

Easter Day 2012

If after this service you were to go home and pick up your Bible and turn to the end of Mark's gospel you would see that there is some confusion over how the story of Jesus ends. Most scholarly interpreters will tell you that it ends where we finished it today. There is, however, another short verse added in some manuscript versions, and in many more manuscripts a whole extra twelve verses is added, which detail the appearances of the resurrected Jesus.

What are we to make of this confusion? If we accept that verse eight is probably the place the author intended to stop, then what do we do with the extra bits? And what do we do, for that matter, with the shortest, stark ending which leaves us staring at an empty tomb, with no clear sign of the risen Jesus, apart from the promise of a mysterious young man in a white robe?

I don't want, this Easter morning, to go into minute details about how the different versions of the end of Mark's Gospel came into being, nor to show why scholars favour one as more "authentic" than the others. That's a job for the lecture theatre, not the pulpit. What I want to do instead is to explore the implications, first, of the very fact of there being three possible endings to the story, and second, briefly to explore the implications of the shortest version, which we have just heard read.

So, what does it mean that there are three endings? What does it mean, for that matter, that there are four Gospels, each of which tells a slightly different story of the death and resurrection of Jesus; not to mention that in the letters of St Paul, which were written before the gospels, we get a different version again? How do we believe them all; especially the bits that are contradictory? Aren't we Christians supposed to be dead certain about what happened? Aren't we supposed to believe what the Bible says without question?

Well, actually, no. We are, for sure, meant to have faith. Faith is our calling. And belief in the resurrection of Jesus, as Paul says, is THE crucial faith statement of the Christian believer. But just exactly what happened, and just exactly what it means to believe in the resurrection were things on which the early Church communities were themselves quite openly divided. If they, whose members were much closer to events than we can ever be, were

unsure, how can Christians of today claim to have 100% proof positive answers?

What I am saying, at heart, is this. The Scriptures themselves simply DO NOT ALLOW us to read the Bible in a fundamentalist way. Fundamentalists are, in fact, mis-using, even abusing, the Scriptural witness. Even this most key story of the death and resurrection of Christ is a story not of certainty, but of confusion, both on the part of the characters in the narrative, and of the text itself. You see, revelation is not neat and tidy. God reveals himself as he chooses, not as we choose. God doesn't fit into a box, not even a Scriptural one. So if you feel that you're not a good Christian because you don't fully understand, you're not CERTAIN, well, join the rest of us. Try to break through your fears, and keep on the journey of faith: not a journey towards certainty, but a journey towards God.

So, what can we say of the story before us today?

Well, it is stark. The tomb is empty, the women are afraid: "terror and amazement had seized them." And that's it. As readers we are given no nice stories of Jesus meeting again with his disciples, no nice stories of appearances in the upper room, or on the road to Emmaus, or to Mary Magdalene, or to anyone at all. What we are given instead is fear and uncertainty.

Yet, clearly, the women at the tomb got over their fear and passed the story on – for here it is, written down for us. HERE is the hope. Despite the fear, despite the emptiness, despite the confusion, despite the lack of understanding or certainty, the story gets out. "He has been raised. He is not here." These women don't need to see Jesus to tell their story. After their terror subsides, their faith takes over. They have been told that Jesus has been raised, they believe, they pass the message on, and the Church begins. The proof of the resurrection is the growth of the community.

So the story is stark, but not too stark. God has left an open-ended story, which leaves room for the believer. Here is hope indeed. We do not need to see Jesus face to face to know that he has been raised. The women at the tomb needed only to be told by one with clear spiritual authority. It took a while, but they came to believe. We too can hear that message. And we too can do the work of those women, and break through our fear, our confusion, our uncertainty, and proclaim to the whole world the message of the gospels. He has been raised! If you want proof, walk with me . . .