

**Easter Sunday 2009**  
***And the Ending Is?***

April 12, 2009  
Pastor Mark Nieting

**Mark 16: 9-20**

***Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Alleluia! Hallelujah!***  
***Alleluia!***

Today we celebrate what makes the Christian faith different from any of the “religious systems” of the world.....the resurrection of Christ from the grave! We Christians are, by very definition, “trinitarian” in our theology: worshiping God the Father, creator of the universe; God the Son, Savior and Redeemer, and God the Holy Spirit, giver and protector of the faith.....and yet not three Gods but ONE. We have assembled this morning not at the “tomb” of our Namesake, Jesus Christ, but in honor of the fact, and I use that word deliberately, that His tomb was, and still is, empty.

Let’s ALL open our Bibles to Mark 16 (p 722), today’s Easter Gospel text and take a little longer look at what Mark has to say about this incredible morning, by walking through it paragraph by paragraph:

Mark 15 ended with Jesus’ body being placed into a grave and a large stone rolled in place to seal the opening. Matthew 27 adds that Pilate assigned soldiers to guard the tomb. It was all done quickly because the Sabbath Day, when no Jew was allowed to “work,” began at sunset on Friday. So there had been no time to properly prepare Jesus’ body.

Imagine what Jesus’ followers felt all day long on Saturday: fear, horror, shock, grief, pain. Let me ask a simple question here: when YOU have

experienced a significant shock in your life, don't you feel a need to DO something? To take control and make decisions? It's perfectly natural and normal to feel that way.....and they couldn't. The irony of God's timing was that because it was a Sabbath, they weren't allowed to "DO" anything. They simply sat and thought.

Finally, at 6 PM on Saturday, the Sabbath was over and the women ran to the shops and bought the spices they needed....but it was too dark, too late, and too dangerous to go out to the cemetery, so once again, the women had to wait.

It's no surprise that EARLY on Sunday morning the women, despite their overwhelming grief, "leapt into action." They took their spices and burial wraps and hurrying and worrying about who would move the stone. But when they arrived, the guards were gone and the STONE was already rolled away.

They ducked their heads and went into the tomb. What do you think they expected to find? One of two things: either the body of Jesus, lying cold on the stone slab OR ....OR.....OR what?

hey didn't expect to find an ANGEL. Would you? I've walked through a lot of cemeteries in my lifetime and encountered a lot of strange stuff, but no angels!

Mark records that they were "alarmed" when they saw....and then heard....and "young man dressed in white..... a far different emotion than any one of us felt when we woke up this Easter morning!

The angel had a message. Read it with me: *“Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here! See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”*

Did you catch the connection of the two words: the women WERE alarmed and the angel told them NOT to be alarmed.....and then fills them with news that is virtually incomprehensible: Jesus, who had been crucified and then buried right in this tomb, was now alive and was going to Galilee! Incredible! Amazing!

Let’s move to verse 8 and focus on the impact all this had upon the women. They were trembling. They were bewildered. They FLED from the tomb and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.

My dear Easter Friends....what did the women EXPECT when they went to the tomb? They expected Roman guards, a sealed up tomb, and a stone cold Jesus. It’s what ALL of us would have expected. It’s what we expect when WE go to the funeral of a loved one. It’s life, death, end of the story, period. There was NO way these dear women, or anyone else for that matter, expected Resurrection. No one expected it.....except for Jesus!

Look back at the text of Mark 16 in your Bibles. Notice the LINE there? Notice the “footnote?” What does it say? *“The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16: 9-10.”*

What kind of closure is this? What kind of “Easter message” ends with “*they were afraid!*”? It’s not exactly an “upbeat and joyous” ending to the story of Jesus’ life!

Did Mark intend for his Gospel to end here? Look back at the text one more time and it’s obvious that we have more verses....9 through 20 to be exact. It’s material that is supported by Matthew, Luke and John and we know and trust it to be accurate....but either Mark’s “original ending” has been lost, or Mark truly intended to end with the words, “*they were afraid.*” As we leave the sanctuary this morning should my last words to you be “don’t be afraid?”

What does this tell us? Just this: ***It takes a considerable adjustment in our thinking to accept the concept of someone who was dead is alive again.***

I have been a pastor for over 20 years now. I’ve baptized 250 people and, sad to say, quite a few of them are no longer “in the church.” I’ve married exactly 100 couples and quite a few of them are now divorced. I’ve confirmed around 200 young people and, well, some of those confirmations didn’t “take,” but *I have buried 127 people and I can say for absolute certain that I have been 100% successful.* Every single one of them, in a physical sense, is still DEAD. Death, and because April 15 is Wednesday I can add “taxes” are THE things in life we can be absolutely sure about.

For these heartsick people, RESURRECTION was something entirely out of their real of possibility, and it scared them almost as much as DEATH did.

There are many ways in which we “post-modern, scientifically sophisticated” people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are just like them. We’ve come to expect death and disappointment. We’ve come to understand that we can’t “have it all.” We even color death with phrases like “you can’t win them all,” or “we’ll pick up the pieces and move on” or “nothing lasts forever.”

But Easter, my dear friends, gives us another perspective on ALL of that. Easter is NOT just the story of one man’s escape from the grave, but it is about God’s victory over death for ALL of us. We have a Jesus who is alive.....and what He has given us through His suffering, death and resurrection truly COLORS every single aspect of our own lives. We are Easter People who live lives of forgiveness now and face death with the sure and certain promise of our OWN resurrection.

The other thing Mark’s original ending may be doing is a little more personal. Mark may be asking US to grab the pen into our own hands and write our OWN endings, applying the reality of Jesus’ resurrection to our own lives.

And how would that happen?

“Being afraid” is a legitimate response to the call to focus our lives on Jesus Christ, but there is a difference in *BEING* afraid and *ACTING* afraid. If we allow fear to immobilize us, it will also keep us from *LIVING* in the reality that death itself is not to be feared. It will keep us from proclaiming the news of

Jesus' resurrection to a world that doesn't know, trust or understand what He has done for them... and us.....to a world that DOES live in the fear of death!

For some, sad to say, tomorrow may just be another day and the reality of Christ's resurrection may have little impact on our lives beyond a few hours on Easter Sunday. But I don't accept that....and in the few moments I have left, I'm going to offer MY explanation of why I think Mark ended His story the way he did.

He is literally handing us the pen, pencil, word processor or keypad and saying to us, "*YOU WRITE THE REST OF YOUR LIFE STORY, based on how YOU integrate the resurrection into your own life!*" Are you going to live the rest of your life being afraid not only of death but of life itself? Or are you going to be so self-centered that it's "eat drink and be merry and tomorrow I die?" Is your philosophy of life going to be "who dies with the most trains wins?"

OR will you live in the confidence that because Christ defeated death, our faith in Christ allows us not to fear death either? Will you live with the joy of the risen Lord in your heart and His "Spring forth from the Grave" in your step? Will you be a WITNESS about the REAL meaning of Easter to the world that fills it only with bunnies and peeps?

That's why, my friends, I'm happy to stop Mark's Gospel at verse 8.....because the rest of it is going to be MY story of life with our living Lord....and yours as well!

AMEN!