

Unfinished Gospel  
Mark 16:1-8  
April 12, 2020  
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## I

A few weeks ago, I found myself sitting in the carpool line at my sons' elementary school. Only I wasn't there to drop off or pick up my children. I was there to receive their school-issued laptops, so that they might make some attempt at finishing their school year online. And as I sat there in my vehicle waiting for those brave and faithful school employees to bring the devices out to my car, it suddenly dawned on me that I wouldn't likely be in that carpool line again until August, I hope.

And as I sat there I began to wonder if there were any of my sons' personal belongings that were still inside the building – jackets and water bottles and such. I began to think about the projects that had been started before spring break – the art and the writing and the math worksheets and the science experiments – projects that they planned to return to when school resumed in the middle of March – but that remain unfinished here in mid-April.

A few days ago, I came across our youngest son's soccer cleats and shin guards. He was so looking forward to playing this spring, and he'd been to precisely one practice before everything was shut down. I put his shin guards and cleats back into storage, and as I did, I wondered if he will have outgrown them by the time he gets to play soccer again.

## II

In the grand scheme of things, those are of course trivial inconveniences in comparison to what thousands of our fellow Georgians are living through these days, and hundreds of thousands of our fellow Americans are going through. But it's still hard to believe that it was just a month ago that we began shutting down the country. It's hard to believe that just six weeks ago, our economy was running at nearly full employment, and now millions of Americans are out of work. No one alive today has ever been through anything like this, and there's so much that feels unfinished and uncertain, almost like someone hit the pause button on the whole world, and we're suspended in mid-air, caught mid-sentence, incomplete and unfinished.

We generally don't like things to be left incomplete. One of the most famous statues in the world is a sculpture of King David by the Renaissance master Michelangelo. It's one of those works of art that you may have seen hundreds of times on television or in books, but there's no substitute for standing there in person. All along the side aisles in the gallery leading up to the David, however, are other works that were left unfinished at the time that Michelangelo died.

As you look at Michelangelo's unfinished pieces lining the gallery, you find yourself imagining what they could have been - there's a back and shoulder poking out of a marble block here, a face that is beginning to emerge there - only the vaguest of shapes beginning to take form over there. It's both beautiful and deeply unsettling all at the same time, to look at all of these works that remain permanently on pause.

There's just something deep inside our psyches that likes for things to be completed and finished - and on this Easter Sunday, here in Athens, across the country, and indeed, across the world, we're all feeling like life has been suddenly suspended in mid-air. On this Easter Sunday, here in Athens, across the country, and indeed, across the world, all of us are feeling anxious, afraid, and uncertain about what comes next.

### III

And that brings us to our story from the gospel according to Mark. If you're joining us for the first time this morning, you should know that since Christmas, we've been working our way through Mark's gospel, from beginning to end, with the exception of a few side trips here and there. And so today, we come to the end of the story.

But before we get to the conclusion, I want to go all the way back and briefly revisit the beginning, all the way back to the very first sentence that Mark writes. Remember, Mark doesn't begin his gospel with a detailed genealogy or with an address to his readers or with a grand cosmic hymn. Mark simply begins like this - *The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* - and then he's off to the races to tell the gospel story that we've been reading all winter and spring.

And that's a heck of a beginning. Right from the start, Mark is telling us that what he has to say is good news, about Jesus, who is the Christ, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew title Messiah. So Mark is making a theological claim with the very first verse. Mark claims that Jesus is the long-promised and long-awaited Messiah, the one foretold in the Hebrew Scriptures who will make all things right again, who is the Son of God. Mark is making a claim that not only is this Jesus the Messiah, he's also the Son of God. If Mark's gospel were a piece of music, the opening notes would be something like the opening to the soundtrack of *Star Wars*, this big, loud, brassy major chord, and then we're off to the races.

So now that we've been reminded how Mark begins, let's turn our attention now to the final notes - to how Mark ends. Listen now for a Word from God from Mark 16:1-8.

*When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the*

*tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But 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.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

If you’ve got your bible open, you may be saying, wait a minute, Ryan, that’s not where Mark ends. There are several more verses. And you’re right, there are indeed more verses. But if you’ve got your bible open, take a look at verse eight. In most bibles, there should be a footnote there, and if you look at the footnote, you’ll read something that bible scholars and theologians and church historians puzzle over to this very day.

Remember, in antiquity, there were no printing presses or copy machines. Mark wrote his gospel by hand, and then it was copied by hand over and over again as it made its way out into the world. And as you might imagine, over a long period of time, there came to be some discrepancies in some of the different copies floating around. Most of the time these textual variants, as they’re called, are simply a matter of a letter or a word transposed here and there.

But the textual variant here at the end of Mark is a big deal. And here’s why. The earliest versions of Mark’s gospel that we still have access to today, that is, the very oldest copies of the manuscripts of Mark that exist, end with this verse – *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

What kind of ending is that?! Mark begins with a bang – with this good news about Jesus Christ the Son of God, and then ends with a literal whimper - the women running away from the empty tomb and saying nothing to anyone because they were afraid? That just seems so incomplete, so uncertain, so unfinished! It just won’t do!

And so it shouldn’t surprise you that there’s strong evidence that some later editors, while making these handwritten copies, might have taken it upon themselves to try to clean up what they thought was Mark’s incomplete ending. So in some later manuscripts, there appears appended to verse eight what some bibles mark as “the shorter ending of Mark.” And then even later manuscripts contain verses 9 through 20, which are often labeled “the longer ending of Mark.

But the very oldest, very earliest copies of Mark all end with this verse – *So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

We've been reading Mark together for months now. You've listened attentively as we've worked our way through this entire gospel story. I don't know about you, my friend, but I think Mark meant to leave it right there. I think Mark meant to write a cliffhanger ending. I think Mark meant for us to be discomfited with the idea that this story is incomplete and unfinished.

#### IV

Because it is. The ending to this gospel story is still being written, my friend. And here's the crazy thing. You're not meant to be just a reader in this story. You're not meant to be just a passive consumer. You've got a role to play in this gospel. If the word gospel literally means "good news," you've got a part to play in seeing to it that it truly is "good news," even in these strange days of social distancing and quarantine.

Because every time you do the hard work of forgiveness, you do gospel work.

Every time you humble yourself and pick up a wash basin and towel and wash the feet of someone else, you do gospel work.

Every time you show hospitality and kindness and welcome to those that everyone else would say is unclean and unwelcome, you do gospel work.

Every time you refuse to meet hate with hate, every time you refuse to repay violence with violence, you do gospel work.

Every time you dig deep and find the strength to pray for that person that drives you up one wall and down the other, instead of resenting them, you do gospel work.

Every time your actions and words bear truth to the good news about Jesus Christ the son of God, you do gospel work.

The gospel is unfinished, my friend, and that's good news, because it means that all these years later, half a world away from that first Easter morning, you aren't just invited to read this story, but to live it this very day.

#### V

So my friends, let us never forget that even on this most unusual of Easter Sundays, on this day when so much of the country is shut down, locked up, frozen in place, the work of the church continues. On this day of all days we remember that the powers that be in this world did everything in their power to shut down Jesus, to lock him up inside the tomb.

But they failed.

Because you can't kill love.

You can't shut down hope.

You can't hold back the waters of righteousness and justice and mercy and peace.

And so on this day, while church buildings may be empty around the globe,

*so is the tomb,*

and the work of the gospel goes on.

He has been raised;

he is not here.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.