

Terror and Amazement
Easter 1B
Mark 16.1-8
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April 3, 2015. Birmingham, Alabama. For the first time in three decades, Anthony Ray Hinton walked out of the Jefferson County Jail a free man. Convicted of a crime he did not commit in a trial with no evidence and no eye witnesses and no proper defense, Hinton spent 30 years in a 5' x 8' cell, alone, on death row, praying for his life to be spared.

He walked out into the sunshine and into the arms of his family and friends. Then he spoke these words, "The prosecution seemed deemed to take my life from me. They didn't just take me from my family and friends, they had every intention of executing me for something I didn't do. But...I want you to know, there is a God. He sits high but he looks low. He will destroy but yet he will defend. And he defended me." With gratitude for the team of lawyers who argued before the US Supreme Court on his behalf and with prayers on his lips for the families of the victims whose murderer was never found, Anthony Ray Hinton walked freely on Good Friday.¹ He walked out of one story and into another; an ending but not the end.

"When is an ending not the end?" Lamar Williamson asks of today's Gospel text as we look in on a scene that cuts off before telling us what happens next.² It is a scene familiar enough to us that we anticipate liberation and freedom and celebration. We hear the teaching that is to come. We know the stories of disciples suddenly encountering the Christ for days and weeks after his death. But Mark offers none of that. Instead, we are eavesdropping on a scene that takes us only from the mundane to total shock.

We noted last week that being a disciple of Jesus, as told by Mark, is described "by performing humble and routine tasks. The disciples in Mark get a boat ready for Jesus, find out how much food is on hand for the multitude, secure the room and prepare the table for the Last Supper and, of course, chase down a donkey that the Lord needs to enter Jerusalem."³ Mark is concerned with action as the way of living out one's faith.

The Gospel lesson this morning has no appearance by Jesus at all. Instead, three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, all followers of

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/04/alabama-death-row-anthony-ray-hilton>

² Lamar Williamson, Jr. *Interpretation: Mark*, p. 283

³ Thomas Long: <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3389>

Jesus, are in the middle of managing details: they have finished their Sabbath requirements, they are carrying spices to properly prepare Jesus' body for burial, they are concerned about the heavy stone covering the tomb where his body was left on Friday. These women are disciples in the fullest sense; serving even after death.

On that Sunday morning after Good Friday, the women were going about their ordinary tasks when resurrection terrified and amazed them. They were struck by it in the midst of their grief and their faithfulness as they heard Jesus was gone, Jesus was risen, Jesus was on his way to Galilee.

And they were afraid even though the angelic man before them told them not to be.

The Gospel According to Mark ends there. Well, maybe it does. The oldest manuscripts seem to end there with some later versions adding a sentence or two to clean up the ending, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Because it's an ending that's not really an ending.

Then even later, several other verses were added that are no longer considered authentic by most scholars. So Mark ends in our Bibles with brackets and footnotes and suggestions and possibilities. *Maybe there's more*, the footnotes offer. *Maybe* the story doesn't end with the women's terror and amazement. *Maybe* there's a story beyond the story that takes us to Galilee, the place of home and routine, the place of sharing Jesus' message and Jesus' way in ordinary life and to the ends of the earth. *Maybe* they didn't stay afraid and silent.

When alternate endings were added to manuscripts of Mark, it is likely that monks copying the text were unsatisfied with the cliff-hanger of verse eight and wanted to offer just a little bit more. After all, we have resurrection accounts from other gospel writers, so there were reference points for telling the story. They knew how it was supposed to go.

However, when we sit with just the shorter ending of Mark, David Lose wonders if the abruptness could be intentional: "Mark writes this open-ended gospel that threatens to end in failure, you see, precisely to place the burden of responsibility for telling the good news squarely on our shoulders. Mark isn't terrible at endings, it turns out, he's brilliant, and by ending his account in this way, he invites us into the story, to pick up where these women left off and, indeed, go and tell that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised, and is going ahead to meet us, just as he promised."

Together, they faced the empty tomb. Together, they were amazed and afraid. Together, they headed for Galilee. Or to Peter. Or to the Others.

Years later, followers of Jesus tried to add their own endings to the women's fear, and we are doing the same thing with our lives today.

“So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” And then...and then...

See, it's an ending that's not an ending. We know something else happens. Because we know, as David Lose puts it, “Resurrection isn't a conclusion, it's an invitation.”

We are doing the same thing with our own lives. We are trying to finish our stories. We are reaching out for the invitation to resurrection. We know fear but want to know amazement. We know silence and hiding but want to know courage and fidelity and abundant life. We know hesitation and caution but want to know boldness and risk-taking.

What happens after the innocent man is set free from the jail cell that restricted him for thirty years? What happens after the women realize they are to keep serving and living in Jesus' way because Jesus may very well have battled death and won? What happens with our endings that aren't quite endings? What happens with the shame and silence and hiding we know in our lives? What comes next for us?

Mark tells us a story that is something like a *Choose Your Own Adventure* novel for kids. We get to write ourselves into the story with our very lives. Where do we go from the empty tomb? What do we do with our terror and our amazement?

Like those monks who came to the end of verse 8 and weren't satisfied with where things ended, we get to imagine ourselves into God's story. And when it comes to imagination, our skills are sorely lacking. We play it safe. We restrict and limit. We go just far enough but not too far. We stay reasonable and sane. We remain cautious and practical. This is true in our lives, and its particularly true in the church. And so we need to be reminded on this Easter morning that resurrection is an invitation to a bigger and better story.

In his sermon “Christ Got Up,” Will Willimon imagines for us in the church:

“We were exercising servant leadership, exerting a positive influence on the community, uplifting the morals of the youth, caring for one another, helping folks make it through the week, affirming family values, embodying entrepreneurial leadership, instilling a positive attitude, pursuing a purpose-filled life. I heard him groan, sigh, fidget with his sandals then arise and shout, ‘I need some air! Call me if any of you ever get the courage to go crazy.’”

We were just wilting, sagging, demographics got us, wearing down, mainline sliding toward the sideline, burdened by buildings, going limp, troubled by the numbers, cutting back, ready to throw in the towel. Christ got up and said with a smirk, ‘To heck with the institution! Let's make a revolution! Anybody got a match?’”

“We were just sealing him safe and sound in the tomb, just making sure that the gravesite was tidy, just getting adjusted to life without him, just obeying the soldiers, just accommodating ourselves to death and defeat. Not waiting for dawn, Christ got up, rolled away the stone, strode forth shining before our fearful faces and commanded, ‘Get up!’”⁴

May your imagination run wild this Easter.

May your amazement with the good news of God pull you into a new story.

May you take Divine risks, in Jesus’ name.

May you start over, start fresh, start today.

May your story not end with fear and silence.

May resurrection be your invitation today.

⁴ Will Willimon, “Christ Got Up” <http://www.faithandleadership.com/content/christ-got>