

How fulfilled do you feel at the end of our gospel reading for today? We have the familiar story of women going to the empty tomb. They meet some man or angel when they get there. He says Jesus isn't there and then they run away and say nothing to anyone because they are afraid. And that's it.

If you know Mark's gospel well you remember that not only is that the end of the gospel reading for today, that's also the end of the entire gospel! Your Bibles will have footnotes saying that that is where the oldest copies of Mark that we have end and that a few alternate ending have been added by other writers over the years - and then they go on to give a couple of them. Apparently other people also weren't satisfied with the way Mark's ends his gospel.

Of course the whole situation is even worse. Our English translations actually clean up what is an even worse ending. I've shared this before and you may remember that if the last line were literally translated word for word it would be, "...and they said nothing to nobody the reason they were afraid was because."

I imagine Mark as a high school student in English class and he's turned in his gospel to be graded. The teacher returns his paper with a big fat F on it with a note, "See me after class." He goes up to the teacher's desk after class and the teacher gives him a stern look, "What are you thinking?!? You know you can't end a sentence with the word 'because.' And you certainly never end a story with the word because. Because... what? If you're totally stumped for how to end then at least say, 'The End.' You don't say 'because.'"

If I had ended a paper like that when I was in high school I probably would have been sent to detention for it!

I'm sure many a person with bad grammar is delighted to find such bad grammar in the Bible, but for the Easter story I'm happy Mark ended it this way for a lot of reasons.

This time of year there's always TV specials and magazine articles about the Bible and the gospels and the Easter story. They all involve experts talking about what is true and what couldn't be true, and what might or might not be true; and on and on. There's always an unspoken assumption behind everything the experts say and that assumption drives me nuts. Everyone assumes the Bible texts themselves were intended to be read with

solemn dignity and in all seriousness. And that is simply not the case. The Bible is a big and vast collection of writings. When you read it, if you read it at all, if you take everything you read seriously and literally you're missing a lot. Many parts of the Bible aren't supposed to be serious!

Take the book of Jonah - you know the guy who gets swallowed by a big fish and lives in its belly for three days. It's a weird tale and will lead you to all sorts of bizarre conclusions if you take it seriously. But read it as a satire not only is it laugh out loud funny, you learn something deep about yourself in it.

Or take the book of Judges. I think we should read that the way you read super hero stories in a comic book. You'll get more from it that way than if you read it literally.

And perhaps the most obvious of all is the Song of Solomon - the Bible's somewhat graphic sex poem. When I was a kid I was taught that the Song of Solomon was a metaphor for the relationship between Jesus and the church. When I got older I began to say how could it be that!?! One, it was written hundreds of years before Jesus was even born. And two, exactly what kind of relationship is Jesus having with the church?

I remember when one passage of it was read at the daily worship service at seminary. The reader that day was Dr. Francis Taylor Gench, a picture of southern belle elegance if ever there was one. When she was done reading she picked up her bulletin, waved her face with it and said, "Whew, the word of the Lord."

There's lots more I could cite, but for now, let's remember that our gospel writer Mark is among them. If you ever really spend time with Mark's gospel you realize just how playful he is as an author; he's a even a bit of a flirt and a tease with his readers. His greatest tease is the way he very deliberately ends the story with the word 'because.'

Or, does he end the story? You may remember me saying this before. Not only does he end the story with an incomplete sentence, he also begins the gospel with an incomplete sentence.. "αρχη του ευαγγελιον Ιησου Χριστου:" "...beginning of the gospel of Jesus..." You put both incomplete sentences together and you get, "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, they were afraid because the beginning of the gospel of Jesus."

Indeed the closer you get to the end of Mark's gospel the more there are parallels with the beginning. There are word parallels and double parallels, countless linguistic and storytelling tricks that tie the beginning and end together. The story is deliberately crafted to be a circle. There is no end. There is no beginning. And 2000 years later we are to get wrapped up in ongoing story too.

We could spend hours going through Mark's gospel pointing out all the quirky things he has written into it - all the little jokes, puns, and playful twists. But for today, Easter Sunday, let us just remember this. Mark tells the very serious story of Jesus -the dark and difficult story of your salvation- with a wink. He does that because death isn't the end.

If we make the Bible too serious don't we also make God too serious too? Isn't the resurrection a playful wink from God?

How did resurrection happen? I don't know. How does it work? I don't know. How could the laws of life and death be suspended and rearranged? I don't know. To attempt to scientifically or intellectually grasp the resurrection is

impossible, and it ruins the point. The point is God gets the last laugh despite our certainties to the contrary.

And whether you can believe the historic reality that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected after being dead for a few days, or you don't believe it, the point is to live with, trust, and delight in our God's work; and God's ultimate plans for our future.

I can't imagine eternal life being any fun if it's all too serious. God gave us the ability to laugh and be playful. God likes to laugh and be playful too.

While our gospel writer Mark never lets us escape the centrality and essential nature of the crucifixion, resurrection gets the last laugh. God's love through the power of the resurrection is ultimate.

Take a look at the art on the cover of the bulletin. Obviously it is Jesus with his arms outstretched as if he were on the cross. Yet look at all the symbols there. There's the sun and moon and stars, trees in four seasons, communion, baptism and more. It is the power of the resurrection flowing into all creation. We've used that art on funeral bulletins

too. And under it we put the words, "Yet even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia."

Find delight in the Bible. Find delight in your life. Find delight in your God. For the grave is not the end of your story. The grave is a 'because' put in the wrong part of a sentence - because it is only the beginning for you. Amen