

“The Upending”
Easter Day
Mark 16:1-8

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Grace Lutheran Church
April 12, 2009

In Jesus' Name.

Lamar Williamson begins his commentary on our Gospel reading by asking an Easter riddle. “When is an ending not the end?” The answer he provides is, “When a dead man rises from the tomb – and when a Gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.” Mark wrote in Greek and he completed his Gospel with the Greek word meaning “for.” The translators have smoothed out the grammar for us so what we heard was, “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” There was nothing smooth about the original. Early on people thought the last page went missing; the final turn of the scroll had torn off. People unknown to us wrote more satisfying endings, two of which appear in some early manuscripts of Mark’s Gospel. The shorter ending creates a non sequiter, so that it reads, “They said nothing to anyone, afraid for. And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter.” The other is longer and borrows Mary Magdalene from John, the appearance on the road to Emmaus from Luke, from Matthew the commissioning of the disciples to go into the world proclaiming the good news, and throws in some snake handling for good measure. Neither the longer nor shorter ending pretends to be original since neither takes up where Mark’s “for” left off.

What Mark was after with his abrupt ending is revealed to us when the gospel is heard from beginning to end. I included this detail in a sermon three years ago so if you remember it, good. It bears repeating. Donald Juel, in his commentary on Mark, tells of the seminary student who memorized Mark’s gospel for a one-man performance before the student body. He stood in front of the altar in the sanctuary of a large church, the audience arrayed before him in the pews. Juel praised his performance. He came to the end and spoke the last lines, “And they said

nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Juel writes, “When he had finished, he stood awkwardly, obviously trying to decide how to end so that he could make an exit. Finally after several seconds, he said, ‘Amen!’ It seemed appropriate to the ecclesial setting. There was obvious relief within the audience, and people applauded enthusiastically. Later we had a conversation in which it became clear to the performer that he had felt obliged to do what all of the later endings of the Gospel had done: to provide a sense of closure for the audience....

“The next time he performed the Gospel, he tried something different. When he finished the last line, he paused for a few seconds, then simply exited. There was no ‘Amen’ to bring the performance to a close; there was no applause to bring the evening to a proper end. The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious, and as people exited the sanctuary the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the nonending.” One of Walter Brueggemann’s many memorable lines is from his theology of the Old Testament. He wrote, “I have focused on disputatious testimony that refuses closure.” That is what Mark has given, disputatious testimony that refuses closure. As such Mark gives us more of an upending than an ending. I mean upending not in the sense of everything ending on an up note, but an ending that turns things upside down.

The women came to the tomb seeking closure. Closure is a word we often hear after someone has died. People seek closure and to move on. One preacher said, “When you have suffered bereavement, well-meaning friends often tell you that you should, ‘Get back to work. Get busy,’ and this will help you ‘get over it.’” Life goes on. Life goes on as before just without the one closed in the grave. That will be easier for the women than for the twelve. They behaved terribly. Betrayal, denial and abandonment marked them all as cowards. The trial was a farce. Jesus’ death was brutal. Closure will be more difficult and take longer for them after the way

they acted. The women are the only ones not too ashamed or afraid to come to his tomb. Jesus told his followers to serve. Here they come to perform one last service, close out that chapter in their lives, and move on. Jesus upends their search for closure. With him there will be no closure on death and no moving on without him. They have come to see Jesus but to see him the women and the twelve must look ahead.

The angel tells the women, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Indeed, that is what he told them in the upper room, the night he was betrayed. The angel’s command holds the promise of forgiveness for the disciples and restoration, even for Peter. They fell away but that is not the end of God’s plan for them. God’s mercy in Jesus reaches through even our shame. God was not done with the disciples and God is not done with us.

Galilee is the place of their everyday lives. It is their home turf. It is the place to which we return when we leave here. The angel’s command sends us back to our Galilee but it is no longer the same place. Everything has been upended.

For one thing, now we know the way of the cross is the way of life. The cross was marked on our foreheads at our baptism so now it is our personal processional cross. The narrow processional cross is like the burly friends we shelter behind in trouble. We follow the cross into the valley of the shadow of death and from behind its protection we call out the taunt, the way we do at funerals, “God has swallowed up death forever.”

Another thing that has upended our Galilee is now we know we are forgiven. Sometimes we need to hear it over and over again. God says, “Why do you keep bringing that up again. You are forgiven.” In his sermon on Friday James Brooks told a story about a young man who took the family car without permission and was rear-ended two blocks from home. He told his father

what he had done and asked for forgiveness. His father said, "I forgive you." A week later the young man said to his father, "If the insurance company raises our insurance rates because of the accident, I'll get a part-time job to pay the difference." His father never looked up from his newspaper. He just said, "What accident." That's how it is now, back in Galilee. We are recipients of God's forgiveness and managers of God's mercy.

We go back to Galilee knowing the creation is being renewed. We have a taste of that renewal at the communion table this morning, a foretaste of the new creation in which there is no more hunger or sorrow or tears. We go from the communion table to the brunch table with a vision of all the saints in light with whom we have communed. That upends our view of those who gather with us today. We share a table with the saints.

There is no closure to this Easter story except what upendings you and I provide with our lives lived on the other side of the announcement.