Sermon for Easter Sunday

March 31, 2024

Mark 16:1-8

 If you want to start an argument amongst TV critics – not that I’m suggesting you have any reason to do so – make a statement about what show you think had the best ending, and then stand back.

 I know some people will say that the ending to *MASH* was the best ever, and I’ll admit it was pretty fabulous. But my personal favorite remains the ending of *Newhart*, the Bob Newhart show set at an inn in Vermont that aired in the ‘80s.

In the last episode, Bob is knocked out by an errant golf ball and wakes up next to Suzanne Pleshette, in the bed they had on the *Bob Newhart Show*. He tells her that he just had a weird dream about owning an inn and she says, “that settles it — no more Japanese food before you go to bed.”

 I love that it’s a quirky ending that only makes sense if you had seen his previous TV series. It didn’t try too much; it didn’t try to give everyone a “happily ever after.” It did something completely unexpected that can’t ever be done again. And to me, that makes it the best ending for a TV show ever.

 I like it when stories have a satisfying ending. One that makes sense given what’s come before it. So I get why there are people who dislike how Mark’s Gospel ends. It’s abrupt, almost as if he was in the middle of a sentence and ran out of space.

 Ancient manuscripts show the efforts some people made to “fix” Mark’s ending. They added Jesus appearing to the disciples, even chastising them for their lack of faith.

 But those verses don’t fit with Mark’s style of writing. They don’t fit the way he presents Jesus’ teachings in a way that makes it clear that discipleship requires a response. Which, in this case, means going to Galilee.

 I admit it…I *like* how Mark ends. I *like* the way it leaves me with more questions than answers.

 But it took me a long time to get to this point.

 It took finding delight in the story of Jonah, filled with absurdity and wonder, ending on the question God directs at the sulking prophet: “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left and also many animals?”

 It took wondering about the parable of the fig tree, and pondering whether another year of tending to it would be enough, if it would bear fruit, or if it would be cut down.

 It took listening to the story of the wealthy young man who asked Jesus what he needed to do to inherit eternal life. Learning to move past my instinctive response of *That’s the wrong question to ask!* so that I could allow myself to wonder what happened to him. What choice did he make?

It took dwelling on the parable of the prodigal son, and wondering if the older son ever forgave his brother. If their relationship ever healed.

All these stories and so many more, invite us to fill in the blanks. To place ourselves in the story, imagine how we *hope* we would have responded.

And then ask ourselves, *are you sure about that?*

*That’s* what happens at verse 8. We can think *I would have gone straight to Galilee!* Or *I would have remembered that Jesus predicted his resurrection! I wouldn’t have been afraid!*

Are you sure about that?

One of my questions at the end of Mark is, what are the women afraid of?

*Not* “*why* are the women afraid?” That’s a different question. And I feel like it allows us to get a little judgy toward the women.

The women had *every reason* to be alarmed when they arrived to find the stone rolled away from the tomb. When they found it empty except for the young man in a white robe. In the midst of their grief and pain and confusion, this was *absolutely* something that would alarm them.

Sure, they’d heard Jesus’ words predicting his death and resurrection. **But the Messiah wasn’t supposed to die.** There was *nothing* in the many, many theories people had about the Messiah that included him *dying*.

 Because how do you free people from what oppresses them if you **die**?

 Surely, in the midst of their grief, the women can be forgiven for their assumption that Jesus had died and that was the end of the story. They had *watched* him die.

 So what were they afraid of?

 Well…who’s going to believe them? They didn’t actually *see* Jesus. They were taking the word of a stranger in the empty tomb. Telling others would leave them open to ridicule and rejection.

 And if they decided to go to Galilee on their own, without the men…and didn’t find Jesus? How crushing would *that* have been? Everything they’d heard from Jesus would have been a lie.

 But also…what if they were afraid it was *true*? Because then…that would change *everything*.

 Because it would mean what Jesus had told them was *true*. And the kingdom of God really *was* at hand.

 We can turn to the Bible for answers, but sometimes our search for answers should lead us to more questions.

 And the big question at the end of Mark is: what’s next?

 Matthew, Luke, and John give us that. They give us the post-resurrection appearances. Peter’s forgiveness. Meals shared. The disciples getting their instructions to share the good news with the world. The promise that Jesus would be with them to the end of the ages. The Holy Spirit and the Ascension.

 For Mark, the clue to the answer of ‘what’s next?’ comes in the very first verse of chapter 1: “The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ.”

 Mark’s story is just the beginning.

 **Because God is not done telling the story of creation.**

 And *we* are part of that story.

 We don’t get to determine how the story will end. But we *do* determine our part of the answer to the question, what’s next. What we will do because of the good news that the kingdom of God is breaking into the world. That God has rejected the notion that death has the final word.

This is the *beginning* of the good news: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!