

“Christ is risen!” “He is risen indeed!”

So it is proclaimed in the liturgy of the Orthodox denomination and so we proclaim it today. But that’s not how the author of the Gospel According to Mark ended his observation of this historical event. According to the author of Mark the women left the empty tomb fearfully – not with the excitement – ecstasy – emotional high we know the news elicited in those who heard it later. What happened? What indeed is the rest of the story?

First, we wonder why Mark’s account ends this way. Did he intentionally do it? Did he get busy doing something else and never quite have time to get back to it? Did he die as a martyr before he had time to finish it? Was he called away to do something for Jesus instead of merely write about him? Was the rest of the story accidentally torn off and never found?¹

Over the centuries some felt the need to offer a different ending to Mark’s work. In most versions of the Bible there are two blocks of material – sometimes enclosed in double square brackets – sometimes with a lengthy footnote – of these attempts to clean up or complete Mark’s unfinished document. One of the bodies of material is titled “The Shorter Ending of Mark” and the other body is headed, “The Longer Ending of Mark.” It’s believed the shorter ending was added sometime after the third century by one of those who was entrusted with the responsibility of hand-copying from an earlier manuscript. The longer version is believed to have been offered similarly sometime in the late second or early third century.²

And, who can blame them for their attempt – their concern. I mean, what kind of closure to a biography of Jesus’ life is an announcement that his followers were *afraid*? If you were writing an account of Jesus’ life would you “point out that despite being told by no less than an angel that Jesus had risen from the dead and that they should pass this news to the disciples, the women were so terrified that they *said nothing to anyone*? Wouldn’t you conclude the story on a more upbeat note, even a triumphant one, because to stop at verse 8 seems as though one is leaving out the rest of the story; the resurrection was a marvelous triumph over death?”³

The truth of the matter is we really don’t know why the author of Mark’s Gospel ended his work the way he did; and, while this may cause some problems for those who want an infallible translation of an infallible Bible,⁴ I find it to be a rather exciting and interesting challenge or opportunity for us. That is, that the Gospel record never really is finished or that the rest of the story needs to be told by each one of us – lived by each one of us.

What we do know is there came a day when the women began to share with the others what they experienced inside the tomb – there came a day when the followers of Jesus no longer believed the theories being offered by others: “that Jesus really didn’t die on the cross, that he fainted and the cool, damp atmosphere of the tomb revived him and he simply escaped; that some of them had broken in earlier and stole the body to prove that he was the Messiah; that the Jewish leaders had the body removed from the tomb to show everyone that Christians were crazy and therefore not to be trusted; that the whole thing was a mass hallucination which was passed on by word of mouth and recorded in what became the New Testament.”⁵ At some point after the empty tomb was discovered something happened that infused the followers of Jesus with a new perspective on things – that put in their bellies a fire that no fear of the Romans or of scholars or of the religious authorities could extinguish – that turned them from a fearful bunch of dumb heads into a movement with a message. Whether the

resurrection happened just the way it is reported in the other scriptures or not, something happened to those followers that caused them to become Christ's body here on earth – that caused them to continue the work that Jesus started. And whatever happened, it certainly was as life-changing – life-empowering – as a dead body coming alive. New life became apparent in the midst of a dead reality.

I know the resurrection to be true because I see it happening all the time – because we are here this morning – and we are in the world every day being Christ – bringing resurrection into plain view – creating life where death appears to have the upper hand. “Easter is old life made new, death made into life. Easter is broken relationships redeemed, grief forgiven, death sentenced to death, despair banished, depression turned into hope.”⁶

Earlier this week one of our church members sent me an email with a video attached of a story that happened several years ago now before the start of a Portland Trailblazers basketball game. I remember reading an account of it back when it happened but I am indebted to Sean for bringing it to my attention again this week. If you want to see it in person, check out this sermon on the website or send me an email and I will forward the site information to you. But for today, a retelling of the story will have to do.

The Trailblazers had run a contest with the winner's award being the opportunity to sing the Star Spangled Banner before the start of a game. Natalie Gilbert won and when her moment in the spotlight began before a televised crowd in 2003 everything was fine. And then, and then she forgot the words. She froze – her embarrassment was obvious.

But then, the head coach at that time of the Portland Trailblazers, Mo Cheeks, strode to her side and with her humiliated face buried in the microphone he began to gently sing the words – not very well you understand, but the right words – and slowly Natalie began to regain her confidence as she looked into the eyes of the tall, kind man who had his arm around her shoulder and a smile on his face as he offered her what he had to get her back in the game. With the awkwardly silent crowd looking on the fear in her began to lessen and she started to sing – hesitantly at first – somewhat off key, but how could she help not to with the off key Cheeks feeding her the lines. But she made it to the end and finished strong all because of the instinctive and compassionate presence of mind of Mo Cheeks. He saved her dignity that night. Natalie Gilbert experienced the resurrection that night. The people in attendance that night saw/experienced the rest of the story – a resurrection appearance.⁷

As I sat in Tim Horton's yesterday morning putting the finishing touches on this morning's sermon, one of the men I've been privileged to get to know from one of our AA groups stopped by my table. We've talked before about what I am usually doing when I am at Tim Horton's that early on a Saturday morning and so he said, “You just tell them that I know the resurrection to be true because every time I look in the sky and see a full moon I am reminded that the same power that put that moon in the sky is the one that has enabled me to be sober all these years.”

A college girl was flying home for Easter break one year with a heavy heart. She had tears in her eyes as she stared out of the plane's window at the green countryside below her. Her first year was almost over and things hadn't gone very well for her. Her life had lost meaning and she couldn't wait to see the ocean near her home.

Her grandmother picked her up at the airport and the two of them traveled in silence to her home. Her mind was only on getting to the ocean.

A little after midnight, she finally did. Hear how she describes what happened: “I just sat there in the moonlight watching the waves roll up on the beach. Slowly my disastrous first year passed before my eyes, day by day, week by week, month by month. Then, suddenly, the whole experience fell into place. It was over and past. I could forget about it forever; but at the same time, I didn’t want to forget it.

“The next thing I knew, the sun was rising in the east. As it did I sensed my feelings starting to peak, just as a wave starts to peak before it breaks. That morning, I, too, arose!

“It was as though my mind, heart and body were drawing strength from the ocean. All my old goals, dreams and enthusiasm came rushing back stronger than ever. I rose with the sun, got into my car, and headed for home.”⁸

And when she returned to college after her Easter break, she picked up the broken pieces of her year and she put them back together. She died and rose again over her Easter break and as a result understood in a personal way the practical meaning of Easter.

Resurrection happens – Easter is – we see Jesus – “Every time a baby is born ... every time a young man and woman decide to build a new life together ... every time someone is welcomed into God’s family ... every time forgiveness is given or is experienced ... every time a kindness is shown ... with every kiss and act of reconciliation ... whenever light shines in dark places ... whenever joy replaces sorrow ... whenever hope displaces despair ... whenever we feel peace in the midst of turmoil – there indeed we see the resurrected Jesus.”

Easter happens – the resurrection is experienced – Jesus is seen – when heaven replaces hell – when violence is rendered impotent by the power of peace – when love replaces hate – when sin is met with forgiveness.

The church is the resurrected body of Jesus Christ. We are the living witness of the reality of Christ’s presence in this world. It is through us that people see the living Christ. (God forgive us.) Thank God, he let Peter know of his still being included – of his still intending to make his reality known through him. Because, you see, it means that despite our failings – despite our acts of disloyalty – despite our poor witness – our poor example – there’s still hope for us – Christ still intends to use us – Christ still intends the rest of the story to be proclaimed through us!

Several years ago Ann Weems wrote a meditation for Easter Sunday that went like this:

“Do We or Do We Not Believe the News Is Good? O, Lord, you love us! Why aren’t we shouting? The stone’s rolled away! Why aren’t we dancing? O, Lord, you love us! Why aren’t the bells pealing? The victory’s won! Why aren’t the drums drumming? Why aren’t the feet stomping and the doves flying

And the bands marching
And the fingers snapping,
And the tongues praising
And the hands clapping
And the trumpets blaring
And the choirs singing
And the cymbals clashing
And the children laughing?
Why aren’t the eyes smiling

And the knees kneeling
And the banners blowing
And the horns sounding
And the voices calling
And the crowds clamoring
And the arms waving
And the tambourines playing
And the hearts humming
And the old men running? And why aren't we crowning him Lord of Lords? If the news is good ... SING!"⁹

- 1 Donald B. Strobe, "On Keeping Quiet about Easter," Collected Words (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-0000-0000-26.
- 2 Leonard Sweet, "Extended Ending," Homiletics, March/April, 2009. p. 59.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Donald B. Strobe, "The Unfinished Story," Collected Words (Dynamic Preaching, 2005), 0-0000-0000-26.
- 5 Don M. Aycok, "Love and Resurrection," God's Most Unmistakable (Lima: CSS Publishing, 1994), 1-5567-3514-6.
- 6 Anne-Rose Reeves, "Aren't You Glad?" as preached at ST. Timothy Lutheran Church, Camp Hill, PA.
- 7 Randy Leonard, "Mo Cheeks and Natalie Gilbert," www.blueoregono.com/2005/03/mo_cheeks_and_n.html.
- 8 Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R., "Your Easter," The Sower's Seeds (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), pp. 77-78.
- 9 Ann Weems as quoted by Donald B. Strobe, "On Keeping Quiet About Easter."