**An Empty Tomb And An Unfinished Story**

Isaiah 25:6-9

Mark 16:1-8

If you have been to the movies as of late, you may recognize which movie it is that provokes among some people a strong negative reaction about the ending. Here is what one person posted, “when I see a movie or read a book I like to go with the fundamentals. In other words, a story should have a beginning, a middle and an ending. This movie has the first two but not so much an ending. The creators of the movie want the viewer to come up with their own understanding of how it ends. The thing is that since I didn’t write the story, I don’t want to come up with the ending”.  Another person posted, “What an insult and a cop out....It's lazy and if I'd known this would have had this ridiculous ending I wouldn't have seen it. It isn't my job to write the ending, it's theirs and they didn't do their job.” The movie in question ends with an empty room and leaves the audience wondering, what happened?

Does that sound familiar? Do you know any other stories that end like that with an empty room or an empty tomb? Most Biblical scholars believe Mark’s Gospel ends with our lesson today. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James find themselves in an empty tomb. A stranger tells them Jesus has been raised and they will encounter Jesus in Galilee. The women flee from the tomb in fear and amazement, saying nothing to anyone. The end. What kind of ending is that? Do your job Mark, finish the story. Don’t leave us hanging with this empty tomb. You gave us a beginning with Jesus stepping out of the waters of baptism, ready to confront the powers of empire proclaiming the Realm of God’s justice as a real presence in our world. You gave us a middle with Jesus healing the sick, welcoming the outcast, challenging the powerful, calling disciples into a community of love and fellowship. Who ends a story with an empty tomb?

If like our present day movie critics you are uncomfortable, maybe unhappy with this ending, you are in good company. The early Christian church also was uncomfortable with Mark’s ending. Most Biblical scholars believe that the verses which follow our text today were later additions intended to get us out of the tomb and in the company of the resurrected Christ. The same is true for Matthew, Luke and John. Since Mark’s Gospel is the oldest the other three draw on Markan tradition and include in their Gospels the story of the empty tomb, but then go on to add what for most folks is a more satisfying ending with various appearances of the risen Christ.

It is worth reminding ourselves that all of the Gospels first and foremost have a theological purpose in how they tell the story of Jesus life, death and resurrection. None of them is concerned about historical accuracy. Each of them seeks to tell a theological truth about who Jesus is and what resurrection means for those who follow Jesus. The question is, “why does Mark give us this ending”? Why not finish the story the way later Christians finished Mark’s Gospel, or Matthew, Luke and John finish their Gospels with Jesus making any number of resurrection appearances. Why does Mark leave us with this unsatisfying image of an empty tomb? If we knew Mark was going to have this ridiculous empty tomb ending we may not have come to church in the first place. It’s not our job to finish this resurrection story, is it?

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James are headed for the tomb believing that this Jesus story already has an ending and it ends with Jesus dead on the cross. The tomb is the repository of death, at least that is how the Roman authorities see it as do most of the people who are convinced that Rome’s power has resoundingly crushed this Realm of God proclaiming peasant from Nazareth.

The two Marys are understandably filled with grief. In the first place they are facing the grief anyone faces with the death of one they love. In the second place, Jesus was executed in a particularly brutal way with a cross, which was intended much like the lynching tree in this country, as an instrument of fear and intimidation keeping people in their place. Finally, as with most forms of death and loss, whatever they might be, the two Marys along with the disciples face the loss and death of the dream Jesus has inspired in them about their lives and the world in which they live.

They go to encounter death in the tomb, but death is already at their side. Death is right there with them, as it is with us whenever we find we have given up or given into the realities of our world. Death is present when we give up on peace, because violence seems so powerful. Death is present when we give up on recovery because addiction seems so powerful. Death is present when we give up on health, because unhealthy living has such a powerful pull. Death is present when we give up on economic fairness, because entrenched wealth is so powerful. Death is present whenever we conclude the way things are is the way they will always be, because the status quo holds all the power. Death is already present with the two Mary’s as they head toward the tomb, expecting to find nothing more there then the corpse of their dreams and the one they loved.

There is no denying the reality of death for these two women any more than we can deny the losses, disappointments and challenges that we face in our day. Yet, we would be remiss if we failed to recognize the important ways in which Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James respond to their grief and loss. First, it is clear from the story that the two Mary’s are moving toward their pain and loss, rather than running from it. The other disciples have apparently fled and who can blame them. We often seek to avoid that which is painful or even uncomfortable. If something is bothering us, we keep it to ourselves, bottled up, rather than share it with a friend or someone who might be a support. These two women head toward their loss, rather than run from it. They face their grief, rather than deny it. They go together, sharing and talking, rather than holding up by themselves in their pain.

Second the two women have the resources of their faith on which to rely. Even as they travel in the company of death toward what they believe is the repository of death, they do so drawing on the rituals of their faith. They have come to anoint Jesus body with oil. They may not feel like engaging in this act of faith. They likely would rather stay where they were in the comfort of their home. But, they remain faithful to their tradition and so they get up and participate in this ritual. People of faith have been following their example ever since. We get up and go to church, even when we feel too discouraged to do so. We sing the songs of faith, even when it feels like we have no song to sing. We share in the communion banquet of God’s abundance, even when it feels like our cupboards are completely bare.

As the women lean into their pain, as they share in the rituals of their faith, they wonder out loud who will remove the stone in front of the tomb? The stone blocking the tomb, of course, is a huge impediment toward their healing and wholeness. For the two Mary’s and for us the stone blocking the tomb is a stark reminder of our own powerlessness, our own inability to muster up enough self-will, pull ourselves up from the bootstraps or any number of images that insist we can do this on our own.

The women approach the tomb expecting the stone to block their way, but we are told “when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away”. Does it make a difference when you move toward your loss rather than flee from it, when you lean into your hurt rather than deny it even exists? Does it make a difference if you come to worship, sing the songs of faith, share in the abundance of God’s banquet when you would rather stay in the comfort of your home? Mark tells us the two Marys arrive at the entrance of the tomb and the stone has been moved. There is no explanation. All we know is that this barrier to healing and wholeness no longer exists. It is the mystery of faith, but we also know from our own experience that this is precisely how our burdens are removed. Jesus once said, you only need the faith of a mustard seed and you can move mountains. All these two women need is enough faith to face their pain and share in the rituals that hold the promise of God with them.

It would be a nice happy ending if Jesus was there to greet them, perhaps throw a victory party over how Jesus has defeated death. But, that, of course, is not how Mark ends this resurrection story. In fact, Mark is quite clear; Jesus has nothing to do with the resurrection. There is an unnamed person present who says to the women, “Jesus has been raised.” He doesn’t say, “Jesus got up”, like you or me on Sunday morning, reaching about trying to turn off the alarm so we can get to church on time for Easter breakfast. Mark says, “Jesus has been raised”, which is to say God is at work and there is no power in this world or the next that is stronger or more powerful than the love of God. “Jesus has been raised.”

In this empty tomb, this is all Mark gives us. “Jesus has been raised”. The power of death, the power of empires, the power of everything that would defeat us or destroy us has been defeated. Like the wizard of oz, the curtain has been pulled back on death’s reign in our world and in our lives.

It is, of course, often easier to believe in the power of death then it is to face the risky proposition of resurrection, which is no doubt why the women are both amazed and afraid. Death we know. Death is found in all our certainties about ourselves and our world. But, if the tomb is empty and Jesus is raised, then we are left to grapple with the possibility of our own resurrected life and our own resurrected world. If the tomb is empty, then our sharing in communion, this banquet of God’s justice, spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, is merely a resurrection foretaste of the world God intends for us and all people. There is more yet to come.

Was Mark too lazy to finish the story, as some folks suggest about one of the current movies in the theatre? Did Mark, who gave us a beginning and a middle, cop out when it came to the ending?

Mark does say, Jesus left these instructions in the empty tomb, “see you in Galilee..” wherever that may be for you or for me. Maybe we do have a role to play in the ending of this resurrection story.

**Isaiah 25:6-9**

*When the prophet Isaiah puts forth an image of God’s salvation for the world it is a powerful image of justice and full inclusion for all people. Ultimately injustice, the power of death and all the sadness it brings is no match for the love of God who wipes away all tears. The image of the great banquet of justice and love was an image embraced by Jesus and which we celebrate every time we share in the sacrament of Holy Communion.*

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

**Mark 16:1-8***Our second lesson reminds us of the important role strong women play in the resurrection story. It is Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, who in spite of the horror of the cross and their deep sadness, muster the courage to care for Jesus’ body. They are, of course, startled to discover that the tomb is empty and the promise of resurrection is on the loose.*

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.