

What Happened Next?  
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Mark 16:1-8

As a child I often drove my mother to distraction by asking her over and over “and then what happened?” Going to the movies with me was a real challenge. I was not satisfied with the endings. What did the Disney “happily ever after” mean? I wanted to know more. I was distraught after we read *Stuart Little* together and the little mouse goes off in search of the bird. What happened next? In watching *Gone with the Wind*, what happened next to Scarlett O’Hara?

We traveled through Holy Week this past week thinking about and re-enacting what happened in Jesus’ last days. The triumphal entry into Jerusalem. The anger of the Roman and Temple leadership. The last supper. The betrayal. Jesus’ death on a cross. His burial in a tomb.

We hear from today’s scripture: the women went to the tomb and it was empty. A man in white tells them Jesus is not here. He goes before you to Galilee. Go tell the disciples. And the women ran away in fear and didn’t tell anyone.

What?!

This is not the Easter scripture we are most familiar with. This year’s lesson comes from the gospel of Mark, the shortest and most pointed gospel. In this Easter story there is no reunion with Jesus, there is no Jesus shining with golden light. The disciples don’t even appear. It is just the brave women who go to the tomb. They see the stone is gone, meet this stranger in white, and run away terrified. The End.

But what happened next?

This stark ending so bothered even the early listeners/readers of the gospel that in the second century the book was edited and a short addition put on in which Jesus appears to the disciples. And then another addition after that with a future visitation. Even the ancient hearers of this gospel were unhappy with the ending. What happened next? And what did Jesus’ resurrection mean?

On Easter we focus on how the tomb was empty. That Jesus rose from the dead. But I think in this truncated version of Mark’s story, we hear something else. The man in white says that Jesus is not there, but says also that he is going ahead of them to Galilee and there they will see him. He goes ahead of you.

The women do run away terrified. But, we also know that they did see Jesus. We know that they did eventually tell of what they experienced. How do we know? It is not from today’s scripture reading.

We know because we are here this morning. The women had to have told someone or we wouldn’t be here. The women told and then the disciples told and others told and this message of an astonishing man full of love and grace and hope and healing, even transcendent over death, has been told for generations all the way down to us.

“Jesus goes on ahead of you,” said the man in white.

That is the message for us today. Jesus goes on ahead of us. Even when we are scared, or perhaps especially when we are scared. Even when we fail at first. That’s really what the Christian life is all about. Going on ahead when we don’t know what lies ahead. Going ahead even after failure. Going ahead in faith trusting that Jesus will meet us, as he has gone on ahead of us.

You see what happens next in this story really depends on us. Jesus’ resurrection is only the beginning. It isn’t the end. What happens next is all the ways in which those who have followed Christ across the centuries have brought healing and love to a damaged world and desolate people.

If we don’t have to live in fear--fear of death, fear of failure, fear of betrayal, things that Jesus knew and lived--then we are free to follow his life, his teachings, his hope for changing the world. We don’t have to be afraid. We don’t have to get it right the first time. We can arise out of despair and loss.

Because Jesus goes on ahead of us. Are we going to follow?

The year I lived in South Africa I went to a n Easter sunrise service held at the beach. It was warm in the pre-dawn darkness and I sat on the sand with 20 others who belonged to this raggedy, struggling church that met on Sunday evenings in a church basement.

The previous months had been difficult. The pastor had left in anger, a member was arrested for embezzlement, another had serious medical issues. We sat in the dark on the shore and waited for the light. We badly needed resurrection.

The sun rose gloriously. We sang and prayed and offered thanks. Then we set up a portable bbq on the beach and ate a huge breakfast on sagging paper plates. Jesus had risen from the dead. That was the promise. He would go on ahead of us. Hope was alive.

As we finished, we saw we had food left over. And in that moment of thinking of what to do with it, our eyes were opened and we saw Jesus ahead of us just as promised.

We saw the forms of folks tucked back against the dunes in ragged blankets and sleeping bags. Folks who had spent the night on the beach either out of need or the ending of an addiction high or homelessness. These were folks we had not seen in the dark.

But now, Jesus was there, ahead of us, seen in these sorrowful person-shapes on the ground.

So we loaded doubled up plates with the eggs and meat and bread. And carefully, and a little fearfully, walked over to these folks who then peered up at us with eyes heavy with sleep and who knows what tragedy and despair. And we offered them food. Invited them to eat: this group of two, and that man by himself, and the so-thin woman in the ratty blanket. In this small way, they too came to know the hope that we had found, at least the hope of this hot breakfast after a long, cold, lonely night.

We did not change the world that day. Cynically one could say we just unloaded our leftovers--typical charity thinking...

But as one who was there, as one who walked with this broken church community, I can attest that it was more. It was moving from our own despairing selves, to finding hope and life in

Jesus resurrection, and then, seeing the resurrected Christ in those around us and offering what we had.

That morning we answered the question: what happened next. What happened next was a sharing of hope even with our fears--fears about the future of our community. Fears for our own safety--there was a shooting I witnessed on this same beach not too long after this. But Jesus went ahead of us, and we saw him in the least of these.

What happens next for those of us here today?

I can assure you that death is not the end of the story--either our story or Christ's.  
I can assure you that you are never alone, even in the darkest tomb-like times of your life.  
I can assure you that Jesus goes ahead of you to meet you in the most unexpected and mundane places.

As a Brazilian poet said:

Because I have founded my life on a sincere word, on the life of Christ, on the promise of God.  
I believe although I feel alone in pain  
I believe although I see people hating  
I believe although I see children weep  
Because I have learned with certainty that you come to meet us in the hardest hours, in the early dawn, in the midst of all things, and you greet us with your love and your light.  
I believe. ---Livro de Cantos, Porte Alegre, Brazil

Let's go out to live a life of love and service in the continuing story of what happens next.  
Amen.