

Mark 16: 1-8 They said nothing?

I am a reader, not a movie goer, but whichever form you choose for entertainment, I am sure you have encountered those stories whose ending you just didn't like. Sometimes the outcome is not what you were hoping for; sometimes you feel there are story threads which are left dangling, something is missing from the conclusion. Our passage from Mark this morning is very much like that. The oldest manuscripts of this gospel end with verse 8 of this passage. "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." That is certainly not a great ending, especially when we look at the accounts from the other gospels. It almost seems to be an indication that all is over and done. Even if we did not have other accounts of the women going back and telling the disciples and the other post resurrection experiences described, I think this ending would be anti-climatic at best. Reading it invites questions, not the least of which is if they said nothing, how did the news get spread? We often focus on the importance of what happened at the empty tomb, but in reality the first assumption was probably not that Jesus has been resurrected, but that someone has taken his body. That Jesus whom they knew had been crucified would somehow be alive would not have been news they were expecting. In fact in John's gospel chapter 20: verse 2 tells us that when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away, she went to Peter and one other disciple with the news that someone had taken Jesus' body from the tomb. In the synoptic gospels the women who arrive at the tomb, finding the stone rolled away, all encounter a messenger who tells them what has happened. In Luke the women who go to the tomb are given much the same message as is conveyed in Mark, that Jesus has been raised. In Matthew's account, when the women do go and tell the disciples, the disciples don't believe them and consider it an idle tale as we read in chapter 24:11. The stories about Jesus' resurrection appearance would have been known to the author of Mark. Mark gives us this account which tells us the women were alarmed at the sight of the "young man in white". This young man is often believed to be an angelic messenger. He tells the women that Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified is not there because he is risen. He then adds that they are to go and tell his disciples that Jesus was going ahead to Galilee as he had previously told them. Mark does not tell us of resurrection appearances, but he anticipates that Jesus will meet with the disciples. Yet because he does not recount these things for us, his ending of the account at this point is truly not a satisfying conclusion. Evidently there were early Christian fathers who found that an unsatisfactory ending as well. Some manuscripts we have which were written later don't end with this passage. Because of this in many Bibles today there are additional verses, sometimes with a notation explaining something about their history. There are two different possibilities for additions: one is called the shorter ending of Mark and the other is labeled as the longer ending of Mark. Descriptive labels, but not very original. Some documents we have from the 2nd or 3rd century have only one or the other of these endings; some have both. But the vocabulary and structure of the verses in these endings are not consistent with the rest of Mark's gospel, and the documents where they are found place their composition as being later than the latest date believed possible for the original Markan document. Mark's gospel account is known for several characteristics. The events are often found with few details to elaborate or interpret

their meanings. That certainly applies to this abrupt ending. There is an urgency inherent in the imperative used to tell the women to go, to tell the disciples, and then to go on to Galilee for the risen Jesus has already left to meet them there. Events happen immediately or at once. In his gospel, the action is fast paced. A third characteristic of Mark's account is there is a constant message from Jesus that those receiving healing or witnessing powerful acts tell no one. But despite these characteristics, a study of Mark shows that the story he is telling has a tightly structure woven with a purpose. Mark is intent on spreading the news of who Jesus is.. There may not be as many details as in the other gospels, but the important facts are conveyed. If we look at this final passage with those general qualities in mind, do we see the logic for Mark's original ending point of his account? Why would Mark craft an incomplete ending by design? Why would he end the story at a moment of failure and disappointment? If you look at the gospel of Mark in its entirety, the disciples, those who should understand exactly who Jesus is and what he has come to do, are often the most confused about what happens. Jesus predicts his passion three times and the disciples regularly end up dazed, confused and arguing about who is greatest. Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, but when Jesus explains what that role really means, Peter's misunderstanding about the purpose of the Messiah is so different that Jesus must rebuke him. By ending the account here, Mark is inviting you to be critical of the women, those who had received the good news and did not share it. Since Mark has led us through the life and ministry of Jesus, told us how he fulfilled prophecy, identified for us who Jesus is, then the conclusion is that the reader of his manuscript knows the truth and therefore should go and share the message given to the women. Mark's understanding is that the story of what God is doing in and through Jesus isn't over at the empty tomb, you see. It is only just getting started. Resurrection is not a conclusion; it is an invitation. Jesus doesn't hang around the empty tomb in Mark's account. He is already off to Galilee to meet with the disciples. Instead of staying, he leaves a message for those who come to the tomb: Go, tell the disciples and Peter that he had better get up and moving because Jesus is headed to Galilee to meet him there. This message to go and tell is in the imperative tense; it is a command and carries with a typical Markan flavor, it has a sense of urgency. Jesus is already waiting on them to get started. This message is directed to the disciples who abandoned him and to Peter who denied him. It is a command to go and tell the news now because unlike earlier when they were following Jesus about the Galilean countryside, they now have access to the full identity of the Messiah. It is no longer a secret. Even they should see the fullness of Jesus' identity. Jesus has shown them that his warnings about what would happen in Jerusalem had happened, but it was not the end of the story. Now the disciples are told to go back out into the world with the full picture to share the good news about who Jesus is. Mark's gospel is about setting us up to live resurrection lives and continue the story of God's redemption of the world. Mark does not wrap up the loose ends because we are invited not to be like the women who did not spread the news. In fact, we could almost predict this type of stopping point for Mark's story. After all, we had a clue in Mark's very first verse. Mark's gospel doesn't open with any genealogy for Jesus or any nativity stories. In the opening statement that is almost as abrupt as the ending verse Mark begins rather pointedly: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the son of God." That actually sounds more like a title than an introduction. But the key thing here is that Mark states straight off that all of the following writing is **only the**

beginning of the good news of what God has done and is still doing for the world through Jesus Christ. That's the good news we have to share. It's only the beginning, this story of God's initiative to reclaim us. If you wonder why there is still so much distress and pain in the world, it's because God's not done yet. It's only the beginning, and Mark tells us that. Mark invites whoever reads his account to get up and get moving; to go and share the good news of Jesus' complete identity; his identification with those who suffer and his triumph over injustice and death. Share this with everyone we meet. It's only the beginning because we are empowered and equipped to work for the good in all situations because we trust God's promise that all will in time come to a good end even when we can't see the evidence of that. It's only the beginning because Jesus has left the tomb and goes ahead of us. Thanks be to God.