

Rewrite the Ending
Mark 16:1 – 8, 9 – 20
Sunday, May 26, 2019

I've told you before how this is my favorite chapter in the entire Bible – Mark's account of the resurrection in chapter 16. A lot of times I compare it to when you're watching a movie or TV show that has an unsatisfying ending. One of those endings where the screen just all of a sudden goes black or it doesn't answer all of your questions and leaves you wanting more.

Last Sunday was the final episode of the TV show *Game of Thrones*, this incredibly popular fantasy show about kings and queens and dragons and an army of the dead that was coming to kill them all. After 8 years, we were finally going to know what happened. Who was going to survive? Who would be the king or the queen? Would this character's secret identity be revealed? Would they defeat the army of the dead and save the kingdom? The whole show had been building up to this, and there were all these questions that were finally going to be answered.

But all throughout this final season, after each episode, people were like, "Eh, this just isn't very good. The writing is bad, and it feels *rushed*, like they're trying too hard to wrap it all up." It just wasn't what a lot of fans of the show *wanted*. And then came the final episode, which people hoped would pull it all together and redeem everything. And I'm not going to give away what happened just in case any of you haven't watched it yet – it's only been a week – but it was *not* the way people wanted the show to end.

Social media was immediately flooded with posts about how the writers had ruined the entire show. I saw articles with titles like, "24 Questions I Have After Watching the *Game of Thrones* Finale That I Will Never Get the Answer To," "15 *Game of Thrones* Fanfiction Stories That Will

Help You Achieve Closure,” and, “11 *Game of Thrones* Fan Theories That Are Better Than the Actual Show.” Someone actually started a petition on the website Change.org demanding that HBO remake the entire final season (a season that cost HBO over \$90 million to make in the first place). The petition says that the writers “have proven themselves to be woefully incompetent [and] the series deserves a final season that makes sense.” They wanted them to rewrite the whole thing and start over like none of it had ever happened. And as of this morning, that petition has been signed by 1,567,835 people! 1.5 million people who were *so unsatisfied* with the way the show ended that they wanted to rewrite it.

That is just like what happens in Mark’s gospel. The way Mark’s gospel ends was so unsatisfying that people demanded a rewrite. Because of that, Mark’s gospel actually has three separate endings. And I want to take a look at each of them real quick to show you what is going on there. When these books were written, there wasn’t a “Bible” yet, the way we have it now. There were just a bunch of different gospels circulating. And because they didn’t have photocopy machines or printing presses, if you wanted a copy of a gospel, it had to be copied out by hand. So there were a lot of copies floating around, and some of them were very different from each other. Mark’s gospel is a prime example of this.

Mark’s gospel was written around the year 70 A.D., but the oldest copy anyone has found is from around the year 225 A.D. The earliest copies of Mark’s gospel end like this: The women go to the tomb, but Jesus isn’t there. An angel appears to them and tells them that he has risen, and to go back and tell the disciples to go to Galilee, and they’ll find him there. And the final verse says, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” That’s it. It just ends. Jesus doesn’t even appear in the earliest ending. The screen just goes black, and it ends with, “they said

nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” That’s not how a story of good news is supposed to end, right?

Well, it was so unsettling for some people, they just couldn’t deal with that kind of ending. They needed closure. They needed some kind of conclusion. They needed to know what *happened*. They needed answers. So what they did was, they tacked on a short, two sentence ending right after verse 8, that just says, “And all that had been commanded them [the women] 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.” So the women go from not telling anyone out of fear, to briefly telling the disciples, and then Jesus sends it out to the whole world. But still, it doesn’t feel complete. It feels like they just rushed and crammed an ending onto it. It’s not the full, satisfying ending that people were hoping for.

So *then* what they did was, some people just kind of said, “That ending’s no good. Let’s get rid of that,” and they added a longer ending in its place that goes like this:

Mark 16:9–12

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

So there we have a pretty well-rounded ending to this gospel story. Nothing leaves us hanging. We have the women telling, Jesus appearing, giving them all instructions, sending them out into the world, and then ascending into heaven. A nice, complete, satisfying ending.

I think that what's going on in this chapter is something that all of us can identify with. Because on some level, every single one of us has a *need* in our lives, in our stories, for *closure*. We crave resolution, clarity, and answers. We have an innate need to wrap things up and have a satisfying ending (it doesn't necessarily have to be a happy ending, but a satisfying one) that we can process, that makes sense to us. We don't like the sudden endings where things are left unresolved.

But the thing is, sometimes our stories end that way. Sometimes we are left with questions that we will never get the answers to.

I think that these three endings to Mark's gospel point to something a lot bigger than just an editing process. I think they point to *doubt*. The original ending ends with a kind of doubt. The women were afraid. They didn't know what to do. So they ran away and did nothing. It leaves the whole thing in doubt. But then there were people who doubted whether *that* ending was enough. So they added another. And then there were people who doubted whether *that* ending was enough. So they added *another*.

Because I think that sometimes we doubt that God's story is enough. Sometimes we doubt that *God* is enough. And we try to take matters into our own hands and provide our own conclusion and try to write our own ending.

It's easy to trust God when things are going well and it feels like we have all the answers and our life is like a nice, tidy, neat story. It's a whole lot harder to trust God when there's doubt and we're just kind of left hanging there and we don't have any answers and we don't know what's going to happen next.

This past week we went down to Washington, D.C. to bury my father at Arlington. He died a year ago, but we hadn't had a relationship for the past 12 years. My father served in Vietnam and, like many others, came home from that war a very different person and struggled with it for the rest of his life. I reached a point where I realized that for my own wellbeing and the wellbeing of my family, I could not be in relationship with him. So we hadn't spoken for 12 years, and I had made peace with that. But I guess there was a part of me that always figured, "One day we'll talk again. One day we'll try to work all this out." So when he died – very suddenly, without any warning or any chance to talk or say goodbye – it was like the screen just went black and the story ended. It was an unsatisfying ending that left me with more *questions* than *answers*.

And the reason I mention this is not because my story is unique. I mention it because I think it's something we can all identify with. All of us have relationships in our lives or experiences in our lives that leave us feeling that way. And the question for us is, "What do we *do* with them?" How do we keep on living our lives with these unresolved issues, these questions that we'll never get the answers to, without letting them *consume* us?

After my father's death, I experienced this sadness at the thought that we'll never be able to work things out. That his life ended – and one day *my* life with end – with this brokenness between us. That he couldn't find the healing that he needed in this life; that *we* couldn't find the healing that we needed in this life. But the one thought I kept coming back to was, "This life is not all there is." That, no, we *couldn't* work things out in this life, but the possibility of healing and forgiveness and reconciliation does not *end* with this life. Because what Mark's gospel shows us is that where one story *ends*, another one *begins*. That's what resurrection is all about. That it's never too late to find the healing and forgiveness and love and life that we need, because through Jesus Christ there is this bigger life and existence and story that we cannot even begin to fully understand the possibilities of. Our stories may seem to end with disappointment or pain or brokenness, but Christ is at work rewriting our endings so that death gives way to life, mourning gives way to dancing, tears give way to laughter, brokenness gives way to healing, sin gives way to forgiveness, doubt gives way to faith. Nothing ever really *ends*. It just turns into something *new*.

And we may not always be able to *see* that. But faith is about trusting where we cannot see and where we have no proof, trusting in the midst of our doubts and our fears that God is *enough*; that when we feel like the story is coming to an end and the screen is going black, God can bring about new possibilities and new life and *resurrection*. Mark's story does not *end* with fear or doubt, and neither do *ours*. Mark's story does not end with *death*, and neither do *ours*. Mark's story ends with Jesus *showing up*, and so do *ours*. Mark's story ends with resurrection and new life, and so do *ours*. Mark's story ends and begins again, and ends and begins again, and so do *ours*. In Mark's gospel, the story is not really *ending* at all. It's only just beginning. And so are *ours*.

The challenge for us is to take all the moments in life when it seems like the story is coming to an *end*, and open ourselves up to the ways that God is beginning something *new* in us. Christ is rewriting our endings into new beginnings. Because through the grace of God, we can always start again.