

Mark 16:1-8
March 31, 2024
Ellen Crawford True

(Not) the End of the Story

That's it. That's the end of Mark. Yes, there were attempts to fix the ending, to pretty it up a bit, but scholars agree that the gospel of Mark ends right there—with an incomplete sentence no less. Even with the expected adjustments we make when moving from one language's word order to another, there's no getting around the fact that Mark ends the gospel with an unfinished phrase: "to none nothing they spoke for." The word can also mean *and*. "To none nothing they spoke and" doesn't really sound much better. Either way we're left with a cliffhanger that mentions nothing about a garden or a risen Jesus offering to show his freshly scarred hands or an impromptu breakfast on the beach. No risen conquering Son anywhere that anyone in Mark's story can see, let alone bunnies or bonnets or breakfast casseroles. What kind of Easter story is that?

The smart Alec in me is quick to say that somebody told something to someone, but that doesn't soften Mark's telling of the Easter story. We've spent the past three months walking through the gospel of Mark. The shortest and earliest gospel, it was written around the year 70, about the time the Romans destroyed the Temple and much of Jerusalem with it. Persecution comes at Mark's community from every angle. They know the stories about the resurrection; they follow a risen Christ, after all. As another preacher writes:

When Mark wrote his gospel, he knew that most of the people who were going to read [or] hear it were already believers. They did not have to be convinced about the reality

of Jesus' resurrection. They already ... believed it. So Mark must be doing something different than giving information in his account of the resurrection.

[Mark's community was] living under the reign of Nero who was one of the greatest persecutors of Christians who ever lived. It was under his reign that both Peter and Paul were executed; and many of Mark's readers were facing the same possibility. Where is Jesus in the midst of the trials and sufferings and perhaps deaths?

Those believers didn't need a history lesson about the name of some women who find an empty tomb. They needed the assurance that Jesus was right there with them in the midst of their troubles now—and perhaps some of them felt like utter failures in trying to follow the way of Jesus in the midst of their trials.

Mark tells them that Jesus goes ahead of them—through the trials, sufferings, and death. Jesus goes ahead of them to the resurrection from the dead. Even if they have failed Jesus, Jesus will not fail them.¹

Even if they have failed Jesus... On Thursday and Friday evenings we were reminded of the ways the disciples spectacularly failed Jesus. Peter leads the way, clutching tightly to his place at the head of the class, insisting that even if the others flunk the test, he won't. And less than 12 hours later, he denies Jesus not once, not twice but three times. Jesus has been telling them all along that yes, he would be tortured and killed AND that after three days he would be raised. They didn't get the first two. They didn't want to. Who can blame them? It is so easy for me to feel superior to the disciples, to think I would have stuck by Jesus to the end, that I would have

¹ <https://www.crossmarks.com/brian/mark16x1.htm>

stayed awake, that I would have been proud to call him my friend. But I would have most likely failed him, too. I do fail at following him. ALL. THE. TIME.

In 2016, Johannes Haushofer, a professor at Princeton shared his CV of failures, listing all his professional pursuits that had not panned out—rejection letters, failed grant requests, dead ends of every sort. He realized that while his successes were visible and celebrated, his failures were often hidden, leading others to believe that things came easily to him.² Inspired by this idea, Smith College developed a year-long program for students inviting them to reflect on their failures out loud, creating failure resumes.³ The intention behind these exercises was not to bask in the failures but to learn from them, to develop resilience, and to begin to trust that failure was not the end of their story.

Mark's ending could be understood as an ancient failure resume. It shows how the religious authorities failed to welcome a peace-wielding messiah, how the people failed to believe that this kind of king could actually save them, how the legal system failed by executing an innocent man, how the disciples failed to follow as they had promised, how the women said nothing to no one. But wait. There's more. Woven into the angel's message is a profound reminder that failure is not the end of the story.

The man in white first tells the speechless women to go right away. "Jesus is not here," after all. And he instructs them to tell—and to keep telling the news that Christ has been raised. "You will see him, just as he told you." Time and time again, throughout his ministry and Holy Week, there have been moments when Jesus has told the disciples what is coming, what to

² <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/04/27/this-princeton-professor-posted-his-cv-of-failures-for-the-world-to-see.html>

³ <https://www.smith.edu/news-events/news/failing-well-campus-series-helps-students-rethink-setbacks>

expect. He has told them that he would be arrested, tortured, killed, AND raised. He also told them to go untie a colt and simply say that the master needs it when asked, assuring them that no one would stop them, and he was right. He told them to follow a man carrying water to a home where they would find a large upper room ready for their Passover meal, and he was right. All these things happened just as Jesus said. In the angel's words we are reminded—along with the women—that Jesus' word can be trusted. Jesus does not make empty promises, no matter how often the disciples, the women, and we struggle to trust his word or believe his promises. And in the middle of his instructions to the women, the angel says, "even Peter." Other translations read "especially Peter." Dear Peter, always ready with his hand raised, always insisting that he can and will do everything Jesus asks, if not more. Dear Peter, who denied even knowing Jesus not once, not twice, but three times, mere hours after declaring how he would be with Jesus to the end.

That "even Peter" part—right up against that incomplete sentence fragment—is the clincher for me. My guess is that Peter has no interest in publishing his list of failures. He doesn't really have to; Mark does it for him. My hunch is that just off-stage he is utterly overwhelmed by shame and grief. He knows what he promised Jesus. He knows how desperately he wanted to be the star pupil, to out-disciple the others. And he knows how dramatically he failed. So the angel's intentional, out-loud inclusion of Peter, this capital F Failure of a disciple, is good news of the greatest kind.

That, dear ones, is the promise of Easter. Even in our Easter finest, we carry with us a whole host of failures in our backpacks, pockets and pocketbooks. And by the grace of God, our failures as individuals, as churches, as nations, as an entire human family are not the end of the

story. We have never been called to pursue *our* greatness or proclaim *our* successes. Faithful discipleship is not about what we accomplish, nor is it ultimately about how far we fall short or how spectacularly we fail. The great good news of Easter morning is that in the face of our failures, God does the raising, and God does the saving. We carry our fears and failings, and still God carries us and calls us to risk and try and risk again. Because God entrusts us—yes us—with this extraordinary story of life that conquers death, love that will not be defeated by cruelty, hatred, torture, cynicism, or despair. The God we meet in our crucified and risen Savior is the same God who keeps calling us forward, inviting us out from the tomb and into a life of courage, hope, light, and love. At the close of worship, we will be led out by a young person waving white streamers, a visible reminder of resurrection, resurrection that does not stay put, resurrection goes ahead of us to Galilee, to our homes, our community, our world and beyond. As you leave you are invited to take a small streamer for yourself, a tangible reminder of the risen Christ who knows our failures and loves us still. We have failed, and we will fail again. And in our fumbles and our failings, we are met by a God whose love never fails for the women, for the disciples, for Peter, or even for us. In Jesus Christ, our story is not over. In Jesus Christ, our story is just beginning. So go and tell and keep telling: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Alleluia! Amen.