

APRIL 12, 2009

THE FESTIVAL OF THE RESURRECTION

“A SURPRISE ENDING”

Let us pray: Fill us, O God, with that terror and amazement, that seized the women at the tomb as they heard the **awe-fully** good news of Easter that Jesus has been raised, in whose name I pray. Amen.

“Either the original ending has been suppressed, or it was never there, or it has been lost accidentally.” So concludes one biblical scholar of the Easter Gospel I just read for you which is not only all that St. Mark bothers to tell us as his version of the events of that first Easter morning, but is, moreover, the conclusion of his whole Gospel. This is the abrupt breaking off of the “Good News of Jesus Christ” that Mark promised to tell us back there at the very beginning of his Gospel which began, you’ll remember, in the middle of things with John’s baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan. Quite an ending, wouldn’t you say—if an ending at all—which

seems to stop before any proper ending, also in the middle of things? Is this any way to run a resurrection?

“The abrupt breaking off of the gospel is extremely surprising,” one of my favorite commentators concludes by way of a grand understatement. “Extremely surprising,” I’d say! So surprising, in fact, that very early on copiers and editors of Mark’s Gospel began trying their hand at finishing off the story with a more satisfying ending. For example, the so-called “shorter ending of Mark” found in some ancient biblical manuscripts follows the conclusion you heard me read ending at verse 8 with this: *“And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.”* Now that’s an ending written “by committee” I’d say—to which some ancient manuscripts add a pious “Amen”

to let the reader know that now the Gospel is really over.

But in the original Greek, verse 8, which most judge to be the authentic original conclusion of Mark's Gospel, the ending is even more abrupt for the sentence ends with the conjunction "gar" which means "for" —leaving us hanging in what sounds like the middle of a sentence. As one scholar comments, a literal translation would sound something like, "*To no one anything they said; afraid they were for....*" "*It's almost,*" he jokes, "*as if the author of Mark had suddenly been dragged from his writing desk in mid-sentence.*" Which simply leaves the reader hanging, waiting for the conclusion of the sentence, which you can see some of the well-meaning faithful took as an invitation to fill in the blanks—the ellipsis—to end Mark's unfinished sentence on a more pious, more orthodox note, wanting to resolve the unsettling, hanging, discordant note on which Mark's Easter story and his entire Gospel

end—like trying to resolve a discordant minor key at the end of a musical composition

And so too our Bibles contain a so-called “longer ending of Mark” that contains as many as an additional nine verses that sound a good bit more like the Easter stories we hear in other years from Matthew’s or Luke’s or John’s Gospels. The effort is obviously to “harmonize” Mark’s abrupt ending with other Gospel traditions, to overcome its blatant discord, to soften its unsettlingly rough edges.

But—contrarian that I am—you won’t be surprised to learn that I’m one. and I’m far from alone. who finds fascinating Mark’s troubling ending seems a good match for our kind of unsettlingly discordant world. I for one am grateful that the church has resisted the temptation to sanction some more soothing and “edifying” ending, as so often happens in the final editing process of our made-in-Hollywood movies, where various endings are field-tested among viewers before the final cut, so fearful are producers of disappointing

potential movie-goers with unacceptably surprising or unresolved, edgy endings that are often judged as “downers” by the likes movie-goers who expect to be entertained and maybe even edified by the “uplifting happy endings” we’ve learned to expect and demand of Hollywood.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I think that Mark’s Easter story which concludes his “Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God,” **does** end on a positive, up-beat note. In fact, I would even go further and claim that Mark’s Easter story redefines and even “transfigures” the whole genre of “comedy,” as the Greeks defined comedy as a drama with a happy ending, a positive resolution.

For Easter, you see, as I mentioned last week on Passion Sunday, can never be the easily anticipated “natural” outcome of Jesus’ passion and death. For the resurrection is not just some eternally recurring truth of nature—like the return of the sun or the spring-time rebirth of nature. That’s the

danger of using natural metaphors as we found Jesus himself doing just a couple of weeks ago when he spoke of the seed that is sown in the earth that must die in order to sprout and grow, or as the butterfly bursts forth from the seeming death of the caterpillar's dry cocoon. These natural images may be as close as we can come to metaphors for the resurrection, but they all fall dangerously short of the absolutely new thing—the utterly shocking and surprising—even terrifying—novelty that the resurrection of Jesus betokens.

For the fact of the matter is, sisters and brothers, that the resurrection of Jesus is absolutely without analogy in the natural or human history of the cosmos. Life out of death—not simple resuscitation to normal human mortality or the revival of an immortal god who by definition couldn't **really** die in the first place—eternal life born out of the grave is absolutely without parallel. And so it is not at all surprising that the three brave-hearted women, who alone among all the

dispirited disciples of Jesus, who according to Mark had all deserted their Master at his arrest and scattered, whose very leader, Peter, had denied that he “ever knew the man,” only the women braved the pre-dawn darkness of that first day of the week to go to the tomb to anoint their dead Master’s corpse.

What they experienced there—really, what encountered them—left them stunned and speechless, for “*terror and amazement seized them,*” is Mark’s way of putting it,” —the original Greek “stutters” with a double negative—“they told **nothing to no one**” —for they were afraid—or literally in the Greek “*they feared, for ...*” (dot, dot, dot) end of the Gospel story.

I bet they were scared out of their skins. Who in their right mind wouldn’t be, by the “*young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side,*” as Mark with such restraint and modesty describes what the other gospel writers insist on calling “angels.” An angel he certainly was, in the literal sense of being a

messenger, but plain-spoken Mark doesn't need all the supernatural theatrics of the other evangelists. A young man in white will suffice. "*And they*" — the women — "*were alarmed,*" Mark says, though perhaps as alarmed at finding the stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb they had been worrying about moving as finding a young man in white.

But what really terrorized and amazed the women was what the young man in white had to say — the message he bore — for his words were truly words with the power to shock and surprise: "*Do not be alarmed,*" he said, seeming to read the women's minds, "*you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. **He has been raised**; he is not here. Look there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.*" End of message. Words sufficiently astonishing, Mark wants us to realize, that their immediate effect could

only lead to the last verse of his entire Gospel: “*So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone — **nothin’ to nobody** — for they were afraid.*”

What an ending! An ending that serves as no other to underline the absolutely “discombobulating” news that “Jesus is risen.” But, of course, “Jesus is risen” as we say, is not precisely the message of the young man in white, is it? “*You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified?*” he says or perhaps asks, and then adds “*He has been raised.*” Notice the passive voice of his words: “**He has been raised.**” In other words, Jesus is not the actor in this matter but the one **acted upon**. As I sometimes like to put it not all that reverently, it’s not as though Jesus pops up out of the grave on the third day like bread out of a toaster, because the time is up. It’s not that Jesus somehow has managed to raise himself from the dead, as though he

were wearing his divine immortality under his human skin like some superman outfit.

But as Peter in Acts chapter 10 makes explicit, the Easter affirmation is that “*God raised him on the third day.*” God is the actor in the action of Easter, that is the very One to whom we heard Jesus crying out in that eerie mid-afternoon darkness as he hung upon the cross, “*eloi, eloi, lama sabbacthani?*” which means “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” —this very One whom Jesus otherwise so characteristically portrayed as “Abba” —Father, or better, Papa. This same Abba-God whom Jesus felt had deserted him in his deepest hour of need as he lay stretched out upon the cruel cross, now this morning we with the women are surprised to hear is the very One who has raised Jesus from the dead, who has vindicated Jesus and all he stood for in his life and death, who, after all, did not leave Jesus abandoned to death forever.

It is terrorizing and amazing news indeed, this “He has been raised” stuff, this Easter

good news that, what's more, God did the "raising." We're still trying to come to terms with what it all means, for new life, life with an eternal quality to it, to erupt from the grave by the power of God and to be set loose upon our world. And notice, the promise is that this risen Jesus is going ahead of his disciples into Galilee, back into their home country, preceding them back into the familiar turf of **their and our** everyday lives, where, the promise is, "*you will see him just as he told you.*"

Thank God, the Word did get out—the best good news we could ever hope to hear: not just "Jesus is risen" but as the young man clad in white put it, "He has been raised" and, what's more, we know Who did the raising! Thanks be to God. For Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!