

*In the name of the Christ who always goes out ahead of us, waiting for us when we arrive. Amen.*

A few weeks ago, the television series ER telecast its final episode. In an attempt to create the most satisfying conclusion possible, the producers brought back all of the previous stars for one final gratifying reunion. The script was written to answer questions about what had happened in each of their lives and to tie up as many loose ends as possible with the current cast.

That is the way we like to end our stories. Happy people and resolved issues, leaving us feeling all warm and fuzzy. Hollywood knows that without such conclusions, the success of their films are in jeopardy. That's why many production companies produce multiple endings to their movies. Then they have focus groups watch and tell them which they like better. Invariably, it is the neatly packaged heartwarming conclusion that wins.

The ending to the Gospel of Mark, which you just heard, was obviously not run by any focus groups. Here we are in the extravagant beauty and brightness of Easter Sunday, and the author of the First Gospel ends his entire book in mid-sentence, telling us that the women at the tomb ran away in stark terror. Period. End of Gospel.

What? How, exactly, does this make for a joyous Easter tale? The ending is so profoundly unsettling and so not warm and fuzzy, that the early church could not handle it. That's why in your bulletins, you have two extra sentences beyond the place where Kathalin stopped. Those two sentences were not written by the author of the First Gospel, but by somebody much later, most likely in the fourth century, at least 240 years

after the Gospel of Mark had been completed. If you look in your bibles, you will also find another possible ending, a longer one, that we guess was written in the second century, maybe 80-100 years after Mark. Like a modern day movie, we eventually were given three potential endings to choose among. So apparently focus groups did play a part to the ending of this story, it just took the church a heck of a lot longer time to write alternate endings than it does today's screen writers.

Of course, not all Hollywood writers choose the heartwarming path, trying a more counter-cultural approach. Remember the almost hostile reaction to the ending of HBO's, the Sopranos, where virtually nothing was resolved? Is this what Mark is trying to do? Of course, there's no way to know for sure what Mark's purpose was in leaving everything up in the air. But Mark's writing style suggests to me that he purposely chose to do this, terminating the story at what he considered the most logical stopping point, namely Easter Day itself. I do not think there is any doubt that on the day of the actual event, no one had any idea what had actually happened, which lead them to the fear, the flight and the silence that Mark describes.

We liturgically depict Easter happening in one grand moment. But in reality, people's realization of what had occurred could only have come to pass over a long period of time. What would your reaction be if you went to the cemetery and found an immovable rock moved, and your best friend's body gone? I can think of lots of possibilities, but thinking that God had taken the body would not be one of them. The women responded just like any of us would have, with fear and trepidation. Only after much time and having personal experiences of the Risen Christ, would the disciples cast aside all the natural explanations and finally conclude that something had happened that

had never occurred before in history. If we were to properly depict in our service today what really happened on Easter, my guess is that our walk from Gossard Hall to this sanctuary would not have taken minutes, but rather years. Mark chose to end the story without adding those years that it took to comprehend what had happened.

I know that there are people who are offended when they learn that the later church wrote their own addendums to Mark. They feel like this is sacred text and that it should not be altered in any way. But such views misunderstand the historical nature of how the Bible came to be in the first place. The Bible is a compilation of thousands of years of people's experiences of God in their lives. It is also commentary on previous experiences of God. What the early church did in writing an addition to the Gospel of Mark is how the entire Bible was written. They were simply adding additional commentary just like every generation had done before them.

I feel certain that the reason Mark was not concerned about his Sopranos ending was that he never dreamed for a second that he would have the last word on the subject. The reason it sounds like he stops writing in the middle of a sentence is because it never occurred to him that this would be the *end* of the story. That's because Mark meant it to be the *beginning* of the story. He assumed that people would continue telling and writing the story of the risen Christ just as they always had, adding more about the presence of God in their own lives.

Perhaps this is one of the biggest mistakes we ever made as a church. When the emperor Constantine forced the Bishops in the fourth century church to define orthodoxy, they were also forced to decide which of the many books written at the time would be considered orthodox and be included in one sacred set of writings that we now

call the Bible. But by doing so, not only did those Bishops eliminate texts from the Bible, they also froze the Bible in its place. From that point on, nothing else that was ever written about people's experiences of God and the risen Christ could be entered into the big book. What this did was devalue these later experiences of God. It suggested that back in the day, the good ol' days, people had "real" experiences of God in their lives. Now we don't.

But beloved, that's not what the story of Easter teaches us. In fact, that is the opposite of what the Easter story teaches us. If the narrative we just heard was meant to be the end of the book, if our religion is really all about describing God's one time victory over death, then who cares? The point cannot be that Easter happened *one time* 2000 years ago. The point is that Easter *always happens*. Easter did not end that day in fear. It continued on and on as the disciples and then thousands of others had experiences of the risen Christ in their lives. It continued to happen down through the centuries to right now, right here. The most telling line for me in Mark's Gospel is the last one our mysterious figure in dazzling white says to Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome. "Go tell the others that he is going AHEAD OF YOU to Galilee, there you will see him."

That beloved, is the Easter story. From that moment on, Christ always goes out ahead of us. He didn't just go to Galilee, but he saw the disciples everywhere, as we hear in story after post-Easter story. 100 years later another group tells us of their experience of the risen Christ and it was added to Mark's Gospel. 150 more years and another group offers their experience of Christ and it is annexed onto the story. Adding to the Gospels is not sacrilege, it is our calling. It is what all of us are supposed to do so

that others may know that Christ is still going out ahead of us, that Easter is still happening right here and right now.

That, of course, is exactly what we did this morning as we began our service in Gossard Hall. We added to the biblical stories our story of Christ's presence with us in this place. You may have noticed that like today's Gospel, it too stopped right in the middle of a sentence. Yes, we have experienced Resurrection at St. David's, and our experience is just as valid and just as powerful as those we read about in this Book. What happened here was also said to be impossible, just as that first resurrection was described in the same terms. But it happened and it was real and we need to continue to tell that story to the world. But like Mark, we also know that this cannot be the end of the story. We stopped our story in mid-sentence because we know that it too, is only the beginning.

A perfect symbol of this new beginning is the act we undertake in a few moments. Billie Blocker is hardly new to Christianity or to this church. Some may have thought that her story had already been told. But in a few moments, she begins anew as she is washed in the waters of resurrection, the waters of baptism.

Beloved, if Billie Blocker can begin a new story of Christ's presence in her life today, than so can all of us. We know how amazing the experience of Christ has been for us in the past. But it is now time to begin a new story, an even more amazing story, as Christ continues to go out ahead of us on this wild and wonderful journey. What a combination, Christ and all of us, loose in the world. We don't have to imagine what that combination can do, we've seen it already. So let us begin anew. Let us write the next chapter. Let us celebrate that Easter always happens. Amen.