

"Now What?"
Mark 16:1-8

Have you ever seen any of those "Now What?" commercials? There has been a series of commercials where a person finds themselves in a shockingly bad situation and all they are left with is saying, "Now What?" Number 1 of those commercials was when a woman was valet parking at a restaurant, and then her car gets jacked, and whoever jacked it drove away fast. Another was when a man parks his car, then puts a steering wheel lock on, and then he covers the car with a tan cover showing how much he cares about his car, then a garbage truck backs up to it. I really dislike these commercials because they leave us hanging. What is going to happen next? The possibilities are endless and any number of things could happen. There is no closure. Personally I prefer American movies where there is a clear dramatic ending (most of the time happy endings). This way I can put the story to rest and not worry about it any more. But the suspense of such abrupt endings certainly gives us a lot to think about and consider. This was the case of the shorter ending of the Gospel of Mark which we read today. We don't have a real ending. It just leaves us hanging to imagine all kinds of possibilities. Mark gives no accounts of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances, and the women fail to tell the others that he has been raised and simply flee in terror. End of story. The longer ending of verses 9-20 was added much later. Scholars believe that the early church added this ending later because the other ending was too unsettling. So, if we don't try to dismiss the shorter and more abrupt ending of the Gospel of Mark, what can we make of it? Why such an open-ended ending?

I think it is important for us to consider the whole Gospel in order to help us shed light on this seemingly mysterious ending. First, we have to remember that through the Gospel of Mark the twelve disciples fail to fully get the picture of what Jesus was doing. Other minor characters do but not the twelve. Their failure was attributed to their hardness of heart (6:52)—and the lack of appearance stories in Mark deprives the reader of visions of their ultimate restoration to Jesus' fellowship. The last things we hear about them are that they all desert him (14:50) and that Peter denies him three times (14:66-72). Minor characters, however, minister to him in various ways. Simon the leper, for example, invites him to dinner (14:3); and a woman anoints him in 14:3-9—to the consternation of some who are present. A second piece for us to remember is Mark's bracketing technique where a story is put in between two other stories that are similar to each other. The story of the empty tomb is put between two stories of anointing. The first one is in chapter 14 when a woman comes and anoints Jesus' feet with her alabaster jar of costly oil. The second is this story of the three women coming to anoint the body. So this kind of bracketing shows that this ending was very intentional. It was not an accident. The abruptness of the ending helps us enter into the story to continue it. Biblical scholar Ched Myers notes in his book, *Binding the Strong Man* that, "The power of Mark's Gospel ultimately lies not in what it tells the disciples/readers, but what it asks of them... The Jesus of Mark provides very few answers, especially if we are asking the wrong questions. But as questioner himself, he compels us to reveal where we stand. If we wish to respond, he offers us only a cross and companionship on the way... For Mark, the resurrection is not the answer, but the final question. There is only one genuine 'witness' to the risen Jesus: to follow in discipleship. Only in this way will the truth of the resurrection be preserved."

This is the whole point of Easter. It was not supposed to be an ending but another beginning. You hear it often said, "Don't put a period, where God puts a comma." That's what the non-ending "ending" of Mark's Gospel compels us to do. Mark indicates the day of the event twice: "When the Sabbath was over," the day of rest, then comes "the first day of the week" (v.1), which is now our Sunday. Mark insists on the timing: the women go to the tomb "very early,"

“when the sun had risen” (v. 2). The focus is on the idea of beginning, a new start. The resurrection of Jesus is not about completing the work for us but about a new beginning for us.

In her book, *Sowing the Gospel*, Mary Ann Tolbert writes that the disappointing ending as an invitation for the reader to participate in the story. Since the women are the only characters in the story who have reason to believe that Jesus has been raised, their failure to proclaim the resurrection leaves this task to the reader. But what, may we ask—building on Tolbert’s insights—qualifies the reader? The answer is that the reader has, through the medium of the story, “heard” Jesus’ words and “seen” his deeds and has also “heard” the testimonies of God’s voice from above (1:11; 9:7) and of the young man in white at the empty tomb.

With this kind of ending, we are invited to continue in keeping our hope alive in love that conquers hate and violence. The abrupt ending may be a new indication, a frequent occurrence in Mark, that believing is a long and difficult process, a process which is always beginning. Where is God calling us today? We are left with this question. There are no simple and easy formulas for our faith. The best is yet to come! This is the promise of Easter and the resurrection. The story is never over. Unfortunately, when Easter is reduced in its significance to bonnets, candy, lilies and dinners, its challenge to us is forgotten or domesticated. It is often said that the worst thing we do to a great leader or experience is to reduce them to a holiday that we celebrate once a year and then move on with our lives as usual. This kind of reduction makes it easier for us to feel good about paying attention to the different causes but then it does not change much. Imagine if we celebrate Earth Day only one day and live the rest of the year careless and wasteful lives. Imagine if we celebrate Martin Luther King Jr. Day and talk about the importance of reconciliation between people of different races, but then the rest of the year we do nothing about it. Imagine if we celebrate the 4th of July one day and talk about the importance of being a nation of freedom, but then the rest of the year we do things that oppress and enslave others. Imagine if we celebrate Easter one day of the year and live hopeless and spiritless lives the rest of the year. We need the dramatic ending of Mark of the story of the resurrection because we need to be involved in the story. This is not just another good moral story that we can remember once a year and put away for the rest of the year. This is the calling of our lives. It is a strong calling to discipleship, to continue the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ through our commitment to love, serve and advocate, i.e., to be transformed and to transform the world around us.

This is what happened to Atira as she was watching 20/20 on her TV in her living room in Seattle. The show was about a nun, in Egypt, that was dedicating her retirement years to the garbage-dump-city in Cairo. Atira has an Egyptian import business. When she saw the show of the nun and her works for the poor and homeless at the garbage dump city, Atira knew she had to help. Atira ordered the transcript from the TV show and set out to see what she could do to help. Atira asked everyone coming to a baby shower, at her home, to bring a wash cloth and soap. They thought she was nuts, until she told them why. She called her Dentist and Doctor's offices and asked what kind of medicines would be needed to help out in a poverty area. She collected toothbrushes, bandages, etc....until she had suitcases full of things to take to Cairo with her. Her goal was to do her part to help. Atira was going with a group on her next trip to Egypt so she asked some of the other members in the tour group to help by bringing used children's clothing, pencils, and children's books with them to be given to this caring nun. Eight other people were kind enough to collect and bring pens, coloring books, clothes, and various toys, to help. On their arrival in Cairo, not knowing what to do with the mountain of supplies for the nun. She asked the hotel manager if he could try and locate this healer of the poor. Within days, he had located the nun. But the nun was out of the country and would not be back until Atira had returned to Seattle. The hotel manager said he would store the goods and present

them to the nun for Atira. The hotel manager shared the story of Atira's kind gesture, with other members of the tour. As it turned out there were two people who worked with World Wide Health Care Project for the Poor. They had never heard of the nun, and her plight to help the poor. These men stayed in Cairo longer than Atira could, and were there when the goods from Atira were collected by the nun. These men ended up talking to the nun. They were able to get her funding for a Health Care Clinic. When the hotel manager saw the nun he realized that she often had come into the hotel to use the phone, and he just did not know who she was. And now, she has FREE phone privileges in his hotel. Atira was continuing the story of the resurrection. The hope that defies all of life's difficulties and fears is alive among us today. Responding to this call of the Risen Lord makes miracles unfold for others and continues the resurrection.

The story of Mark has not ended. It continues to unfold today. The question is before all of us: Are we willing to continue to be part of the story and always ask God, "Now What?" Amen.