

PROVIDING CLOSURE

Easter Sunday, 2015 – Year B: Mark 16:1-8

There are very few Easter Sundays when we read from the Gospel of Mark. Even though we have a three-year cycle of readings, and spend most of the Sundays in Year B learning of Jesus through Mark's record, come Easter Sunday, the option of reading from John is quite tempting. John's account is beautifully told and dramatic: it has Mary Magdalene encounter Jesus in the Garden of Sepulchre, mistake him as the gardener, and then only recognize him when he calls her by name. And then, after a private conversation between Mary and Jesus which only John's readers are privy to, Mary returns to the rest of the disciples saying, "I have seen the Lord." It is a fitting ending for John's meticulously assembled and carefully worked-out story; and it prepares the epilogue – yes there's an epilogue! John's gospel has Jesus appear three times, post-resurrection, twice to the disciples hold-up in their rented house in Jerusalem, and once on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius for the sake of Thomas, Nathanael, James and John, two others, and Simon Peter. This third appearance includes Jesus' commissioning Simon Peter to carry on what Jesus and the disciples have begun, the famous "Feed my sheep" passage.

Mark offers none of this: in fact, there is no ending to speak of. In Mark, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome come to Jesus' tomb early Sunday morning finally to perform the proper rites of burial, but only to discover the stone covering the opening to the tomb has been rolled away, and to encounter a young man dressed in white giving them the message that Jesus has been raised and is on his way to Galilee. They also learn from the man that they, the three women, are to tell Peter and the disciples that they are to meet up with Jesus in Galilee. The women, Mark tells us, didn't follow through. In fact they fled the tomb, terrified, saying nothing to anyone.

I must tell you that I appreciate the authenticity of Mark. He reports the facts as he learned them, resisting the temptation to tie up any loose ends. Without question, he frustrated many with his abrupt ending and no mention of Jesus, post-resurrection. In fact, in most Bibles, there are two endings to Mark's gospel added by later editors, neither ending very convincing. As it stands, as we heard it this morning, we can understand that what Mark says happened did happen: the two Marys and Salome were ordinary human beings who were scared to death by everything that had transpired and was happening now. It makes perfect sense that they said nothing to anyone!

When I was in elementary school, our Grade 8 teacher added the short story "The Lady, or the Tiger" to our English curriculum. It amused him, and I think that he wanted his students to learn something about storytelling through the piece. It's an old story, dating from the late 19th century: my guess is that our teacher read it when *he* was in elementary school, and that it made such an impression on him, he couldn't resist passing it along to us.

Anyway, the character at the centre of the action is a young man, a criminal, in an ancient kingdom which practises "trial by ordeal". The plot is complex in order to build suspense and sympathy for the young man; but at the end we see him brought into an arena with two doors. Behind one door is a maiden who, if he chooses that door, will become his wife; and he will be, by that choice, effectively pardoned for his crimes. Behind the other door is a starving tiger who will attack and devour him, punishing him with the death penalty for his crimes. This is his "trial by ordeal:" he must choose one of the doors! The reader does not know which door has the tiger behind it and which door conceals the lady. The author, enjoying too much the suspense he has created for his readers, takes them to the point of having the young man choose the door on the right. But then he ends with "And so I leave it with all of you: Which came out of the opened door – the lady, or the tiger?"

I think that Mark does the same thing with his readers. He leaves the proof of Jesus' resurrection with us to solve. He leaves us to finish the story – not with a shorter ending or a longer ending as Mark's editors did, but rather with faith and action. In fact, it seems to me that it is only through our living the risen life that *any* of the gospels can be suitably ended – or believed!

What does living the risen life look like? Well, perhaps you, individually, or perhaps we, as a congregation, can find unique ways of answering that question. But in general, it proclaims the opposite of the crucified life. It proclaims that goodness is stronger than evil, that love is stronger than death, that

love is at its best when it is sacrificial and unconditional and saving, and that love always calls for action and for justice. Living the risen life never means accepting the *status quo*; in fact, it always challenges the established order; it always calls for re-formation and renewal and transformation – within and without.

The gift in Jesus' resurrection and the gift in Mark's abrupt ending to his gospel are one and the same: they both call us back into the story to become the story.