

Mark 16:1-8, 1 Cor 15:20-26  
July 17, 2011

South Plains

### He Is Going Ahead of You

When he was a teenager, our son Stephen had an opportunity to learn to fly. On his very first flying lesson, he was thrilled when the instructor went through some preliminaries and then gave him the controls. He was told to take off. I understand that he did well. I'm told, however, that the real test of a pilot is not the ability to get the plane in the air, but the ability to get it back down on the ground safely. To finish smoothly.

After the Apostles Creed has taken off and flown us to the nadir of Jesus' story with the line "He descended into hell," the following sentence reverses course: "On the third day he rose again from the dead." It's the smoothest finish for the Christian story to say that Jesus lived, died and then rose from the dead. Now, contrast that to the rough ending of the gospel according to Mark. The women have seen the empty tomb.

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.

The earliest story of Jesus ends with frightened disciples running away. Even that translation has smoothed out the original Greek. The best manuscripts end with a little preposition that means "for," an odd

ending indeed. One scholar attempts to duplicate the roughness of the Greek by translating the verse this way:

They said nothing to anyone; they were  
scared was why. (Wm. Placher)

That ending is so abrupt that some people have tried to write a better one. Many Bibles offer three different additions to the gospel after verse eight, but most students of scripture believe Mark's authentic version stops with that verse and that little preposition "for."

This means there are no resurrection appearances in Mark's gospel. Furthermore, there is very little evidence of resurrection faith on the part of the disciples. There is no proclamation of the good news to the world. There is no hint of the imminent founding of the church. There is only terror and amazement and silence. And, yet, Mark's story continues to have its way with our hearts 2000 years after the resurrection. And, we affirm the resurrection of Jesus in the Creed.

Perhaps the writer intended to add more stories later. Perhaps his manuscript conclusion got torn off the scroll and lost. But, I like to think that just maybe; just maybe he deliberately leaves us hanging so that the next step in the gospel story is up to us. We must write the conclusion to the gospel of Jesus Christ in our own words, in our own deeds, in our own witness to the resurrection. The story is not over until we join God's resurrection story.

In the meantime, the resurrection we celebrate every Sunday continues to be a troubling event. It is intellectually troubling to some scientific minds although that attitude has softened somewhat. They would argue that the resurrection of Jesus is a fantasy or a wished for dream.

But the resurrection is not only troubling to science. Resurrection or any possibility of life after death can be emotionally troubling or disorienting. Hence, we see that families who have lost someone to a disaster will expend enormous energy and time trying to confirm that their loved one did in fact die and will never be seen again. We hunger for closure, even if the price of closure is the certainty of death.

Thanks to quantum mechanics and the randomness of those tiniest particles in the universe, some scientists and philosophers are open to the possibility that the resurrection of Jesus is like no other event in the history of the universe. That's certainly the way Mark describes it. It may be better to live with untidy uniqueness, than to force everything into the mold of what we can explain or predict. The resurrection makes trouble we can live with, even if it means we have to re-think everything.

Of course, the literal meaning of "re-think" is to repent. If this Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried is alive, then we will want to re-think everything, to repent of some things, and perhaps even re-form our lives

because the world in which a dead man rises to life looks different. Perhaps there is more to Jesus than we realized.

The next chapter in the resurrection story is ours to write, but in the meantime we have to live with death as a sad, often tragic, but dependable event. There was an old couple who lived halfway up a steep mountainside in West Virginia. The husband was notorious for being ornery with his neighbors and mean with his wife. One night, the old boy had a spell as they say. At first light, his wife sent for the undertaker. Times were simpler in those days, so they brought the coffin right up to the house, laid the body inside, and hoisted it upon the shoulders of the helpers to carry it to the hearse waiting outside the gate. But as they passed through the gate, one of the men stumbled, the coffin hit the gatepost, and the old man sat up, pretty unhappy over what had been done. He lived two more years after that adventure, but eventually died in his sleep. This time his wife waited until afternoon before calling the undertaker. They repeated the same routine with a little more attention to the state of the body. Again they started toward the hearse and the undertaker asked if there was anything more he could do for the widow. She thanked them and then called out the door, "For pity's sake, watch out for that gatepost." She depended on death.

In a violent world such as ours, it can seem death is the only certainty. Easter says that eternal life is more certain than death. But if Jesus has been raised, then sin

and death have lost their potency. They have done their worst, but they could not hold him in the grave. If that is so, if we dare to believe the good news that the tomb does not hold him, then it's worth trying love and believing life holds more than death.

One of the hints that Mark's gospel intends for something more to happen after the resurrection is the otherwise strange prediction that the disciples will see Jesus in Galilee: "He is not here," says the young man in white sitting by the tomb. "He is going ahead of you to Galilee." To know that Jesus is going ahead of us will not remove all the terror and anxiety from life, but it will soften the certainty of death. In the meantime, we must live with the messiness of life. Questions without easy answers. Relationships that haunt us with possibility. Careers that point in contradictory directions. And, big issues like the role of God in the meaning of life, issues that maddeningly insist we take a leap of faith before we can settle them.

Some years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting two of our Presbyterian missionaries in Africa, Bill and Willie Simmons. They lived in Kinshasa, Zaire or Congo as it now is called. At the time, the political turmoil in Congo meant that every day was uncertain. Bill's job was to arrange travel for missionaries and visitors. I learned that when he booked a flight within Zaire, he always double-booked so he had an alternative flight or another form of transportation. Travelers could depend on Bill Simmons. Whatever Jesus knew about his

resurrection before he died, he knew he could depend on God's alternative arrangements.

In the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God moved closer to the world he created. Jesus' death was tragic, but it ennobled him because he died affirming life and love. His resurrection says a decisive YES to life. Christianity requires faith, but not a faith that hides from questions. It's a faith that invites us to love God with all our mind, a faith that builds on history and expects a future to fulfill the past, not to negate it. The Simmons lived with uncertainty for the sake of a kingdom that already has begun on earth, for the sake of a world beloved by God, and in response to a salvation that gives joy and meaning right now.

We can write ourselves into the next chapter of the gospel. The Jesus who goes ahead of us is the lodestar we follow. The pain, the punishment, the guilt of sin has been experienced already by our Lord. No matter how weary we grow with our problems, the little epithet, "Been there, done that," belongs really to Jesus.

He has opened the way of life for us. Our next move is to get in step with the resurrected Lord. There's no use pretending it will be easy. We will get messages every day telling us that death is more certain than life. But the promise of life is all around us.

The other thing I learned from the Simmons is that they never leave the house without a little bag packed

with personal belongings in case they must flee the country. I've thought about that little bag many times since, especially when the news reports a bombing in Iraq, or a riot in Kenya. You pack a bag when there's someplace to go. Bill and Willie lived in the confidence that they always had someplace to go.

The good news belongs to every one of you. You will finish the story. Almost surely, the closing chapters will have bumps and uncertainty in the details. But the final result has been assured by the One who has gone ahead of you. Thanks be to God, we will rise with Christ.