituality I've ever read. Sue Monk Kidd, *When the Heart Waits: Spiritual Direction for Life's Sacred Questions* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1990).

4 Kidd, pp. 157-158

5 I found this beautiful story in an article by Rev. Theodore W. Schroeder in an Aid Association for Lutherans monthly magazine sometime in the mid 1990s. I lost my copy of the article and after an extensive search I have not been able to locate a cite for it.