

Readings: Acts 10: 34-43 Title: a new beginning – available to everyone Thriplow and Shepreth
Mark 16: 1-8

Have you ever got to the end of a book, and realised that the end of the book you have in front of you is not really the end? That awful moment when, despite reading the 475 pages that you have read, been gripped by, and been desperate to find out what would happen in the end, you realise that the climax actually comes on page 476, or perhaps even later, and those pages are missing from your copy of the book. If it is an Agathe Christie, you will have missed where Miss Marple or Hercule Poirot gets all those who might possibly have done it together in a room and painstakingly goes through what actually happens throwing guilt momentarily on several of those present before, in what appears to me to quiet often the case, telling us it was the village doctor who was the perpetrator. Or you might have got to the moment at the end of your romantic novel, when after various fallings in and out of love, our hero goes down on one knee and says,

“Will you make the happiest man in the world by giving me your hand in marriage?” and her answer is on page 476.

Mark’s gospel, according to many people is a bit like that. Mark’s gospel is well known for it’s conciseness, at some times there almost feels like an unnecessary lack of detail in some of the stories it tells – particularly when it is compared to the longer, other three gospels. Yet having said that, Mark is so clear in the message his gospel is giving – it is so heavily based on telling what the future holds. Mark didn’t think the details of Jesus’ birth were significant enough to include – yet he made it clear how Jesus taught his disciples what was to happen. “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again”, is what Jesus tried to explain to the disciples. Later, Jesus told them that the temple would be destroyed, his followers be persecuted, and he even tried to tell them what would happen at the end of time.

Our gospel reading today tells us of the resurrection of Jesus. It includes various almost unnecessary pieces of information – the three women who came to the tomb are mentioned by name, and Mark didn’t really mention many people by name in his gospel. There was what the women were talking about on the way to the tomb – in effect, how are we going to get in? When they got into the tomb they found the young man, sitting on the right side. What has the side that the young man was sitting on got to do with anything. And then his story finishes with a brief statement from the young man:

But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; 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.’

Those things that Jesus said would happen have happened. This is the climax of the story. This is the good news. And what do we get next?

So they (that’s the three women) went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

(flip pages over) Sorry, but what happened next? They ran away, and that’s the end of the story? Did they tell the disciples and Peter? Quick diversion – that’s a strange one isn’t it? The disciples and Peter? Had Peter been sacked from the disciples because of the denial? Wasn’t Peter the boss disciple? Isn’t the theory about the main source of information about Mark’s gospel was that that source was in fact Peter? This just doesn’t add up. It’s not a proper ending, surely?

There are two alternative endings to Mark’s gospel printed in most bibles. There is the shorter ending, “And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter.

Readings: Acts 10: 34-43 Title: a new beginning – available to everyone Thriplow and Shepreth
Mark 16: 1-8

And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen” and there is a longer version which I’m not going to read because its another 12 verses, but the point about these two endings is that first, they were discovered quite a time after Mark’s gospel itself was accepted, and so there is a timing issue, but more importantly, neither of these endings are written in anything like the style of Mark’s gospel. So, generally speaking, nobody really believes that either of these is the actual ending of the gospel.

So, there are two possibilities. First, as I have already suggested, the last page or pages of the manuscript got lost – we doubt if this sort of manuscript would have had a cover, a strong binding, or the equivalent protection, in those days, and so we have simply not got the end of Mark’s gospel, or second, perhaps this is where Mark wanted to leave us at the end of his gospel – in a place where we had to work out the rest for ourselves. Perhaps he thought he had told us enough for us to work out the ending.

But whichever we go for, the next steps are the same. We have to work out for ourselves what this story means, and we have to work out for ourselves how that affects each and every one of us. And where do we start? We start with the first reading we heard this morning.

You see, when God spoke to Abraham, and told him that he, God, would build a nation from Abraham’s descendants, “I will make of you a great nation”, God promised Abraham, from that point that nation, the Jewish nation, believed that they were God’s favoured people.

But when God sent his Son to the world, and the Jewish leaders rejected him, that favoured status disappeared. And in that first reading Peter, now fully restored as the leader of Jesus’ church, speaking to the non Jewish community, the Gentiles, said, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality.” That favoured status is open to us all – to Jew and to Gentile, and so, “everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

The end of Mark’s gospel, as we have it, can really be seen as our launch pad. It is almost as if we have to go away and write what we think happened next – or perhaps more accurately, what happens next. Are we content just knowing the factual accuracy of the resurrection of Jesus Christ – there are plenty of lawyers out there who have examined the evidence as to whether Jesus actually rose from the dead and came back with the conclusion that he did – or are we prepared to go to the next stage, and consider what that resurrection really means for us?

We have in the church of England a process that people go through which publicly states their faith. It starts with baptism, often of infants, where the person being baptised or their parents and godparents on their behalf, make promises about growing up as part of God’s family, the church. Today (in Thriplow) we received Hamish (and Felicity) and Leon (and Felicity) will also be received in a couple of weeks, into Communion, as the next stage of their journey in God’s family. Perhaps when they are in their teens they may decide to be confirmed – when they make all the baptismal promises afresh for themselves, and beyond that , who knows.

But the point of this is a recognition that we are all on a journey with God. That is a journey we need to make sure that we understand; it is a journey part of which requires us to encourage others to join us on that journey; it is a journey where, because of what happened on that first Easter Day, anyone can join us, and they join us with a clean slate. Anything we have done wrong in the past which we may feel has stopped us joining the journey, is removed because of the forgiveness of God, which is available to us because of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Readings: Acts 10: 34-43 Title: a new beginning – available to everyone Thriplow and Shepreth
Mark 16: 1-8

Today, Easter Day, really is the first day of the rest of our lives. You may have been living your lives alongside Jesus for years, perhaps all your life, or perhaps you might like to try and doing that from today – and if you would let me know, doesn't have to be today, it can be anytime, and I'd love to talk to you about how I, how we in the church, can help you make that happen.

The last pages of Mark's gospel may have been lost – or perhaps they were never written. But we can write them for ourselves. Today can be a new beginning – available to everyone.

Amen.