

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(April 8, 2012)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: BREATHLESS

(studies in the Gospel of Mark)

Easter Sunday - He is Risen!

Alternate Endings

(Mark 15:52--16:8)

Study #31

Introduction: The way it *should* have ended...

In recent years, we've gotten used to the idea of a movie having one or more "alternate endings."

We finish watching a movie and then click on the DVD's Bonus Features to see other ways the story could have ended.

- Instead of disappearing to fight another day, Jason Bourne is invited back to the CIA. (The Bourne Identity).
- Rocky wins the split decision against Mason "The Line" Dixon. (Rocky Balboa).

The idea of alternate endings is everywhere.

The website www.myhungergames.com is inviting aspiring young authors to "let your imagination go wild and write your most creative alternative ending" to the story, different than what was in the book or in the movie.

And the idea isn't new. At the end of the original "The Muppet Movie" (1979), Kermit the Frog sang, "*Life's like a movie, write your own ending...*"

In fact, the thought of alternate endings arose long before 1979.

In our Bibles we have four different accounts of the Good Friday through Easter Sunday string of events. Each of the Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John - tells the story somewhat differently.

Like any set of eyewitness reports, the Gospels differ in the reporting of the details, the style of reporting, even in the point of view.

In particular, and especially relevant to us today, Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24 and John 20-21 are all about Jesus' resurrection and the events surrounding it. But they are four unique tellings of the story.

Matthew takes us to a mountain in Galilee for a Great Commission. **Luke** leads us on an eye-opening walk to Emmaus. **John** serves us fish for breakfast on a beach at the Sea of Galilee.

And Mark? Well, talk about an alternate ending! The conclusion of Mark's Gospel couldn't be more different than the ending of the other three. And it is to Mark 16 we will turn this morning for our Easter Sunday morning meditation on the resurrection of Jesus.

Before we land on Sunday, though, let's remember Friday, even if only briefly.

Jesus died around three in the afternoon on Friday. On that day, Passover was being celebrated throughout Jerusalem. And, on that particular year, Passover fell on the Sabbath.

Because of Jewish Law, Jesus' body had to be removed from the cross before sunset.¹

And, with His body off the cross, it had to be buried. Enter **Joseph of Arimathea** - a man who is never mentioned before and is never mentioned after this in the Bible.

But "hats off" to Joseph. He stepped forward to play his part when no one else would.

¹ To leave it hanging there would have brought defilement on the land (Deut. 21:23).

The Burial of Jesus (Mark 15:42-47)

Joseph of Arimathea “gathered up courage” (vv. 42-43)

[42] When evening had already come, because it was the preparation day, that is, the day before the Sabbath, [43] Joseph of Arimathea came, a prominent member of the Council, who himself was waiting for the kingdom of God; and he gathered up courage and went in before Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus.

- **John’s** Gospel refers to Joseph as *[19:38]...a disciple of Jesus, but a secret one, for fear of the Jews.*
- **Matthew** tells us that Joseph was rich.
- **Luke** informs us both that he was known as a good and a just man, AND that he had disagreed with the way his colleagues on the Sanhedrin had treated Jesus.

True, he hadn’t raised his voice in Jesus’ defense during the “trial” in Caiaphas’ home just a few hours earlier.

Can we understand being overcome with fear, the pressure of peer pressure? I can and maybe you can, too. But, now Joseph is ready to stand up and be counted.

Sometime late in the afternoon, after Jesus breathed His last and gave up His spirit, Joseph “gathered up courage” and went to Pilate to ask for the body of Jesus

We might have accused Joseph of cowardice earlier, but not now. Here he acted in the face of his fears. That’s courageous faith.

Before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, could consider Joseph’s request, though, he had to be sure that Jesus was really dead.² With that assurance³ Pilate allowed Joseph to have Jesus’ body.

² Jesus died more quickly than most men condemned to crucifixion, more quickly, in fact, than either of the two men who had been crucified next to Him. Maybe that explains why Pilate had doubts about Jesus’ death. *[44] Pilate wondered if He was dead by this time, and summoning the centurion, he questioned him as to whether He was already dead. [45] And ascertaining this from the centurion, he granted the body to Joseph.*

Jesus: Buried in Joseph’s Tomb (vv. 46-47)

[46] Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock; and he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. [47] Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus were looking on to see where He was laid.

And with that, just like that, Jesus and all the hopes He had stirred in the hearts of His disciples was gone.

It’s tough to even imagine what life was like from that Friday night forward for the disciples.

- They had known and loved Jesus, so they would have been grieving deeply.
- They would all have been under scrutiny from the Jewish and the Roman governments, since Jesus had been convicted of both blasphemy and sedition. They would have all been considered guilty by association.
- They had just lost the best Friend they had ever known and the One to whom they had pledged their lives. Their Lord was dead.

How did they feel? “Hopeless” comes to mind.

Surprisingly, that hopeless Saturday is hardly mentioned at all in any of the Gospel records.⁴ We can let our imaginations run wild there. And, to some extent, that might even be helpful. But, with very little hesitation all four Gospels rush forward to Sunday, the first day of the week.

As we continue to follow Mark’s account this morning, he tells us that three women made their way to the tomb on Sunday morning to carry out one final act of devotion for the Man they had followed and lived for.

³ Perhaps after sticking his spear into Jesus’ side, and seeing blood and water gush out?

⁴ Neither Mark nor John make a reference to it, while Matthew only tells us that a plot by the Jews to explain away the resurrection was hatched on that day (Matthew 27:62-66), and Luke informs us that the disciples rested on the Sabbath according to the commandment (Luke 23:56).

Easter Sunday Morning at the Tomb (Mark 16:1-8)

(Not Very Great) Expectations (vv. 1-3)

Preparations for the day (v. 1)

[Mark 16:1] When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might come and anoint Him.

These three women knew perfectly well that Jesus was dead. They had been there at the crucifixion. They watched Him die.

They had watched the men place Him in the tomb. They watched as the stone was rolled into place to protect against grave-robbers. And now they have come to start off a new week by finishing up the job of embalming Jesus' body.⁵

These three were fully anticipating His body to be in the tomb. That is why they brought spices to the tomb.

Can you read their minds?

“Let’s all go out to the cemetery and give poor Jesus a decent burial. It’s the least we can do, to show Him some respect, now that He’s dead.”

With Jesus dead, things would be so different. Perhaps they had lost loved ones in their lives before, as you and I have. Certainly, they would have missed Him greatly.

But they knew that they would continue to embrace Him in their hearts, continue to follow Him with their lives. They would keep His teachings posted on the doorframes of their minds.

Who knows, maybe it would even be easier to follow Him now that He was dead. After all, when He was alive, it was so hard to keep up with Him.

Throughout Mark's Gospel, there is this breathless account of Jesus' busy-ness. Mark uses the word “immediately” thirty nine times to describe the movement of Jesus. He was always on the go, always traveling, doing something else. You never knew where He was going to show up next.

But with Him dead, lying in Joseph's tomb, it wouldn't hard to keep up with Him.

They could venerate Him, codify His teachings, alphabetize His parables, number His miracles, systematize His commandments.

And so, the women plodded on, determined to do this thing for Jesus.

Planned activities for the day (vv. 2-3)

[Mark 16:2-3] Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. [3] They were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?”

Clearly, resurrection was the last thing on their minds.

As they walked to the cemetery, all they concerned themselves with was the giant slab of stone which the soldiers had placed in front of the entrance to the tomb - “How are we going to move that thing?!”

The stone was a circular slab that was rolled in a channel carved out of the rock. Nearly the height of a man, the stone would have weighed at least a half a ton. Priority #1 was simply to get *into* the tomb!

We are almost tempted to shake our heads and make fun of them for not having reckoned with such a major “detail” prior to setting out.

But that is just the sort of thing that people in grief don't take into account, just the kind of detail people whose worlds have been turned upside down might not have thought about.

When they arrived at the graveyard, though, their expectations about what they would encounter were shattered, as they looked up and saw that the stone had already been rolled away.

⁵ Nicodemus had begun this task late on Friday afternoon. (see John's account)

The Women's Expectations: Shattered! (vv. 4-7)

The declaration of the "young man" (vv. 4-6)

[Mark 16:4-5] Looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. [5] Entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right⁶, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed.

OK. They were amazed. According to the angel - and we are to understand that the young man was an angel - they should *not* have been amazed.

[Mark 16:6] And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him.

"Ladies, close your mouths, you're catching flies. You need to be alert, awake to what is before you!"

And so do we who are here today!

If before this morning you have thought that Jesus' rising again was only a "spiritual" thing - this should convince you otherwise.

Christianity has always taught that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was a physical thing.

The body that walked around Judea and Galilee and the body that hung on the cross on Friday literally vacated the tomb.

The resurrection is not just "in our hearts." It is an objective reality, and **IT IS THE HISTORICAL HEART OF OUR FAITH!**

⁶ Here, Mark mentions a "young man" seated in the tomb. The other three Gospels speak of an angel. One of the accounts mentions two angels, while the others speak of one. Sometimes they are pictured sitting - at other times standing. Far from invalidating the accuracy of the report by these minor discrepancies, the variety shows the perspectives of various eyewitnesses who describe what struck them most.

The apostle Paul wrote, **[1 Corinthians 15:17]...if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is worthless."**

Joseph's empty tomb has been hard to explain away for twenty centuries. Enemies wouldn't have emptied it. Neither would friends.

The best explanation for the empty tomb is the obvious one, the *"too good to be true"* one:

Jesus left the tomb a resurrected Lord. And His resurrection proves that He is not only the LORD of life, but the SOURCE of life for all those who place their trust in Him!

For the hopeless in our world today - or in our midst today - Jesus' resurrection shouts **HOPE**.

Saturday, the day of hopelessness and fear, is over. Sunday has come. Jesus is alive - and because Jesus is alive, hope is alive and hopelessness is gone.

This morning, with Mark, we proclaim the truth of the resurrection of Jesus, the event that validates the truth of His every claim to be Savior and Lord.

But - while you're thinking that this would be a great place to end the sermon, I'm not done - because Mark's account is not finished.

The angel drew the women's attention to the place where they had put Jesus' body and invited their inspection.

"See for yourself! He's gone."

And sure enough, the women would have nodded, *"Yes, He's gone all right."*

The angel then gave the women marching orders.

The instructions given by the "young man" (v. 7)

[Mark 16:7] "But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.'"

Isn't that a nice touch - "*Tell His disciples - AND PETER*" Not that Peter was not a disciple. The thought is, *especially* tell the disciple Peter.

And why was Peter singled out?

Isn't it because Peter had failed so miserably in the courtyard of the High Priest when three times he denied even knowing Jesus, when questioned by a slave girl?

The last time we saw Peter in Mark's Gospel he was weeping over his personal failure.

But, the angel lets the women know that the Lord had not rejected Peter for his denials. He still wanted to see Peter.

In fact, the angel assured the women that Jesus wanted to meet with all the disciples again up north in Galilee.

So, they were to go tell the eleven to get there as quickly as they could.⁷ Mark's exit verse from the scene at the tomb leaves us, again, breathless.

Fearful, the Women Flee the Cemetery (v. 8)

[Mark 16:8] They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them;⁸ and they said nothing to anyone, FOR THEY WERE AFRAID.⁹

That verse might somewhat surprise you.

⁷ Comparison with the other Gospels shows that the disciples did not leave at once for Galilee, but that time was allowed for Peter (Luke 24:34) and the disciples to see the Lord (Luke 24:36). The meeting in Galilee is only recorded in Matthew 28 and John 21.

⁸ There aren't many ways to communicate more fully in the Greek language the emotion of paralyzing, confusing, fear than what we read here in verse 8.

⁹ Eugene Peterson's rendering of this verse in his New Testament paraphrase, *The Message* reads, "They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone."

We might have expected Mark to say that the women triumphantly brought the news back to the disciples, or as the other Gospels indicate, they ran back joyfully.

But instead, he just says that they ran away - like the men had done before. They said nothing to anyone along the way. Words failed. They were too stunned, amazed, shell-shocked!

Now, it is our custom here at Northwest to move from verse to verse in our study of Scripture.

But, there is good reason to pause at this point and ask ourselves if we **SHOULD** move beyond verse 8 this morning.

A Good Ending

Where does Mark's Gospel end?

In the margins of many of your Bibles, there are words to this effect next to verse 9, "*Later manuscripts add verses 9-20.*" Now what does that mean?

OK. Here is what that means...

There are many, many ancient copies of the Gospel of Mark - hundreds of them.

Some of them date from as early as the second century, which is little more than a generation or two after Mark wrote his Gospel.

Among those copies that are the oldest, none contain verses 9 and following.

There has been a long-running debate among scholars as to whether Mark penned the words after verse 8, and if they should be considered a part of the Bible.

In my opinion, there are reasons for coming to the conclusion that verses 9-20 were **NOT** written by Mark.

For one thing, the Greek style, the grammar and the vocabulary are all quite different in this final passage than anything we find elsewhere in Mark's Gospel.

And, while change in style is not proof that Mark didn't write the verses after verse 8, the differences do raise our antennae.

More importantly, as I just mentioned, most of the most reliable ancient manuscripts simply do not contain verses 9-20.¹⁰ (And the manuscripts that do include those verses are of a much later date and are inferior in quality to those that don't have it.)

Now, in telling you all of this, I will go on to say that these verses are likely TRUE - that is, they are historically accurate descriptions of what Jesus said (much of it being quotations from the other three Gospels), and of the experience of the first Christians.

For my part, I am of a mind that they are not part of Mark's original Gospel.¹¹

In that opinion, I am in good - but not unanimous - company.¹² But if I am right, if Mark 16:9 and following are not original to Mark's gospel, why do we have vv. 9 and following in our Bibles?

Why not stop at verse 8?

Well, you'll probably agree with me that verse 8 just doesn't seem finished. Again, it reads,

[Mark 16:8] They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Believers from the first century to the twenty-first have thought that the phrase "***for they were afraid***" is no way to end a Gospel!

So, shortly after the second century, those who thought that Mark's Gospel was a torso in need of legs to help it walk off stage with dignity, began coming alongside Mark's poor ending to supply their own.

The one we have in our Bibles (vv. 9-20) is the most widely accepted way to help Mark finish well.¹³

We can suggest all kinds of explanations to answer the question about the seeming unfinished-ness of Mark's Gospel.

Some believe that Mark never intended that his Gospel should end at verse 8. They suggest that he was either interrupted and never got to finish or that his real ending has been lost.¹⁴

One of the most brilliant scholars of our age in dealing with matters like this¹⁵ had the humility to say that he didn't know what the ending of Mark actually was.

I think it would be good for us to imitate this man's humility.

But here is a thought.

¹⁰ Eusebius and Jerome (two early church fathers from the fourth century) tell us that while they were familiar with the longer ending, it was missing from most of the manuscripts of their day.

¹¹ As one scholar has written, "*By the recognized standards of textual evaluation, both the longer and shorter endings must be rejected.*" (Burdick)

¹² Those who hold that the longer reading is Mark's include Hodges, Lightfoot, Lenski, and Edersheim. Those who believe that the text should end at verse 8 include Metzger, Guthrie, Grassmick (who nevertheless holds that the long ending is a part of inspired Scripture, even though not written by Mark), A.T. Robertson Eugene Peterson, R. T. France, and others.

¹³ As Alan Coles writes, "*The early church was faced with the same question we are about why Mark broke off so abruptly, especially since the other Gospels give such full accounts of appearances of Jesus after the resurrection. The ending cannot be said to be a part of the Scriptures (like the rest of the Gospels), but they are an honest attempt to complete, or 'round off' the story of Jesus.*"

¹⁴ Explanations as to how the ending disappeared have been ingenious, to say the least. Several suggest that a Roman officer might have broken into Mark's home as he was about to pen the conclusion. He was taken off to prison, and had to leave the text as we see it at verse 8. Others suggest that the last few inches of the scroll on which he wrote the conclusion were either accidentally or intentionally torn off.

¹⁵ Bruce Metzger, in The Text of the New Testament, a book dealing with textual criticism.

WHAT IF what we have in front of us is exactly what Mark meant for us to have? What if he intended to end His Gospel at verse 8, with “...*for they were afraid*”.

What would that mean?

Mark’s blunt ending - abrupt, stark, and ugly? Or inviting, provocative, intriguing, challenging?

Clearly, each of the authors of the four Gospels intended to communicate different truths through the events they chose to include, to bring home a different emphasis.

In contrast to the other three Gospels, Mark tells of:

- no further appearances of Jesus;
- no reassuring words to the women on the road back to Jerusalem from the cemetery;
- no surprises on a walk to Emmaus;
- no sudden appearances in locked rooms;
- no breakfasts on the beach in Galilee.

But, we believe that Mark’s book is a finely crafted piece of inspired Scripture, just as Matthew’s and Luke’s and John’s are inspired and finely crafted.

So, to bring Mark’s message to bear on our lives, we don’t have to bring in to the discussion every resurrection detail we can remember from the other accounts.

We can read, and meditate, explore and ask God to reveal what He has for us. And I’m convinced that Mark has a very special message for us.

And after doing all of that, I have come to believe that Mark has excluded the details the other Gospels have included for a reason. I think that he has *intentionally* ended his Easter story abruptly. There is a starkness to it - it leaves us hanging, unsure of what will come next.

“*For they were afraid*” - not exactly the kind of an ending that inspires confidence.

You couldn’t write a hymn based on those words. Hallmark wouldn’t produce a card with “*For they were afraid*.” Hollywood wouldn’t make a movie based on “*For they were afraid*.”

If you want Easter done in Technicolor, pounded into you in weighty words of earnest conviction, argued persuasively, or with poetic images about the return of the robin in the spring, don’t turn in your Bibles to Mark 16:8!

Mark’s ending doesn’t give it.¹⁶

Conclusion:

“*For they were afraid*.”! What a way to end a Gospel. It leaves us off-balance, mid-stride.

Not in doubt about the fact of the resurrection, but unsure about what the women were going to do about it.

I’d like a few more verses to know what they eventually did, after they recovered from their astonishment and fear. How did their story end?

Did they eventually obey? Did they trust? Did they lead victorious lives?

Well, do you know what? The questions we want to ask Mark about the women are precisely the questions that boomerang back to each of us now.

What will each of us do with the fact that Jesus is alive! He is more than we can handle. How will we live with, deal with, obey, submit to the Lord Jesus?

Will we come down on the side of belief or unbelief?¹⁷

¹⁶ Mark puts a grammatical oddity in this verse. The word “for” is found at the end of the sentence. But “for” is a transitional word that leads us into something else, gets us ready for the next statement. It is a throat-clearing word that slows us down so that there is space for the energies of anticipation to develop and deepen for whatever comes next.

Will the invasion of new life send us scurrying for cover in *anxious* fear or venturing out in *reverent* fear to worship and serve and perform great feats of faith?

We are just as convinced of the resurrection as the women were. But we aren't any more convinced of what we are going to do with it than they were.

We're just as plagued by fears as they were. The story isn't written out in full for us, either.

To follow an alive Jesus is to follow into a place of UNCertainty. We are not following a set of rules, but a Person who rules. Jesus is anything but predictable. He won't allow us to put Him into neat, tidy boxes.

To follow Jesus is to follow into mystery and into uncertainty - and that prospect might be just a little bit terrifying.

It sounds like an adventure!

But, knowing the One who is driving the bus steadies us and propels us into that unknown, exciting future where obedience might take us anywhere at all.

So, sensing the tension Mark left at the end of his book, the early church added their own ending.

Well-meaning Christians that they were, they gave it a proper conclusion. They made it more satisfying.

They told of disciples believing and obeying and celebrating, of the power of God, of another final commission.

And they weren't just making something up!

They were writing down the plain truth, that the resurrection of Jesus generated new life in Jesus' followers.

The resurrection did turn cowardly disciples into courageous disciples who praised and preached and prayed and performed miracles and suffered.

That was their ending. They ended with their faithful lives.

So, how will you end Mark's Gospel?

This is the masterful, artful stroke of Mark's ending. He holds himself in check so that you and I have freedom to "write" a personal conclusion.

Mark comes to the end of the story - death and resurrection have been proclaimed - hands us the pen and says, "*Here, you write it. Write a resurrection conclusion with your life. The rest of the story is up to you!*"

HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN, INDEED!!

¹⁷ Mark's awkward ending is consistent with at least one other Bible book. In the Old Testament book of Jonah, a book about God's grace and love as manifested to Israel's enemies (the Assyrians), the prophet Jonah takes issue with that mercy. Even though God had personally challenged Jonah to repent of his hateful heart, the book ends with Jonah incensed at God's compassion, angry "*to the point of death.*" Not much in the way of resolution, is it? And we are left wondering how the story really ends. Does Jonah change? Does he stay hard-hearted? And, in asking that question of Jonah, we are drawn to ask ourselves the same question, realizing that his book prompts us to love, even our enemies, too.