

# Unfinished Business

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Mark 16:1-8

**Sermons Series:**  
**In Christ Together**  
**for the World**

*How can  
Mark get  
away with  
ending his  
gospel with  
frightened  
women  
fleeing the  
cemetery in  
disobedient  
silence?*

Chris and I came to this church from the Boston area in 1979.

During our time in Boston, we followed the Red Sox and occasionally watched them play at venerable Fenway Park. In those days, rooting for the Red Sox was an exercise in futility. The last time the Red Sox had won the World Series was 1918.

You can imagine our delight when the Red Sox took a three-games-to-two lead into the 6<sup>th</sup> game of the 1986 World Series against the New York Mets. With the score tied, the game went into extra innings. The Sox scored two runs in the top of the 10<sup>th</sup>, but New York rallied to tie the score, courtesy of a wild pitch. With two outs and two runners on base, Mets center fielder Mookie Wilson hit a slow roller up the first base line. Boston first baseman Bill Buckner, now in the twilight of his career playing on a bum ankle, charged the ball, which rolled under his glove and through his legs into right field, allowing the winning run to score. This forced a 7<sup>th</sup> and deciding game, which the Mets won 4-3.

It was agonizing to watch Buckner's miscue. Nobody

wanted the game to end on an error, unless you're a Mets fan. I want a World Series game to end on a colossal home run or a sterling play in the field, not a botched ground ball. I want a player to do something heroic, not awful. So Mookie Wilson is hailed as a hero, while Buckner, despite a long, productive career, becomes something of a goat. It seems so anticlimactic for a big game to end this way.

We've been preaching our way through Mark's gospel for the past four months. We've devoted 15 Sundays to Jesus' miracles and teachings in the first 15 chapters. Mark's gospel culminates in chapter 16 with the words, "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" (Mark 16:8).

That's it? How can Mark get away with ending his gospel with frightened women fleeing the cemetery in disobedient silence? This eight-verse Easter story seems so anti-climactic.

The literal translation of verse 8 in the Greek is even more striking: "To no one anything they said, afraid they were for." Didn't anyone ever tell Mark that you don't end a sentence with a preposition? He

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not only ends this sentence with the preposition; horror of horrors, he concludes his gospel with one!

The church seldom reads Mark's account of Jesus' resurrection on Easter. The other three gospels have an abundance of post-resurrection appearances. They record joyful seaside meals, a garden embrace with the risen Lord and several stories of reconciliation and forgiveness. There is none of that in Mark. His story ends with frightened women saying nothing to anyone. Go figure!

Mark's gospel has such an unfinished feel to it, which probably explains why the early church supplied an ending. Normally, Biblical scribes were circumspect about adding anything to the text. But here the scribes felt compelled to add eleven verses. Since this longer ending doesn't appear in the earliest Biblical manuscripts, most scholars conclude it was a later addition.

There are three possibilities to account for Mark's abrupt ending. First, Mark intended to include a longer ending but was prevented from doing so by illness or arrest. Second, Mark wrote an original ending which has been lost in antiquity. Or third, Mark's ending is purposeful.

Mark's account of the empty tomb centers on three women: Mary Magdalene (whom Jesus cleansed of seven demons), Mary, the mother of James

(scholars are unsure whether this is Jesus' mother, Mary, or another Mary) and Salome. The fact that these women are mentioned three times within a span of eight verses is telling (15:40, 47; 16:1).

Mark never would have written these women so prominently into his gospel story if he was fabricating it. In ancient society, the testimony of women couldn't be admitted in a first century court of law. The second century Greek philosopher Celsus argued that Christianity couldn't possibly be true since the written accounts are based on the testimony of women. And we all know, Celsus writes, that women are hysterical. The only possible explanation for their presence in Mark's gospel is that the women are actually present and report what they see.

These three women make all the necessary arrangements to anoint Jesus' body for burial, yet, oddly enough, haven't made provision to roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb. None of them is expecting a resurrection this particular morning. When they arrive at the tomb, the stone has already been rolled away and a young man dressed in a white robe is seated inside. Matthew identifies, in his parallel account of this story, this young man in question to be an angel (Matthew 28:5). The women are understandably frightened.

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Fear is a common reaction to divine messengers.

“Do not be alarmed,” the angels says. “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where 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” (Mark 16:6-7).

Peter is likely singled out on account of his earlier apostasy. It's curious that Jesus will meet his disciples in Galilee, since Galilee was the place where Jesus first called them (1:16-20). Jesus also predicted at the last supper that they would have a post-resurrection encounter in Galilee (14:27-28).

Mark concludes his gospel with frightened women fleeing the tomb, saying nothing to anyone. Mark deliberately leaves the ending unfinished. Mark opens his gospel with the words, “The beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1). In essence, Mark's whole story supplies the beginning of Jesus' gospel. Mark's story doesn't have a proper ending because the ending is still unfolding. Our story is its continuation.

I was unaware until recently that the first century was a fertile era for self-proclaimed messiahs. These messiahs burst onto the world stage in violent opposition to Roman

tyranny. Josephus Flavius wrote a history of the Jewish people entitled *The Jewish Antiquities*. Josephus writes about numerous messiahs who were resisted and killed, causing the invariable collapse of their movement. Everybody went home and that was it.

One messianic movement, however, didn't collapse after the death of its leader. Not only did it not collapse, it exploded. In the course of next 300 years, Christianity infiltrated the whole Roman Empire. Today, its followers number two billion people worldwide.

When Jesus lived within the confines of a human body, he could only be one place at a time. But in his exalted, resurrected state, he can transcend the earthly limitations of time and space and can be everywhere at once. If Jesus has been raised from the dead, then he is alive. Easter means Jesus is on the loose, and there's no telling where he might show up next. True story: one of my first sightings of the risen Christ was in a bar in Sandusky, Ohio. Christ has been sighted in some of the most unlikely places: in prison cells, board rooms and sports arenas.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Easter is the closest thing to an open house in the church. It's the one time of year people join us to check out what we're doing. For our guests among us this morning, I believe the evidence

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in Mark's gospel is conclusive. Jesus is worth following with your life. Christ is alive and wants to pour his life into yours.

What might this sermon say to those who are his followers? Like the angel said to the women, go and tell the good news. Jesus Christ is alive and wants to change our lives for the better.

The abbot of a monastery called a young novice into his office and told him he would be responsible for giving the homily for the next three days at chapel. The prospect of delivering the homily the next several mornings filled this young novice with considerable fear and trepidation.

The next morning at chapel, the brothers assembled for worship. When it came time for the homily, the young novice went into the pulpit with knees knocking and hands trembling. There was a long pause before he spoke. "Do you know what I am going to say?" The brothers had no idea, so they shook their heads no. "Neither do I," said the novice. "Let's stand for the benediction."

The next day, the brothers assembled for chapel again. Again the novice stood in the pulpit with knees knocking and hands shaking. After a long pause, he asked the brothers, "Do you know what I'm going to say?" After the previous days, experience, the brothers had a pretty good idea, so they all nodded yes. "Well then,"

said the brother-in-training, "There's no need for me to tell you. Let's stand for the benediction."

The abbot was furious with this brother-in-training, so he called him into his office. "If you ever do that again, I'm going to make sure you are never promoted to the position of brother. Tomorrow morning when you give the homily, you'd better say it right."

Attendance in chapel the next day was at an all-time high. Everyone wanted to see what this young novice would say next. Like the first two days, he stood in the pulpit with hands trembling and voice quivering. After a long pause, he asked, "Do you know what I'm going to say?" Half of them had a pretty good idea, so they nodded their heads yes. But the other half were not at all sure so they shook their heads no. The novice surveyed the results and announced, "Let those who know tell those who don't. Let's stand for the benediction."

I concur. Let those who know tell those who don't!