

# How does it end?

*A sermon on Mark 16: 1-8 by Nathan Nettleton, 31 March 2018*

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## Message

There is no neat finish to the Jesus story, because it is far from over. The risen Jesus is always ahead of us, calling us to follow and live the next chapter.

## Sermon

Tonight, after a big week and a big forty days, we reach the climax of the church year, the explosion of celebration that comes with our encounter with the risen Jesus. Our journey has passed through the valley of the shadow of death, through the depths of hell itself, and now we stand with Jesus as witnesses to the birth of new life, of a new world.

But this year, the gospel account we hear of that moment is a strange and unsettling one. The gospel according to Mark ends on a very weird note; so weird that the church has struggled with it from day one, and often tried to clean it up. Mark's gospel was the first written, and in its original form, it doesn't record any appearances of the risen Jesus.

As we heard tonight, the three women come to the tomb to finish properly embalming the hastily buried body, and they find the body gone. They don't meet Jesus. Instead they meet a mysterious young man who tells them that Jesus is risen and is on his way to Galilee. And although they are told to go and report this news to the other disciples, the gospel ends by telling us that they flee in terror and don't breathe a word of it to anyone. The end.

What kind of end is that? Such an awkward end that many people have thought that there must be a page missing. But the fact that they started trying to write alternative endings for it so soon after it was written is evidence that there never was any more. If you check your Bibles, you will find that most editions include two or three of the early alternative endings. But it is quite clear that none of them are original. The original just ends in jarring silence. The three women flee in terror, without seeing the risen Jesus, and they say nothing to no one. What's that all about?

The later tack-on endings and the other three gospels all record a number of encounters with the risen Jesus. But it must be said that there are some strange and ambiguous features about them too. We are told that even as they worshipped him, some of the believers were doubting. And none of the stories line up neatly in a way that enables us to recreate this as any kind of neat history.

So Mark is not on his own in not being sure how to record what happened. And perhaps it is the desire of the others to try to pin down the story that is precisely the temptation that Mark is calling us to resist. Sometimes the desire to wrap up the story and bring it to a neat conclusion is something that actually threatens to undermine the very things Jesus is calling us to.

It is all too common to reduce faith in Jesus to just believing the authorised version of the story. It gives us some sense of control. We've got the story straight. We know how it starts and ends. We've got it sorted and we feel that we've got Jesus, that we have come to grips with him. But somehow in the process, we've put the whole story safely in the past and we are a bit

immune to it. It is now too safe. It no longer disturbs us or scares the crap out of us or leaves us wondering what is about to happen next.

And perhaps the question of what happens next is precisely the question that Mark wants to leave open and leave us asking. Can you hear that in the message of the mysterious young man at the tomb? “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was executed. He is not here; he has been raised. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell the rest of the disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

You are looking for Jesus, but you are looking in the place of dead ends, in the cemetery. You are looking for yesterday’s Jesus, a Jesus of the past. You are looking for a Jesus who you can tend to and honour and lay to rest. But such a Jesus will never be found. He is risen, and he has gone on ahead of you. The place you are going to find Jesus is not safely entombed in the past, but in the uncertain and unfolding present and the future. He is going ahead of you and there you will see him, just as he told you.

I don’t know about you, but Mark’s strange ending is a lot more like my experience of the risen Jesus than the alternative stories. Some of those first believers got to touch the holes in Jesus’s hands and watch him eat fish and hear him talk face to face with them of forgiveness. But Mark tells only what connects most directly with the experience of us who were not there. Jesus always seems to be just ahead of us somewhere. Not entombed where we thought we might find him, but always just out of our reach and beckoning us on into an uncertain future.

And isn’t that precisely what the good news is about? Jesus is going ahead of us. Whatever you might run into tomorrow or next week or next month, Jesus has already gone on ahead of you and tackled things and found the way through, the way to new life and hope. No one can promise you an easy future. No one is guaranteed immunity from times of turmoil, of tragedy, of suffering. But whatever comes your way, no matter how terrifying or traumatic, Jesus has already been there ahead of you and will continue to lead you on through it and into the wide open spaces of heaven beyond.

It’s not just that though. There is perhaps an even bigger message in the strange ending, or non-ending, to this gospel account. And that is that the story is never over. There is no finish because it is not finished. As the young man at the tomb said, “Jesus is going on ahead of you, and there you will meet him.” Which means that the next chapter of the story involves you. What happens next depends on your willingness to follow wherever Jesus is leading and to meet him there and follow again when he moves on again. It is up to us to write the story, to live the story, to continue the ongoing story.

Tonight, over here at the baptismal pool, we will be welcoming three people into the membership of this congregation. We will be baptising two of them, and the third has already been baptised elsewhere. But that third one, John, is a reminder that baptism is not the end of a story either. It is not some kind of completion or graduation. Like the resurrection, it is a step into the flow of an ongoing story. When John was baptised, he couldn’t know that tonight he’d be here as part of this congregation. He didn’t know where Jesus would lead him next.

Acacia and Dennis are about to be immersed into the resurrection story of Jesus, and they have no idea where Jesus is going as they commit themselves to following him. Dennis, in

keeping with the ritual practices of the early church and of his ancestors has chosen to know as little as possible about even what is going to be done to him tonight. “Just take it as it comes,” he’s said. And that’s exactly the spirit of what we are celebrating here tonight.

The story of Jesus is not something that is finished and that you can congratulate yourself for knowing and having sorted and fervently believing. The story is opening up in front of you as Jesus goes on ahead, and we are all now a part of it. And as we move now to the baptismal pool and then to the communion table, the story continues to unfold and we all pledge ourselves to living our lives open to that unfolding story. That’s why our paschal greeting is not in the past tense, “Christ rose”, but in the present continuous: “Christ is risen!” He is risen indeed.