

“Cliffhanger”  
April 9, 2023—Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8

If you are someone who watches a particular television show faithfully week after week. Or if you are someone who binge watches multiple episodes of a tv series over a shorter period of time. Then you will know exactly what I’m talking about.

Almost without fail, at the end of a particular season, in the very last episode of a really good show, something will happen that leaves you as the viewer stunned or amazed. For example, there’s an unbelievable twist in the plot you had no idea was coming. Or a beloved character in the show suddenly dies or has something catastrophic happen to them. Or there’s a mystery or a secret in the show that creates so much intrigue you obsess over how it’s going to be resolved. Sometimes there’s even something apocalyptic that happens at the end of a season...something so Armageddon-like that you don’t know who will survive or whether anyone will survive to see the next season.

Those final episodes in a season are often called “cliffhangers.” Created to raise suspense and adrenaline levels and designed to have you talking with family and friends long after the episode is over, those season ending cliffhangers serve one primary purpose. To get you excited about coming back to watch the show the following season...

From a Biblical perspective, the story that leads up to Easter is the biggest cliffhanger of them all. As the final days in the life of Jesus unfold, there are twists and turns around every corner. Characters in the story of the death of Jesus act in ways that are both unpredictable and uncharacteristic. The motives of the lead players in the story become more and more confusing.

Along the way, as Jesus endures betrayal, humiliation and abandonment at the hands of enemies and friends alike, the dramatic tension builds. Finally, Jesus hangs on a wooden cross, crying out to God in suffering before he takes his final earthly breath. He’s buried unceremoniously in a brand new tomb. And three days later, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome come to the tomb bearing spices to anoint Jesus’ body.

But when they arrive at the tomb, the stone in front of the tomb entrance is rolled off to the side. Duh, duh, duh!! If the life of Jesus was a television series, the crucifixion and the burial, followed by the three women walking up to the empty tomb with expressions of shock and horror on their faces, would be called a cliffhanger. Not a bad one either, I might add...

So as we gather here this morning, we’ve watched the end of the life Jesus unfold over this Lenten season. The excitement and the anticipation have been building for forty

days, through Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. And now here we are on Easter ready for a whole new season. Today begins the season of resurrection as we hear the story of Jesus Christ rising from the dead and we claim God's promise of new and eternal life as our own.

Yes, today is the day the Easter cliffhanger is supposed to be resolved. In Matthew's Gospel version of the Easter story, there's a giant earthquake. Jesus greets the women as they run from the empty tomb, encouraging them to share the good news with everyone they encounter. And not long thereafter, Jesus meets with his disciples on top of a mountain and tells them to baptize and make disciples of all nations.

In Luke's Gospel version of the Easter story, the women meet two men in dazzling white clothes inside the tomb. Terrified at first, the women soon realize that Christ has risen, just as he told them he would. And the women pass along to the disciples what they have seen and heard. Only to have those eleven remaining male disciples casually dismiss the women by claiming their resurrection story is nothing more than an idle tale.

In John's Gospel version of the Easter story, small details come alive in vivid color. Mary Magdalene encounters a man outside the tomb and assumes he is the gardener. Until she hears the sound of his voice and recognizes that he is, in fact, the living Christ. Meanwhile, Peter and the Beloved Disciple race on foot to the tomb, only to discover for themselves that the tomb is empty. In the end, everybody winds up running from the gravesite to tell the world they have seen the Lord.

All of which leads us up to Mark's Gospel version of the Easter story which we heard a few minutes ago. And how does Mark deal with the Easter cliffhanger? We will know as soon as we read his final verse. "So the 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..."

Huh? Is that it? What about the earthquake and the idle tale and the face-to-face encounters with the Risen Jesus and everyone running out into the world sharing the Good News? Where's all that stuff?

By the way, it's not just me asking this question. Some years after Mark's Gospel was written, someone read Mark's Easter story and had the same thought. What really, actually happened at the end? And their solution was to tack on twelve extra verses to the end of Mark's sixteenth chapter in an attempt to make Mark's Easter story sound more complete...

Most scholars, however, tell us that Mark ended his Easter story and his entire Gospel at verse eight in the sixteenth chapter. Right where we ended this morning. With a group of women terrified and amazed to the point they were unable to say anything to anyone.

As a result, all these years later, you and I hear Mark's story and we still find ourselves hanging on the cliff. Still wondering why Mark ends his version of the story so abruptly. According to Mark, Easter is almost anti-climactic.

All kinds of lingering questions remain. Do the women at the empty tomb ever share with anyone what they've seen and heard? How do the disciples respond? What about all the people who hear the story of Jesus after he is risen? Mark's Easter story is like reading an article on your computer or your phone and just when you get to the best part, there's a message flashing on the screen that says you can only read the rest of the article if you are a paid subscriber. It's like the person who tries to tell you a great joke they've heard, but when they get to the end, they can't remember the punch line.

In truth, Mark's Easter story is a bit of a letdown. Unsatisfying, disappointing, frustrating. We want the story to have a great ending. Yet Mark does not oblige.

Which leaves us with a couple of choices. The first choice is fairly simple and straightforward. You could walk out of our worship service this morning and tell the preacher to go with Matthew, Luke or John next year on Easter Sunday.

Or you and I can do what Mark may well have intended. Come up with our own ending to the Easter story. By the kind words we say and the faithful ways we live our lives and the dignity and compassion with which we treat our neighbor, followers of Christ have a chance to complete Mark's Easter tale...

Every time we reach out to someone who is grieving or going through physical or mental illness to remind them they are loved and not alone, you and I are writing our own version of the Easter story.

Every time we teach our children and grandchildren how to solve disputes without picking up weapons and destroying one another, we are spreading the Easter good news.

Every time we pray and work for peace in a world that is wounded and divided and broken, we offer each other a chance to live fully and abundantly, which is at the heart of Christ's Easter promise.

Every time we break down the barriers that divide human beings on account of skin color or gender expression or sexual orientation or physical or mental ability or ethnicity or economic class or faith tradition, we practice the kind of Easter compassion Jesus gave his life for.

And every time we live our lives with a sense of hope, trusting that what God has in store for us tomorrow will be even better and brighter than what God has in store for us today, we fulfill our calling as disciples of the Risen Christ...

You don't have to get stuck on the edge of the cliff this morning. Write your own Easter ending by how you live your life. Share your own Easter good news with the

people you encounter. Use Easter as motivation to seek peace and justice on behalf of friends and strangers and enemies. Give thanks to God who reminds us every year on this day that life and love are always stronger than death.

And stay tuned as we watch God's Easter assurance that all things are possible unfold in the season to come!

Christ is risen...alleluia!

