

**United Church of Fayetteville
310 E. Genesee Street
Fayetteville, NY 13066**

**May 17, 2009
Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even**

SEQUELS AND SPIN-OFFS (Mark 16:1-8)

Sequels and Spin-offs. I saw *Star Trek* recently and it occurred to me if you can spin the story any farther into the future, there is always the back story. There is also *Twilight*, *New Moon*, *Eclipse* and *Breaking Dawn*, *Survivor: Tocantins*. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and wands and stuffed owls and school scarves. We may occasionally groan at the commercialism of yet another sequel, or yet another pre-quel, yet another spin-off product, but we buy the tickets and the products. We like to know, not only the end of the story, but the whole story. We like neat packages. We like continuity. We like cliff-hangers only when we know we will have to opportunity to discover if the one hanging falls or scrabbles back to the top of the cliff. When the storyteller does not provide the opportunity, we do it for ourselves. We fill in the blanks. (We practiced that when I asked about our Pentecost traditions during announcements.) We finish the words to jingles. We connect the dots.

Smart marketers have long-made use of what psychologists refer to as the human need for closure to sell their products. As long as the hero is alive or the villain unvanquished, we continue to come back for more. For us, an unsatisfactory ending is no ending at all.

The writer of the gospel of Mark left us one of the most unsatisfactory endings of all time. The passage I read this morning is known as the "original ending" of Mark. Here is a summary of it:

A young man tells the women at the tomb that Jesus has gone to Galilee. The women are further instructed to look for Jesus there and to tell the other disciples to go to Galilee as well. Afraid, the women don't go. And they don't tell anyone else to head for Galilee.

No wonder the lectionary never picks this Easter morning story for Easter itself. What an ending! No explanations. No proof of the resurrection. No faithful obedience on the part of the disciples. In fact, in Greek, the gospel ends in the middle of a sentence. What kind of ending is that for a gospel? Scholar Lamar Williamson puts it this way: "When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb -- and when a gospel ends in the middle of a sentence."

A highly unsatisfying ending, that's for sure! So unsatisfactory, that from earliest times, Christians have been writing new ones. The result is that we have three endings for the gospel of Mark, all included in canon -- two of which were added by later readers or interpreters.

One is called "the shorter ending of Mark." It consists of only two sentences: "And all that had been commanded them 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." It seems to have been produced by someone who noticed Mark's abrupt stop and scribbled a few sentences, skipping a chapter or two of the story. Dry and theological, it doesn't have any of the passion or drama of the gospel. Not much more satisfactory than Mark's

ending, it never was very popular. In fact, until the publication of the New Revised Standard version of the Bible, it appeared as a footnote in most texts.

There is a third ending for this gospel, known logically enough, as "the longer ending of Mark." Eleven verses provided: five signs of Jesus' presence, three resurrection appearances by Jesus to the disciples, one summary of Jesus' teaching, the disciples' commissioning and empowerment, Jesus' ascension, and a note about the success of the disciples' efforts ... and a partridge in a pear tree. (Oops! Wrong season:-) It has been the most popular ending, probably because it tied up every loose end in the gospel. We can't ask for any more closure than that. It may perhaps be even a little too much closure -- a little too neat.

Yet, despite these endings and their ancient sources, and the clearly unsatisfactory nature of the gospel's original ending, most scholars today don't argue that a piece of the manuscript was lost or that the author was interrupted in mid-sentence, never to return to his writing table. They agree that the original ending was, in fact, the gospel writer's intended ending.

What possible reason could Mark have had for stopping mid-sentence? Surely he wasn't hoping for a publishing contract for the sequel, *The Acts according to Mark* to compete with Luke's version, or the sale of T-shirts emblazoned with "Galilee or bust". If not for profit, what motive could Mark have had for taking advantage of our human need for closure?

Mark's ending that is no ending reminds us that Jesus' story did not end with death on a cross, but with resurrection from the tomb. Mark reminds us that we are sustained and called by faith, not convinced by proof. Because the gospel does not end, "and they live happily ever after," Mark cautions us against the comfortable assumption that God's purposes are fulfilled and the Lord's disciples may be at rest. We might, as the familiar hymn has it, "Love to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love," as long as we are not confused into thinking there is no more to do and tell. We humans might write sequels, but only God will write the ending to this story.

Perhaps that was Mark's purpose -- to challenge Jesus' disciples -- to invite us -- to do exactly what we have done through the ages, since the appearance of the gospel. Perhaps it's up to all of us to write a sequel to the story -- not for inclusion in canon, but for the sake of the reign of heaven on earth. The sequels humans have written to the good news of the gospel have ranged from two sentence postscripts hurriedly jotted down to meet a publishing deadline; to death bed repentances; to summaries that have appeared to answer all the questions; to long lives dedicated to the exploration of the nuances of discipleship.

We judge the quality and effectiveness of those sequels the same way we judge commercial efforts -- by continuity with the original story; by how well we capture the nature of the characters; by shared interpretation of events; and by our ability to continue the story without ending it. And the only way we can write a good and effective sequel is to be intimately familiar with the original story. There is no way around reading and re-reading the story, around study and the participation in the beginning of the tale. Jesus knew that and prepared his first disciples and us for the writing of the sequels to the story begun in Mark's gospel.

The clue to that preparation is in the young man's message to the women at the tomb. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Galilee was a familiar place to the disciples. It was in Galilee that Jesus first called them to follow. It was to Galilee that they returned again and again. Galilee was where Jesus taught them, explaining what he was doing and who he was -- where he began the story. It was from Galilee that Jesus sent the disciples into the world, two-by-two, preaching and

teaching and healing in his name. Now, it is in Galilee that the Lord promises they will see him again.

This place and community serves as our Galilee. It is to this place we come week after week, to learn, remember, and hear again the story that was begun so long ago. It is in this place where we reflect on the nature and character of Jesus, and his disciples, so that the sequels and spin-offs that are our life stories, and most importantly right now, in light of our time of transition, of strategic planning and visioning for the future, that our congregational sequel, may be found effective and worth telling. It is in this place, where we learn the back-story of how we got to be where and who we are, through the ages and through our life together. It is in this place, where we learn the contours of the face we long to see, so that we might indeed recognize him when he stands before us. It is here we are commissioned for service to the church and world. It is from this place, we are sent, week after week, to tell our faith's story in the community and in the world, teaching, preaching, healing and bringing hope in Jesus' name.

It is to this community, we return, week after week, consoling one another in disappointment and failure, and rejoicing with one another in success and transformation. It is in this place, we remind one another of the promises of the One who has gone ahead and who has promised we will see him again. If we don't let fear of an unknown future in our world, nation and lives paralyze us; rather if we continue to come and go from this, our Galilee, Mark's opened-ended, God's open-ended gospel suggests we may be successful at writing the sequel to a story yet unfinished.

Consider for a moment one of the many stories about another master and his students. Composer Giacomo Puccini began to write his opera *Turandot*, during his battle with cancer. He worked on the score day and night, despite his friends' advice to rest and save his energy, telling his students, "If I don't finish, I want you to finish it." He died before the last act was complete.

His students gathered all that he had written, studied it in great detail, and then proceeded to write the remainder of the opera. The world premier was performed at La Scala, conducted by Puccini's student, Arturo Toscanini. When Toscanini came to the end of the music written by Puccini, he lowered his baton and turned to the audience, saying, "Thus far the master wrote until he died." There was a long pause; no one moved. Then Toscanini picked up his baton and with tears in his eyes announced, "But his disciples finished his work." The opera closed to thunderous applause.

"Go, tell his disciples that Jesus is going ahead of us to Galilee; there we will see him, just as he promised us." "Thus far the master wrote until he died and was resurrected." When we finish writing our sequels, will our children be prepared to pick up the pen? Will we have kept the hero alive and defeated a few of the villains? When we lay down the pens of our lives, will someone say of us, "his disciples finished his work"?

We can engage these questions without fear or anxiety as we remember, we travel not alone, we work not alone, but by the power of the Spirit that is coming into the world yet again, God works through our working together.

Let us pray: God of our lives: By your Spirit, make this place and this community Galilee for us, so that we might indeed be your faithful disciples. Make us servants of the old, old story of your son's love, so that it is new and fresh in our time. Amen.