

**Easter Sunday**  
**Series: The Unfinished Business of Easter**  
**#1: What Will You Do with an Empty Tomb?**  
**Mark 1:1-8; First Peter 1:3-9 (NRSV)**  
**By Rev. John Gill**

Do you like a “cliff-hanger!” You know, that technique TV producers love to use on the last episode of one year’s season to keep you interested enough to tune back in when the new season begins. Probably the most famous “cliff-hanger” of all time was way back during the TV series, “Dallas.” For months, all of America was asking the question, “Who shot J.R.?” On November 21, 1980, 350 million people around the world tuned in to find out the answer! I guess cliff-hangers are great for TV ratings.

But I don’t like cliff-hangers. I enjoy watching TV murder mysteries, especially those British crime shows on PBS. I will sometimes be clicking through the channels and stumble upon the beginning of one of those shows and watch it for a whole hour – only to see at the conclusion “To Be Continued.” How infuriating! I probably will forget to watch the second half. What a waste of time!”

You see, I like my stories to come to a nice clear conclusion, where all the story-lines are pulled together at the very end, and tied in a neat little bow – a satisfying and predictable ending.

Maybe you do, too. That’s probably why so many people love to watch those movies on the Hallmark Channel – you always know that the lovers will work out their differences, get married, and live happily ever after.

I think that may be why people love Easter so much. It’s like a great Drama, with multiple story-lines that, on Easter morning, are pulled together to present the Ultimate “happy ending.” We are willing to struggle with the angst and drama of Holy Week, the cliff-hanger of the Cross and the Sealed Tomb, because we know that, just as sure as morning will dawn, there will be a joyous “Happy Ending.”

But not this year. At least not for me. This Easter seems unfinished to me. It feels like a cliff-hanger...

That’s why I selected to share the Easter-story from Mark’s Gospel on this particular Easter morning – because Mark wasn’t afraid of cliff-hanger.

You see, Mark was the first of the Gospels to be written down. As I mentioned in our recent sermon series on each of the Gospels, Mark focuses on the transformative power of Jesus’ suffering – he draws our attention to the Cross of Calvary, not the empty tomb. We see this in how he treats Easter morning.

If you have a good study Bible, you will notice that the editors include at least three different endings to Mark's Gospel. The text that was read a moment ago, I believe, was the original ending to Mark's Gospel: with the women finding that "someone" had already rolled the stone from the opening of the tomb, that the body of Jesus was missing, and a "young man" (Mark doesn't actually call him an angel) – a young man declares to them that Jesus had risen from the dead. The man tells the women that he has a message from Jesus, that they should go to the disciples and tell them to go to Galilee, where they will "see" Jesus. But according to this original ending of Mark, the women are afraid, and "tell no one."

The End.

Talk about a cliff-hanger! Where are the angels? Where is the earthquake? Where are the women rushing back to the disciples with joy to announce the resurrection? Where are the disciples running to the tomb to see for themselves and "believing?" And, where is the Risen Jesus appearing to Mary "in the garden" by the tomb? No appearances by Jesus of any kind – at least not in Mark's original ending! A cliff-hanger! Not a very satisfying ending, is it?

And apparently, the Early Church thought so, too. Because, as your Bible should indicate, they added more material to Mark's abrupt ending – stories of resurrection appearances borrowed from the other Gospels – to tie up the loose ends that Mark had so deliberately left dangling - so that there is a happier and more satisfying ending.

They wanted the ending of Mark to feel more like "Easter."

But, this year, I prefer Mark's original ending. I don't know about you, but this morning doesn't feel like Easter to me.

Because of the pandemic that is gripping our nation and our world, this Holy Week we can powerfully identify with the suffering of Jesus' Passion, and the agony and death of Jesus on the cross. Perhaps more profoundly than any Holy Week in our lifetimes, we resonate with Holy Saturday – the most overlooked day of that holiest of weeks. For once, we have an inkling of what the "sealed in the tomb" day means – for we may feel entombed in our homes and by our grief – as we fear a virus we can't see that has infected millions - as we watch so many people suffering and dying around us – with seemingly no end in sight. No, today doesn't feel like Easter. It feels like we are stuck, sealed in the tomb with the lifeless-body of Jesus – wondering when the stone of our grief will be rolled away so we can finally bask in the bright sun of Easter.

And that's how those women who came early on Sunday morning to anoint the body of Jesus must have felt. Like them, we are living a "cliff-hanger" ... a story "to be continued..."

You and I have "unfinished business" this Easter. We come to the tomb with the women and find it empty, and yet we can't quite bring ourselves to believe the word of the stranger who tries to convince us that Christ is risen. We are confused. We are still frightened. We see an

empty tomb – but we don't see Jesus. And so, like the women, we want to run-away scared, and we don't tell anyone – because we can't quite believe that it's true.

Maybe that's how you are feeling today. In the midst of a pandemic, amidst so much death and suffering, how are we supposed to make sense of the claim of an empty tomb? It's enough to cause us to question all we thought we believed.

It seems that those for whom Mark was addressing his Gospel may also have been struggling the same doubts. As I mentioned in my recent sermon series on each of the Gospel writers, Mark's Gospel was written to believers who were undergoing a period of extreme persecution for their faith. The Emperor Nero was scapegoating Christians, and killing them with impunity. Many of those who refused to renounce their faith were arrested and nailed to crosses, just as their Lord had been – they literally were forced to “take up their cross” to follow Jesus. It was a holocaust for the early church.

In the midst of such suffering, and death, and grief, those early Christians could be forgiven for beginning to wonder if it was all worth it. Perhaps they were mistaken about the resurrection. After all, (according to Mark's original cliff-hanger ending) all they had to go on was an empty tomb and the word of a stranger. Maybe Easter was just a hoax, after all.

That is why the Apostle Peter took pen-in-hand and wrote his first letter to the church (the letter our first lesson is from). Peter is addressing his epistle to the very same people who were suffering so terribly for their faith. And in his letter, he reminds them of the promises of God for those who remain faithful – rewards that far surpass the sufferings of the present moment. He acknowledges their pain, but reminds them of the victory that God has promised. They may feel trapped in the tomb with Jesus – but their own Easter Day is coming.

Listen again to what Peter writes:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”

Peter is saying to us, “Don't be discouraged! The tomb is empty! Jesus is risen, just as he said. And, because He is Risen, you and I have been given “a new birth into a living hope” – the promise that death is not the end – that, because Jesus lives, you and I will also live!”

Oh, yes, I do like the way Mark leaves the Easter story open-ended! It's almost as if he concludes his story this way: “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. – To Be Continued...

Mark ends his Easter story with a cliff-hanger. Why? So that each of us can write our own ending, as we wrestle with what an “empty tomb” means for us - and for our world.

Easter is, after all a matter of faith!

So – on this Easter morning, what will YOU do with an empty tomb?