

April 12, 2009

1 Corinthians 15:20-22, 35-38, 42-44

Mark 16:1-8

“The Never-Ending Story”

How many of you have seen the fantasy film *The Never Ending Story*? It portrays the amazing adventures of a young boy in a make-believe land. Years ago, when the film came out and I heard the title, I thought, “Who wants to be told a story that never ends?” I remembered the unpleasant feeling that surges up when you’re watching a gripping TV show and those infamous words appear on the screen at the most climactic moment: *to be continued.....* Who wants to read a mystery that never identifies the murderer? Who wants a romance that leaves love unfulfilled? What gospel story about Jesus would leave his followers frightened at the news of his rising, with the risen Christ not yet glimpsed, not yet seen?

Well, what gospel would do this? The answer is: Mark’s gospel. Mark’s gospel ends with the words we heard read this morning:

(The white robed young man in the tomb) said, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.... Go, tell his disciples... that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you. So they (the women) went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The most ancient manuscripts of Mark end right there. Our pew Bibles provide information in a footnote about two other endings, which follow these words in later manuscripts. Many scholars believe the longer ending was added later, based on the other gospels, by Christians who found the abrupt ending as puzzling as we do.

David Bartlett, writing in *The Christian Century* magazine, suggests the ending is even more abrupt than our translation. He writes: *Mark’s entire Gospel ends not only with an abrupt sentence, but with an...incomplete one. ..The English is neater than the Greek, which ends with the conjunction “gar”, meaning “because” or “for”. It’s a little like ending a sentence with a preposition in English, only Mark’s sentence is peculiar as well as ungrammatical. Something seems to be missing from the last clause itself. It’s as though the sentence read: “terror and amazement had*

seized them is why.....” We’re not sure what the sentence is supposed to do next.

What a puzzle! Mark ends his story of Jesus seemingly in the middle of a sentence, almost as if he too had fled, or run off like the women, before he could finish his thought. What happened? Was he called away, interrupted?

There is much about the writing of Mark’s gospel that we will never know. But as people of faith we believe God speaks to us through it. What message comes through Mark’s hurried, breathless style? What message is spoken through this ending which is no end to the story?

I think God speaks through Mark’s gospel’s ending in a powerful way. This end, which is no end, carries us forward. We are swept along with the women. We are carried forward by the momentum. God is telling us something about the good news of Jesus.

First, God is saying the story is not locked in the past. Jesus is not just a special man who lived long ago. Jesus is not “back there”, even though the glory of the sunlit Easter morning seems a nice place for us to find him. Jesus is “going ahead of you” as the young man told the women. Jesus is out there----- in OUR present world, in the events that we encounter in the challenge and struggle we call living.

God is telling us something else through this ending that is no ending. Have you ever come to the end of a book feeling crushed that there was no more to read? You’ve been fascinated by the story and have grown to love the characters. You close the back cover with sadness. Well, God tells us we don’t have to feel sad as we close the book that speaks to us of Jesus. The main character we have met, this one called “Christ” is not lost as we finish reading the words on the page. This person, this Jesus is one we can know through a personal relationship. He leaps off the pages of the story to go ahead of us, to walk with us, to share our journey, to CONTINUE writing the story WITH US!

So many stories in our lives seem final- ended in ways we would never have chosen. A job is gone, swept away like a house in a hurricane. We find ourselves growing distant from a parent or sibling we were once close to. Our lives and beliefs take shapes that divide us—miles separate us. It seems we will never again be close. A child grows up and leaves home, and there is

tension around the leaving—hurt and anger spill over in ways we regret. The years pass and we resign ourselves to the separation, convinced nothing can ever renew or heal the relationship.

On Easter God challenges us to open the doors and windows of our minds and hearts. God is showing us that, through Jesus Christ, nothing is ever lost forever. God prods us to entertain new expectations, to hope in the possibilities that lie ahead of us—even in seemingly shattered careers, in our apparently broken relationships.

Easter speaks God message of unconditional, sacrificial love. God speaks to us even through a story with no end—actually God speaks to us ESPECIALLY through this story with no end. God laughs and says, “Don’t be sad. Don’t be afraid. The adventure is not ended. Life is not over. It will NEVER be over!! I am going ahead of you to Galilee. Leave the past. Leave it behind you. It is over. It is gone. Come! Come with me! The future lies ahead and I will be with you always.” He calls us to continue writing the story with our lives.

So. This never-ending story will continue to be written through OUR LIVES, as we follow Jesus, our Savior, brother, guide and friend. But what about that day when our lives come to an end? Well, the title of this sermon is “The Never-Ending Story”----- and I believe Easter teaches us that’s exactly what we are in the middle of. We are living in the midst of a story that TRULY AND ABSOLUTELY NEVER ENDS!!

In the words I imagined God speaking to us a moment ago, I included these: ***The adventure is not ended. Life is not over. IT WILL NEVER BE OVER.***

Let’s consider the Scripture from Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth. In the 15th chapter of this letter Paul discusses the resurrection of the dead. He is very clear about it! I do believe it is a great mystery, and beyond our ability to fully comprehend. But he gives us wonderful images and illustrations.

Ancient people were pretty much like us. Paul writes: ***Someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”*** Have you ever entered into a discussion like that? I have heard folks debate which body they’d like to have in the resurrection—some say, “Oh, I’d go for my body at age 19!” Others prefer age 35—we chuckle and wonder.

But Paul tries to help us understand: *As for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or some other grain.*

Now, I have never grown wheat. But I do grow flowers. Have you ever grown a bulb garden? There's a miracle of varieties of bulbs—one most of us know about is the tulip bulb. Once when I was planting tulip bulbs this Scripture came to my mind.

I've brought a few bulbs with me today. (Display) So, what do you think about the beauty of this thing? Looks like a clump of dirt, doesn't it? If you never had any experience with this bulb, if you found it on the driveway near your house, what would you do with it? Would you take it inside and display it on your mantle, or dining room table? Would you wait with delight, expecting it to change into something amazing, something vibrant with color and form? No way!!

You see, I think our physical bodies in this world are a lot like the tulip bulb. "But the human form is beautiful!" you might exclaim. Yes, I think it is, too. I'm very fond of this experience of being a human being in the world God created. But what if we really ARE like tulip bulbs? Don't you see? If the beauty of THIS physical world, the beauty of our physical human bodies is really like the tulip bulbs, then can you IMAGINE the beauty still to emerge??? If THIS world's beauty is a brown lump, then how much more beauty will we find in the flowering to come?

Another thing I really like about Paul's analogy is that what emerges from the seed is already within the seed. It's not like the seed is thrown away to make way for the next phase of development. No, the flower is IN the seed. They are ONE. So what WE will be is eternally connected to what we are now. Within our physical bodies is the spiritual body that we are promised through Jesus Christ.

Easter brings us the promise of life. Christ has opened a door to us—a door into a NEW LIFE in this world, and ETERNAL LIFE beyond this world. As we follow him, as we take his hand, we travel into an adventure that WILL NEVER END! Allow yourself to believe this. Decide to embrace this. Let this Easter change your life—let it be more than a pleasant morning in church. Take Jesus' hand—and be part of the Never Ending Story!! AMEN!
(Invite those who wish to take a bulb with them.)