

THE UNFINISHED STORY<sup>1</sup>  
Mark 16: 1-8  
Colossians 3: 12-17  
A sermon by Thomas R. McKibbens  
April 12, 2009

In the Gospel of Mark's resurrection account, for example, we have the two Marys: one from the little fishing village of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee, the other described as the mother of James. Then there is a third woman named Solome, who is probably an aunt of Jesus. We hear of other women who generally disappear into the shadows of the gospel accounts, with one exception: at the beginning and the ending.

I

At Christmas time we feel like we are in an obstetrician's waiting room. The women carry the major parts of the story. There is Mary, the young woman engaged to Joseph. And there is her cousin Elizabeth, who gives birth to a son named John, who would later be called John the Baptist. The men are all in the shadows at Christmas. They play secondary roles.

Now at Easter time, the women are once again in the forefront. The men have all fled to the shadows; only the women remain faithful to the end. Now we find them moving silently toward the tomb early on a Sunday

---

<sup>1</sup> ©Thomas R. McKibbens, April 12, 2009.

morning, wondering who will move the stone away, a stone that was obviously too heavy for them to move.

In a sense, these women are symbolic of all of us as we walk through life. We cannot move all the stones in our pathway. Some are just too heavy for us! As we journey along, we cannot remove the mistakes we have made, the decisions that have proven wrong, the poor judgments we have made on impulse. These are stones we cannot move. We cannot move the stones of missed opportunities. Then there are the tombstones of our friends and loved ones who have died, leaving an empty place in our hearts. And we can never move the stone with our name on it that lies somewhere before us. All our exercise programs and Lipitor and diets and hair coloring and makeup may delay it or disguise it, but that stone is inevitable. The old joke about those who look first at the obituary section of the paper and are relieved not to see their names has some truth. In a sense, we all come to church to grapple with the question: *Who will roll away that stone for us?*

And we struggle with other stones in our pathway. Who will roll away the stone of debt? Who will roll away the stone of illness? Who will roll away the stone of doubt? There are all sorts of stones in our pathway, and many of them we seem helpless to move.

## II

The gospel of Mark ends in bafflement and fear and helplessness.

The last words in Mark's account are these: *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.*

And that's it! The end! What a way to end a gospel! It is almost as if the writer of the gospel of Mark had been dragged from his writing desk in mid-sentence! Over the centuries devout believers have concluded that surely Mark did not really mean to end his gospel that way. The real ending must have been lost, or perhaps the end of the scroll was broken off at verse 8, leaving this strange ending.

So, if you look in your Bibles, you will see various endings, often found in a footnote. In these various endings after verse 8 you find traditions about the disciples casting out demons, handling snakes, and speaking in tongues. But they are all additions, not part of the gospel of Mark. One of the great scholarly questions for biblical researchers is what happened to the ending of the gospel of Mark.

I wonder if Mark meant to end it with verse 8? We assume that Easter is supposed to have post-resurrection appearances, joyful seaside meals, scenes of reconciliation and forgiveness, garden embraces of the

risen Lord, and the disciples excited shout, "He is risen!" But Mark offers us none of these, choosing instead to end his story with frightened women fleeing from a cemetery in silence. Is that any way to run a resurrection? It's as if Mark is throwing us the ball, so to speak, and saying, "Now you end it; you finish the story; you complete the story of Jesus with your life and faith."

What we do not have in any of the gospel accounts is an attempt to argue in favor of the resurrection or to enable us to understand it. Not a finger is lifted to persuade us with logic to believe in the resurrection. Theirs is not an argument; it is an announcement: *He is not here; he is risen!* And notice that it is in the present tense! *He IS risen!* It is a present reality to these writers because the risen-ness of Christ is a living reality for them.

That is not a bad model for the church these days when so many people get bogged down about things like scientific proof of religious faith. Easter is a mighty act of God, which is by definition outside the realm of scientific proof. We cannot objectify it, depict it, create a computer model for it, or prove it in any human way. If we could understand it, it would be something less than resurrection.

## III

You may have seen the story this week of the mayoral election in Winfield, MO. This town of 1500 people re-elected Mayor Harry Stonebraker even though he had died of a heart attack a month before the election!<sup>2</sup> They liked him that much! Easter is not the re-election of Jesus to a place of honor because we like him so much! It is not an election that Jesus has won! Easter is a promise— a promise that God is the ultimate stonebreaker, and that we can take heart when we face our own immovable stones!

When that happens, we can see changed lives; we can see strength beyond ourselves; we can see courage to face the future. The Apostle Paul would later write about those things by using a wonderful metaphor. He compared faith in the resurrection to wearing new clothes, something like putting on new Easter clothes!

Put on *compassion*, he says. My, how good you look in compassion! A perfect fit! And *kindness*, and *humility*— these are always in style! And don't forget to try on some *meekness*, by which he does not mean weakness. He means the refusal to strut, the refusal to swagger, the refusal to lord it over others. And put on some *patience*, he says. Anybody

---

<sup>2</sup> Story in Associated Press, April 8, 2009.

here need a new suit of patience? Paul goes on: *Bear with one another and...forgive each other, just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.*

And for the best part of this new Easter outfit, he says, *clothe yourselves in God's love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts....* As one friend says, *Rule there, not just hang around the edges.*+ *And be thankful,* says Paul. *Don't forget to be thankful. Period!*

There must have been a pause as Paul pondered what to write next. Then he dips his pen into the ink and writes: *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.* And what word is that? Well, we could never do better than the Easter word: *Be not afraid. It is I. Peace be with you.*

And because we all need to be reminded of that, he says, *Teach and admonish one another.* You don't need to depend on an official, licensed, ordained, credentialed, and officially installed minister. You minister with and among each other! Remind one another that Christ is with us and calls us to peace and courage!

*And sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,* he says. I underline that, not just because William and our choir will resonate with it, but because singing great hymns and songs of faith reaches down where

words can never reach. If you can't sing with your voice, then sing in your heart, smile, laugh, cry for joy; but let this good word enter your soul:

Christ is risen!

This has admittedly been a long winter. It began with an ice storm we will never forget, and from which we are still cleaning up. It included the catastrophic decline in the banking system and the drying up of loans. And worse, it included the loss of five million American jobs (another 663,000 in March alone!), and countless more their 401(k)s, leaving many people with no way to pay their rent or their mortgage, and many more families are left homeless. Even for those who have not lost their jobs or their homes, this winter has left many exhausted, bewildered, and sobered— not unlike those women who were baffled and afraid at the end of the gospel of Mark.

#### IV

But here is the good news: Easter may begin in bafflement, but it ends in alleluias— the alleluias of grace. There is a wonderful story about the late William Sloan Coffin, when he and others were arrested during a Civil Rights march. Coffin and the others were placed in adjoining cells in some southern town, and in the middle of the night, when they were all exhausted and discouraged, they heard Coffin's sturdy baritone voice singing, "For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth." The Hallelujah Chorus,

there in the middle of the night, locked up behind bars. That's where the Hallelujah Chorus sounds best, in those places where it is most improbable.

Near the end of his life Coffin suffered a stroke that left his speech slurred. But he was still able to write, and in one of his last writings he said that %b makes sense just as musicians can abandon their instruments to find others elsewhere, so at death our spirits can leave our bodies and find other forms in which to make new music.<sup>3</sup> Chances are, when he found a new form to make new music, he was still singing the Hallelujah Chorus.

So let it be for all of us. Hallelujah!

---

<sup>3</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Credo* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), p. 171.