

# Easter Sunday - 2024

## *Your Easter Story*

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

The little boy was not exactly happy about going to church on Easter Sunday morning. His new shoes were too tight, his tie pinched his neck and the weather outside was just too beautiful to be cooped up inside. So as he sulked in the pew, his parents heard him mutter to no one in particular. *"I don't know why we have to go to church on Easter, anyway; they keep telling the same old story and it always comes out the same in the end."*

Perhaps you have similar sentiments this Easter Sunday morning. Not so much perhaps about the need to be in church on this very special day - I think all of us know that this is the place we should be. But perhaps like that little boy, you wonder about the Easter message. It's the same old, same old - year after year. Two thousand years ago Jesus rose from the grave and the disciples saw Him and the church began soon afterwards. *"Halleluia. Amen ... I wonder if we are having ham again this year?"*

Well, I hope that today's text surprises you just a little, because it's not quite the same old story (or at least the one we think we know) and the ending is very much in doubt. Mark 16 begins much like the rest of the gospel accounts of the resurrection. Early on Sunday morning a group of women gather up some spices and head off to anoint the body of Jesus. There is the prerequisite question: *"Who will roll away the stone?"* The story continues along nicely. They get to the tomb and lo and behold the stone is rolled away! And lo an angel appears with the good news of the resurrection. Everything seems to be going according to plan. But then something goes a bit askew with Mark's Gospel account.

In our dazed *"I've heard this all before"* state we can almost recite what happens next: Jesus appears to the women; He surprises the disciples and everyone lives happily ever after. But that is not what happens with Mark's resurrection story. In most translations today, the text continues on past verse 8, but you will notice that little footnote in the NIV - *"The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20."* Let that sink in for a second.

If that is true, then Mark's original gospel ends not with the appearances of Jesus to the women and disciples. Not with great commission. Not with Jesus' ascension into heaven. Rather it ends with these rather disturbing words: *"They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."* What kind of ending to Easter is this? The great and glorious news of the resurrection has been proclaimed. Death has been defeated. Satan has been subdued. Sin has been squashed. The witnesses have been commissioned. And Easter ends for Mark with the words *"They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."* It is not exactly an ending which inspires confidence!

Not only does the story end on this somewhat low note, even grammatically the gospel ends in a very peculiar way. In the Greek the last words in the text are *ephobounto gar* - literally *"they were afraid for ..."* Now this is very strange. Every Greek writer and every good English student, for that matter, knows that you don't end a sentence with a conjunction. One commentator notes: *"Gar is a small, transitional word that leads into something else. It serves as a kind of syntactic hesitation, getting us ready for the next statement."*

But in Mark's gospel, that next statement never comes. Where we would expect to see the story neatly wrapped up with a post-resurrection story of Jesus - all we hear is silence. Easter seems to have an incomplete ending in Mark.

Now we are people who don't like things to be left hanging. We want our stories wrapped up nice and neat. We like things to be tidy. That's just human nature. So, as we can see from what follows the footnote in the NIV, soon other people began providing the 'rest of the story' - the fuller resurrection account - and inserted it into Mark's gospel. They were not entirely wrong in doing this. For we have the evidence in the other gospels which prove that what is recorded in the additions to Mark are true. Jesus did appear to the disciples; the message of salvation did go out into the world and indeed Jesus is Lord of the living and the dead. That is the safe and familiar story we have grown to expect at Easter.

But the original intended meaning of Mark has as its purpose anything but to make us feel safe and comfortable. Mark intended his gospel to end with that little word *gar*. Eugene Peterson explained it this way: *"The gar leaves us in mid-stride, off balance. The other foot has to come down someplace. Where will it come down? In belief or unbelief? Will the invasion of new life that completely rearranges reality for us, confronting us with more life than we ever imagined and so calling our minimal lives into question, send us scurrying in anxious fear for cover or venturing in reverent fear into worship?"*

According to Mark, that little boy in our opening illustration is wrong. The story doesn't come the same way every year. By ending his gospel with that little word *gar* - Mark in a sense is saying to each of you. *"OK - you have heard the good news. Now you write your own conclusion. You tell us how the resurrection story ends in your life."*

Now I don't know about you, but that is a little bit frightening to me. Suddenly the ball is in my court, in your court. It has been said: *"Mark's ending starkly reminds us that while Jesus is risen, things are different now."* That's right. Things are different. We are now entrusted with that good news that He is Risen. We have to make some choices. We have to provide our own conclusion to the gospel of Jesus.

Now before you start to feel overwhelmed by this seemingly daunting task - there is one thing more in Mark's gospel ending that will help us as we write the resurrection story in our own lives. Mark's resurrection account leaves the women and us with a promise - a promise from Jesus Himself. Look at verse 7 again: *"But go, tell his disciples and Peter, He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you."*

That is the message that the women are instructed to take to the disciples: *"He will meet you in Galilee."* Galilee is of course an actual physical location. But it meant more than that. Galilee was the place where they had lived out their daily existence. Galilee is where they fished; where they had families; where the mundane little things of their life were located. By promising to meet them in Galilee, Jesus was promising to be there in their everyday existence. To be with them in the little things as well as the big things.

That is the Easter promise - that Jesus will meet us as we live out our lives in the "real" world. Jesus is not met only within the four walls of the church worship centre on this one day set aside to ponder the resurrection. The Risen Lord is to be found just as readily on Monday as He is on Sunday.

As you take the incomplete story of Easter and write its conclusion in your life you need to keep that promise before you. *"He is risen ... he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."*

What this means is that in every visit I make, every meeting I attend, every appointment I keep, every conversation I have ... I have been anticipated. The risen Christ got there ahead of me. The risen Christ is in that place already. What is He doing? What is He saying? What is going on? That's what I need to discover as I write my own Easter story.

So, as we live out the ending of Easter in our own lives, we just need to keep filling in the locations of our own 'Galilees' - our own unique situations:

He is risen ... He is going before me to my job, there I will see Him, just as He said.

He is risen ... He is going before me into that operating room, there I will see Him, just as he said.

He is risen ... He is going before me into this situation with my wife; with my husband; with my child; there I will see him just as he said.

He is risen ... He is going before me to every part of my life, every circumstance I experience, every good day, every bad day ... He is risen and gone one ahead of me ... just as he said.

I believe there was a method in Mark's madness. I believe there was a reason for the way he ended his gospel. He knew that if he wrapped it all up nice and neat - that we who hear or read his words don't really have to make any decisions. We can allow the resurrection to fade into history. Mark won't allow that.

The resurrection is not history - it is *His story* – but it is *our story* as well - and the Easter story is incomplete until we write the final chapters with our lives. Are you ready to finish the story? If so, the One Who is risen waits for you - just ahead. Go find Him. Learn from Him. Follow Him. Be empowered by Him as you write the ending to *your Easter story*.