

## **“And Now For...The Rest of the Story”**

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*

*Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

*April 12, 2009*

### **Easter Sunday**

#### *Mark 16:1-8*

Our scripture lesson for this morning comes from the first eight verses of the 16<sup>th</sup> and final chapter of Mark's Gospel. In its current form in most of our Bibles, Mark's 16<sup>th</sup> chapter has twenty verses. But because the earliest manuscripts of the gospel end with verse eight, and the final twelve verses read very differently than the rest of Mark, most scholars believe the text originally ended right there, with the women fleeing the tomb, scared and saying nothing to anyone. What makes that ending even more worthy of note is that the word order of the last sentence in the original Greek ends in a preposition, (which was bad form even in ancient Greek). It is almost as if the author of Mark has been pulled from his desk in midsentence.<sup>1</sup> Listen for God's word in the gospel of Mark, and when I get to the last sentence, I will read it in a form closer to its original construction. *Read Mark here.*

On February 28<sup>th</sup> of this year, the world of radio broadcasting lost one of its icons when Paul Harvey died at the age of ninety. Harvey was a tad conservative for some. But for more than fifty years, millions of people, particularly across Middle America, tuned in to hear Paul Harvey share news and commentary over the airwaves. I was not a regular listener, though I occasionally came upon his broadcast while flipping through channels on my car radio.

I remember, as a boy, hearing Harvey whenever we would visit my grandfather in northern Illinois. At some point in the day, Harvey's mellow voice would come over the radio in my Grandpa Carlson's kitchen or while I was riding with him in his blue Chevy Nova. There was no mistaking that distinctive vocal style, with its staccato cadence and occasional lengthy pauses. He would begin his broadcast by saying, "Hello America, this is Paul Harvey. Stand by... for news." Then, at a certain point later in the show, like clockwork, Harvey would intone, "You know the news, and now... the rest of the story." Then he'd go on to share some human interest story, like the one he told about the woman in Sheboygan, Wisconsin, who was saved from a knife wielding assailant. "The rescuer?" Harvey asked rhetorically. "Well the rescuer is a gutsy woman who just happened to be passing by. And she says if I don't tell her name, it's all right to tell her age." "Eighty."<sup>2</sup>

There's something about the way the original version of Mark's gospel ends that makes me think of good old Paul Harvey, may he rest in peace. The ending hangs there, like one of his trademark pregnant pauses, just waiting for the rest of the story. "The women fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone." They were afraid, for..." Yes? And? Why were they afraid? What about the rest of the story? Who will provide it? Where will it lead? It is these sorts of questions that Mark's original account of Easter morning raises, as it leaves us hanging, with three terrified women on the run from the scene of a resurrection.

I have a clergy colleague who loves to tell about the "Time For Young Disciples" he shared one Easter Sunday morning. He asked the children gathered up front what the women who came to the tomb and found that Jesus body was gone must have been thinking that morning. The kids were silent at first, so he asked the question again. And then, from the littlest one there, came this response, "Uh-oh!"

Uh-oh is right. Just imagine the scene. As Mark tells it, the women arrive at the tomb with spices they had purchased, in order to give Jesus a proper burial, to treat his corpse with special care was their way of saying goodbye. When they get there, here's what they find: The large stone meant to seal the tomb has been rolled away. Jesus' body is nowhere in sight. And sitting there in the tomb is some young man they don't know from Adam, dressed all in white. The text says they were "alarmed." You bet they were alarmed. In shock would be more like it. What was going on? How did the stone get moved? Where was Jesus' body? And who was this man dressed in white?

Apparently the words the mystery man said to try to calm them down didn't work very well because despite the fact that he specifically instructed them not to be afraid, despite the fact he charged them to go back and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus had risen and was going ahead of them to Galilee (and there they would see him just as Jesus had said), the women fled. They took off running, without saying anything to anyone.

That's not your typical modern-day response to Easter. But you and I have an advantage. We come knowing what to expect. The brass quintet and the timpani will stir our souls, Brian will have written some special music, the choir will sing gloriously, the air will be filled with alleluias, the chancel will be decorated with fragrant lilies, and we will go home to have roasted lamb or honey-baked ham with family and friends. We might not leave here telling everybody we meet that Jesus has risen, (this is a Presbyterian church, after all), but we won't leave here trembling in fear. That's a good thing, I think. And yet, something in me thinks that Easter ought to unsettle us at least a little. It ought to leave us asking "What about the rest of the story? Where do I fit in to it?" "What does the news of Jesus' resurrection mean for me, not just after I die, but right now?" Perhaps that's why Mark left the story hanging, rather than tying it up in a neat little package with a tight bow.

Today at the 11:15 service, we will be baptizing little Katherine Marie Cali, Jim and Aimee Cole Cali's daughter and Randy Cole's granddaughter. It might seem odd to some of you to have a baptism on Easter, but actually that was the day the early church set aside for baptism. They would take candidates for baptism, (at that point just adults), and walk them through a three year process of instruction, called the catechumenate. At the conclusion of that time period, they would be declared ready to join the church and on Easter Sunday, they would be baptized.<sup>3</sup>

Little Katherine is just a baby. She hasn't received that sort of instruction yet. We baptize her because we believe that God's grace comes before our response to it. But her mom and dad will be making vows to help teach her the faith, and we will, on behalf of the larger church, be promising to teach her that faith as well, and trusting that the good people at Highland Park Presbyterian in Dallas will fulfill those promises through teaching her in Sunday School, and encouraging her to worship, and guiding her to serve others.

We don't know exactly what the rest of Katherine's story will look like but it is our hope this day that people will keep saying to Katherine throughout her life: "Don't be afraid. Jesus has risen and is going before you to Galilee - or wherever you happen to go, there you will see him, just as he said."

I hope they say it to her when she heads off to kindergarten for the first time,  
and she's a little scared to be meeting new people.

I hope they say it to her, the first time somebody she trusted lets her down  
and her heart is broken.

I hope they say it to her if she ever asks, "Why do we spend so much time serving  
the poor?"

I hope they say it to her when she leaves home for college,  
or if she gets a rejection letter from a college she really wanted to attend.

I hope they say it to her when she is old enough to understand the consequences  
of another economic downturn and the anxieties that can come with it.

And when she begins, God willing, the adventure of marriage and becomes a  
parent herself.

I hope they say it to her when someone she has come to love dearly gets sick or  
dies.

And I hope she hears it years from now when she is on her death bed.

“Don’t be afraid. Jesus has risen and is going before you to Galilee - There you  
will see him, just as he said.”

A colleague of mine writes that to say that Jesus has risen and is going before you to Galilee was to send the disciples back to the beginning of the gospel so that they could experience the rest of that story from the perspective of knowing the end.<sup>4</sup>

So it is my hope that a host of church members will pass on to Katherine the stories of how Jesus fed the 5,000, stilled the storm, healed the sick, ate with tax collectors and sinners, got frustrated with self-righteous Pharisees, went to a cross, and hung in there with clueless disciples like Peter and James and John who so often just didn’t understand about the abundant provision of God. How the call to vulnerable love, and the radically inclusive nature of One who conversed with Samaritans, touched lepers, forgave his enemies even as they were nailing him to a cross, and rose to show us that not even death can stop the power of God’s love. That’s the good news, not just for Katherine, but for each of us. But what does that mean for how we live out the rest of the story?

At Westminster Choir College, the lore is that one of the organ masters used to practice a particularly musical form of torture on the students. He would play a song or a snippet of one on the organ right up until the very end, where the chord progression should resolve and then just STOP, like Brian is about to do. (*Brian plays the organ*). This would drive the students to get up and move to their pianos and play the last chord.

That’s what Mark’s Gospel does for us, leaving it hanging, unresolved with the women. The reason we have the last twelve verses of Mark is that the early church couldn’t stand leaving it open-ended. They had to fix it, just like the redactors of the book of Job had to tack on an easy ending, where Job gets his riches and a whole new family.

But that’s not the way life is. Life is not so tidy. So perhaps the original version is right. In every generation, and at the conclusion of every Easter service, it is up to us to finish the piece, to play the note, to fill out the rest of the story, to teach the children, to serve the poor, to welcome the outcast, to forgive the one who has hurt us, to be faithful in our relationships, and to not let sin, death, and evil have the last word in our lives.

If that scares you, it’s worth remembering that we don’t do it alone. When we fail, when we come up short, when we are inevitably human, it is worth remembering what Kathleen Norris wrote in the piece that served as the meditation for day forty, in the *40 Day Journey with Kathleen Norris* book that eighty Immanuelites used for a devotional this past Lent.

*“We make such a fuss about seeking God. We’re anxious about so many things, and faith, prayer, and searching for God are not accepted. Are we doing it right? Will a retreat teach us a better way? Which method of prayer will be most effective for us? Which church congregation will best ‘feed us spiritually’? Probably the best thing we can do is to relax, take a deep breath, stop thinking about what we want or need, and forget about it. Seeking God, that is. Instead we might wait, and begin to silently ponder the ways in which God might already have been seeking us, all along, in the faulty, scary stuff of our ordinary lives.”<sup>5</sup>*

As a friend of mine puts it, sometimes we just need to pause...

We know the news.... Now let’s live the rest of the story.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> I borrowed this image of the author being pulled from his desk midsentence from Tom Long’s article “Dangling Gospel” in the April 4, 2006 issue of *The Christian Century*.

<sup>2</sup> I found this anecdote in an obituary piece on Harvey in The Chicago Tribune, posted to their website on February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009. See the link here. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/chi-paul-harvey-dead,0,3381755.story?page=2>

<sup>3</sup> For more on the catechumenate and the practice of baptism at Easter, see, for instance, Will Willimon’s book *Word and Water, Wine and Bread: How Worship Has Changed Over the Years* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1980), p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> Tom Long, “Dangling Gospel”, *The Christian Century* (April 4, 2006). For a link to an online version of the article, go to <http://www.christiancentury.org/article.lasso?id=1944>

<sup>5</sup> *40 Day Journey with Kathleen Norris*, ed. Kathryn Haueisen, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2008), p. 100. For the original cite, see Norris’ book *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), p. 299.