

## **“Back to Galilee”**

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**Text: Mark 16:1-8**

Every practitioner has his or her personal rituals that help get the work done. My brother walks into his office, switches on his computer, goes for a cup of coffee, checks the large office calendar, and then begins his day. He says if he skips any of those steps, or does them out of order, his routine is disrupted and it takes longer to settle in and focus on the work in front of him.

Me—one of my rituals has to do with preparations for memorial services. I always listen to Mozart’s Requiem. There’s something about the first movement that helps me get focused. If I need to write a homily or a eulogy, I’ll keep the CD playing as I’m working.

The Requiem is a beautiful piece of music, but it’s not all Mozart’s. Mozart died before the piece was done. No one knows for sure who completed the scripts, though most musicologists agree it wasn’t Salieri as depicted in the movie *Amadeus*.

Mozart wasn’t the only composer whose work was finished by someone else. Bach, Mahler, and Tchaikovsky all left behind work that was completed by less well known composers.

There’s something unnerving about unfinished work. The general public doesn’t particularly like to be left hanging. Sequences need to be finished out, chords need to be resolved, books need to reach a conclusion, plots in plays and movies need to be resolved, even TV episodes have to come to an identifiable end. There’s something in us that desires conclusion, ending, a neat tying of details, a sense of completion. Endings help us define the meaning of experience. They give us a chance to look back. They give us permission to let go of one experience and move on to another: This is done. And something else can begin.

In many Christian congregations, the resurrection of Jesus is understood to be the end of the story. It’s the unexpected twist that frequently occurs in good stories, just at the finale. Jesus taught, healed, prayed, and challenged the religious authorities of his day. He was arrested on false charges, given a mock trial in the middle of the night, and executed along with two common criminals. A friend with influence in high places placed his body in a cave. The governing authorities wanted this to be the end, so they covered the entrance to the cave with a huge boulder and assigned soldiers to stand guard.

But, according to the stories Christians told later, this was not yet the end. On the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead. Easter! Resurrection! And lest the disciples doubt the possibility, Jesus appeared to them several times before finally leaving them. Read Matthew, Luke and John, and you get the impression that the resurrection is the end of the Jesus story. Read the longer

ending of Mark and the shorter ending of Mark, and it sounds like whatever happened on Easter Sunday morning is the conclusion of Jesus' earthly life.

Wait a minute, Shorter ending of Mark? Longer ending of Mark? There are at least two endings to the Gospel according to Mark. Some Bible translations put these endings in the parentheses. Some put them in the footnotes. Some leave them out altogether. You see, they weren't written by Mark. Each was penned generations later by someone copying a manuscript, someone who was uncomfortable with the unfinished nature of Mark's Gospel.

Mark's Gospel ends, literally, mid sentence. There is no validation of Jesus' resurrection in this gospel. No followers of Jesus are joyfully proclaiming the news. Not in this Gospel.

According to Mark's Gospel, very early in the morning, three women went to the cemetery. Jesus' body had been put to rest just before sundown which marked the beginning of the Sabbath. They couldn't clean the body, They didn't have time to wash away the dried blood and stench of death, Such activity was prohibited on the Sabbath. So early in the morning, with the first streak of dawn's light across the sky, they went to finish the work left from Friday evening. They would dress the body in perfumed spices, rub oil on to the drying skin, and properly prepare the body for entombment.

As they walked, they realized they had forgotten about the huge boulder at the front of the cave —how would they move that? As they rounded a bend in the pathway, one of them gasped. The rock had been moved and the entrance to the cave was open.

Puzzled, curious, a little frightened—they stepped into the cave. They saw a figure, dressed in white, sitting as though waiting for them. Even though the morning air was cool, one of the women felt beads of perspiration rolling down her back. "Don't be afraid," the young man said, "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is not here. He is going ahead of you into Galilee, you will find him there. Go, tell Peter and the others."

Thoroughly frightened now, the women fled—they ran away from the cave as fast as they could —terror clutched their hearts and their minds could not make any sense of what they had seen. They said nothing to any one, because. . . .

And that, literally, in Greek, is how the Gospel of Mark ends: with an unfinished sentence, with an incomplete statement, with questions hanging in the air. No resurrection appearance by Jesus, no corroborating experience among others of the disciples, nothing. . . except these words from an apparition whose clothing looked like the clothing of an angel and whose words sounded as if they might be from the heavenly realm.

"Don't be afraid." In almost every angelic appearance, those are the first words. "He goes before you into Galilee." . . . Galilee—even readers unacquainted with Palestinian geography might recognize this reference. Mark introduces his gospel with the words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God." The opening scene is John the Baptist, preaching and baptizing. Fourteen verses later, John is arrested, and Jesus appears in Galilee to take up the mission.

The disciples, most of them, were from Galilee. Capernaum, where Peter lived and where Jesus made himself at home when he wasn't traveling, was in Galilee. Galilee was the site of Jesus' first healings and exorcisms and teaching.

He is going ahead of you into Galilee and he will meet you there. . . Back to the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God. Back to the place from which the disciples—and the women who accompanied them—had come. Back home—that's where Jesus told you he would go, and he's already there, said the angel.

Back home—where there are piles of laundry waiting to be done; where the income tax forms are strewn across the desk; where the kids have taken over the living room during this week of school vacation. Back home—to the everydayness of our lives, the routine, the mundane. Back home—where the calendar on the refrigerator is full of appointments to be kept and volunteer commitments to be fulfilled. Back home—where the evening news cast reports mass murders, accidents, and deaths attributable to natural disasters. That's where Jesus waits for us. That's where the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God, begins.

It is as if Mark, in leaving the story unfinished, directs us back to the beginning; and invites us to start over. The resurrection isn't the end of the story at all; it takes us back to the beginning. Maybe Mark, and Jesus are hoping that this time, we and the disciples will “get it.” Maybe this time we'll comprehend how God's tremendous power gives life. Maybe this time we'll realize the strength and need for community. Maybe this time we'll see glimpses of the realm of God in the parables. Maybe this time we'll hear those words, “Take up your cross” and realize that Jesus intends that we make sacrifices for the sake of divine love.

Maybe Mark, and Jesus, want us to understand that the place where Jesus really makes a difference in our lives is in our daily routines, not particularly in our high holy festival, as wonderful as it is. Jesus is already waiting for us, waiting to bless us and be with us as we do the laundry, fill out the tax forms, care for children and elders, teach our students, prepare for our cases, rehearse our music, study for classes. It's the same old, same old, except its not the same old, because the resurrected Son of God is with us, blessing what we do, multiplying our efforts, forgiving our failures, cherishing our work, and renewing our energy!

T. S. Eliot ended one of the Four Quartets with the line, “And the end of all our exploring is to arrive at the place where we began and to know the place for the first time.”

The angel at the tomb sends us back to Galilee, and perhaps we will discover new truths about the place where the good news began. New truths from Mark, maybe. More importantly, new truths about the places back home where our faith first took root and still grows. Have a blessed Easter, returning home.