

“He is not here”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Mark 16:1-8*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

It is not the ending we expected. But then again, it never really is.

The women who loved Jesus, who stayed by his side and saw him die, who for three days have carried that grief like a stone in their bellies, come to perform one final service, to rub his body with spices and oils. They come expecting him to be exactly where they left him. (Dead bodies usually are.) At the tomb, however, the stone is found tossed aside, and a young man tells them, “He’s not here.” He’s alive and somewhere else. What?

They flee, seized with “terror and amazement,” or in the Greek, with “trauma and ecstasy.”<sup>1</sup> They tell no one. These, the most faithful of his disciples, the only ones left, even these now, at the last, fail him. “For they were afraid,” Mark says.

All of the earliest manuscripts end Mark’s Gospel here, in silence and fear. In every other Gospel, the resurrected Jesus appears, comforting the disciples and empowering them to proclaim the good news. But not in Mark. We never even see Jesus.

*He is not here.*

It’s a really awful ending! Which is probably why you almost never hear this version of the Easter story in church. (*Thanks a lot, pastor!*) In fact, it is so dissatisfying that scribes refused to accept Mark’s cryptic conclusion and instead added better endings. That’s why in your Bible, you’ll see headings like “The Shorter Ending” and “The Longer Ending.” Those were all attempts by the church to fill in the silence left by Mark. After all, the women had to tell someone; otherwise, no one would know the story. It only stands to reason that the story didn’t end there. And yet, that seems to be precisely where Mark wanted the story to end.

Mark is what I call *The Sopranos* version of the Gospels. It’s full of action and intrigue (Jesus probably talked with an Italian Jersey accent), and concludes with a whole lot of disappointed fans. I’d say “spoiler alert,” but it’s been 13 years, 9 months, and 25 days since the finale aired, so if you haven’t seen it by now, you deserve to be spoiled.

At the end of the final episode, Tony Soprano, the head of the north Jersey mafia, is seen sitting in a café with his wife and son, while Journey’s *Don’t Stop Believin’* plays on a jukebox. His daughter is approaching the café. A possible gunman is coming out of the bathroom. The door to the café opens. Tony looks up. Suddenly, the screen goes black. And that’s it. That’s the end of the whole show that revolutionized television and made America fall in love with the bad guy who goes to therapy. Millions of people watching this suddenly stood up and screamed, furiously

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Lundblad

trying to fix their TVs. One person remembers, being a kid, and his dad yelling, “The cable went out now?!” except with more expletives.

Some fans loved it. Others hated it. Did Tony die? Did he survive? What happened?

The show never tells you.

It’s almost as frustrating as Mark’s Gospel. We are finally ready for some Easter hope, for Jesus to show up after all this Lenten waiting, and he’s not here. Where is he? You’d think the guy could show up for his own resurrection day!

And yet, I find something remarkably honest about this account. When Mark wrote this, his people were experiencing the trauma of the Roman armies killing thousands of Jews, persecuting Christians, and destroying the temple. They expected Jesus to show up and save them, and he didn’t.

Who among us has not at one time or another arrived at a place or moment and heard those same words: “He is not here”? We pray, and hear only silence. Something bad happens, and God’s nowhere to be found. We think we know God’s purpose for our lives, only to get there, and have it all fall apart.

You hear that homosexuality is a sin, but then you see that this belief is consuming churches with hate and driving our children away from God and love, into prisons of self-loathing and suicide, and you realize: Jesus isn’t here.

You hear people’s profession of faith, but then you see the same turn around and blithely cage and separate immigrant families, laugh at racist jokes and justify the discrimination and assault upon people of color, hoard wealth and endorse policies that trample the poor, neglect their families and communities, and you realize: Jesus isn’t here.

You hear the certainty of doctrine, but then you see that its God is far too small for the majesty and mystery of this existence, and you realize: Jesus isn’t here.

You hear the power of worship, but then you see that it’s been reduced, on one end of the spectrum, to entertainment and, on the other, to a mere intellectual exercise, with few ever allowing worship to penetrate their souls and change them, and you realize: Jesus isn’t here.

You hear about the goodness of Christian charity and justice work, but then you see how rarely these good Christians ever truly get to know and love the people they are serving, and instead are reinforcing their own positions of superiority and privilege, and you realize: Jesus isn’t here.

It’s why so many people have left the church—not because they didn’t want Jesus, but because they didn’t find him here.

In the fabulous, Academy Award nominated movie *The Two Popes*, the future Pope Francis says to Pope Benedict: “Nothing is static in nature, or the universe, not even God.” Benedict is appalled by this notion, insisting that God does not change. Francis says that of course God

changes: “He moves toward us.” Benedict responds, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.’ Where should we find him if he’s always moving?”

And that’s the question, isn’t it? If he’s not here, where we expected him, where we left him buried, then where is he? Where is Jesus?

Mark tells us. The young man who told the women, “He is not here,” goes on to say, “He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

For a time, the disciples that day were afraid and silent. Mark needed to acknowledge that, because that is how we all feel when we come to the place where we expected God to be and don’t find him. But the women did not stop there. They went on to tell others of Jesus’ resurrection. Mark’s audience knew that. Or we wouldn’t have the Gospel. They went to Galilee, and Jesus found them there, not a static God, but a risen, dynamic God whose love compels movement and change.

*He is going ahead of you to Galilee.* To the place where Jesus’ ministry started, where he first called these women and men, where they left behind their old certainties and followed him into the unknown. A place of wilderness trials and healing the sick and feeding the hungry and proclaiming love and teaching the mysteries of God. A place on the margins, bordering the rest of the world and all its diverse peoples. A place of daily life, of washing and tilling and casting nets.

Ask our women’s spirituality group Refresh, and they will tell you. They’ve been keeping a “God sightings” journal throughout Lent, noticing God in their everyday lives.

They sat at Auburn Hospital, watching as nurses patiently, kindly, tended to the wounds of others, risking themselves, and they said: he is here.

They savored every morsel of food another had prepared for them, and they said: he is here.

They watched a child growing and learning in her faith, and they said: he is here.

They went to funerals and witnessed a people caring for one another in their grief, singing hope and resurrection, and they said: he is here.

They held newborn children in their arms and dreamed of their lives, one of them just home from the NICU, where others gave him breath when he had none to give himself, and they said: he is here.

They watched the waves, the migrating swans, the blooming amaryllis, the rising sun in hues of pink, orange, and yellow, and all the endless variations of this ever-changing life, and they said: he is here.

Where is Jesus? He’s out there. He’s not waiting around for us to figure out the answers; he’s got work to do, people to love, good news to share, growth to inspire. And he invites us to join him

there. That's why Mark ends his Gospel on such an incomplete note—because he knows that the story isn't over. Jesus' resurrection isn't the end. It's the beginning. God isn't done yet.

We may not know how we will find him, but we are promised that if we dare to follow him, he will find us. He will find us wherever people are gathered to love with reckless vulnerability, to worship with awe and wonder, to grapple and grow together with mystery, to encounter God in the daily stuff of life and in people different from ourselves. He will find us whenever we leave these tombs behind, and dare the road ahead. **Amen.**