

RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD, B
Acts 10:34-45
an Church
I Corinthians 15:1-11
Mark 16:1-8

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We all know what hard times retailers are having these days, but there's one product that's flying off the shelves. Romance novels. Barnes and Noble reports that while overall book sales are down, their sales of romance novels are way up. It seems to be a sign of our times. With so much worry and uncertainty going around, people are eager to escape into a world of dreamy passion and, above all, a predictable plot. As one spokeswoman says, "When you buy a Harlequin romance, you know exactly what you're getting. You're buying a happy ending. And you have a warm feeling knowing everything will turn out right in the end." (seen on the *Today Show*)

It was the same back in Shakespeare's day. When you went to see one of Shakespeare's comedies, you could count on wending your way through a fanciful plot full of mistaken identities, misunderstandings, and interesting complications. But you could also count on everything getting sorted out and wrapped up by the final scene, when a series of happy couples would literally be lined up across the stage. One of Shakespeare's plays is called *All's Well that Ends Well*, which pretty much sums it up.

I admit I'm a sucker for a happy ending. Sometimes when life is stressful I choose what movie to see just based on whether it has a happy ending or not. Who needs bad news when you're already struggling? But the longer I live, the more suspicious I've become of film makers or writers who wrap their plots up too neatly. Those stories don't ring true.

Because real life hardly ever offers us a tidy, satisfying ending. One evening you finally get all the dinner dishes done and you wipe down the kitchen counter tops, all neat and tidy. After breakfast next morning the counters are covered with dirty dishes again. It never ends. When your job is uncertain, you live in a constant state of ambiguity, wondering if things will turn around soon enough for the business to survive. There's no closure in that situation. Or you're dealing with chronic illness, and doctors inform you there will be no end point, no cure, so your task is now to learn to live with your condition. It might be an addiction, something nobody can wrap up neatly for you. Instead, you come to the realization that this is going to be a lifelong journey, and you'll need to walk it one day at a time.

Tidy endings are next to impossible when you're dealing with divorce or deep-seated family conflict. Tidy endings don't happen much in public life either, in military

campaigns or dealing with poverty or balancing a state budget. And there's certainly not much closure when it comes to parenthood. A child graduating does not necessarily mean an empty nest. No matter what age your children are, you still worry over them and celebrate with them and support them. You never stop being a parent.

In real life we almost never experience neat and tidy resolutions. That's why today's Easter story from Mark's gospel hold special meaning for us.

The ending of Mark's Easter story is different from the other gospels. It isn't tidy or satisfying. Instead, it's abrupt and startling. The women go to the tomb to take care of Jesus' dead body, but instead they are scared out of their wits by an angel. He tells them Jesus has been raised and they should go look for him in Galilee. They should go tell others, they should be on their way. And sure enough, the women do bolt right out of there – but not in a spirit of joy or confidence. They're amazed. They're terrified. And they don't tell anybody what they've seen.

This is where Mark's story ends. In fact, it breaks off in mid-sentence. In the Greek manuscript it ends with the word "for" as in... "for they were afraid"! Some people think the author planned it this way. Others think the last page got torn off and the conclusion was lost. Later on, other people added their own conclusions, which appear in many Bibles, but the original text of Mark breaks off here.

What happened to our happy ending? What happened to Jesus meeting Mary in the garden, or talking to the disciples on the road? We want an ending that wraps it all up. But this one leaves us hanging.

And for me, that's the beauty of it. This Easter story leaves things wide open. What will the women do? Everything has changed. They thought their Lord had died. Will they be able to believe that he's risen? Will they go to the place the angel said, and see him with their own eyes? Will they tell others what they see? The ending depends on them.

We find ourselves in exactly the same place those women were, with no tidy outcomes predetermined. Today we are standing in front of a miracle and wondering what to do with it. Jesus is not in the tomb. People say he's risen. Will we believe the good news? Will we take hope from it? Will we trust it to give us life? How will we respond to what God has done?

If we're looking for a happy ending, we have one today, on Easter. It's the happiest ending imaginable. Christ is not in that grave anymore. He is risen! God has bro-

ken the hold of death. God has proven who truly rules in this world! Not human cruelty, but divine love.

But Easter is more than your standard happy ending. It's *better* than that. On Easter day, nothing is tied up neatly except the power of sin and death. Those dark powers God has bound up securely and locked them away forever. But the power of life God has unleashed, God has unbound it and set it free.

On Good Friday, those women standing at the cross saw an ending that was entirely too tidy – it was terrifying in its grim orderliness. But God said “No” to that ending. When God broke the tomb wide open, God broke the future wide open for all of us. And now there is no ending to life with God. And no limit to the Risen Christ being present with us, in our joys and our sorrows, in our struggles and celebrations.

God comes into our closed-off lives and opens up new beginnings.

A man was telling me how his business went bust several years ago. It happened over the course of four days. He said on Wednesday it was a success, and by the weekend it was bankrupt. But then he said, pinching his skin as if to give evidence, “When all is said and done, you’re still alive, you’re still here.” He’s been asked to give speeches on what it’s like to make your way through something like that and find the “new normal” on the other side.

And there is a “new normal” on the other side of every painful event. Beyond the divorce, there will one day be hope again. Beyond the injury, there will be healing to whatever degree is possible. Beyond the job loss, there will be some way to get through each day. And more than all this... because of Easter... beyond death, there will always be new life. Even when your life on earth ends, even when you go to your earthly grave, there will be life eternal with God. Forever. Because of Easter.

This Easter morning, please know this: No matter what endings may threaten you, they cannot define you. There is life beyond every death. Because the God of Easter is still writing your story. God is still walking with you one day at a time. God is still journeying with you through struggles that seem to have no clear resolution. God is raising you up, God is making you part of Christ’s resurrection. God is making you part of the new beginning that has no end.

He is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!