

**Creative Living**  
**Preached by**  
**Rev. Linda D. Even**  
**United Church of Fayetteville**  
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**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** *Psalm 133*

Look at how good and pleasing it is  
when families live together as one!  
It is like expensive oil poured over the head,  
running down onto the beard—  
Aaron's beard!—  
which extended over the collar of his robes.  
It is like the dew on Mount Hermon  
streaming down onto the mountains of Zion,  
because it is there that the LORD has commanded the blessing:  
everlasting life.

**Gospel Reading:** *Mark 16:9-19*

*Today's reading is actually two texts which are known as the shorter and longer endings of the gospel of Mark, so called because they were apparently appended to Mark's gospel on at least two different subsequent occasions, most likely at least a century after the original author completed his work. Our reading appears in no lectionary cycle, and is often not mentioned in commentaries. It is nonetheless part of the canon we have received from our ancestors in faith, who found it valuable enough to keep and hand on.*

*This first ending was actually written last – near the 4th century CE*

They promptly reported all of the young man's instructions to those who were with Peter. Afterward, through the work of his disciples, Jesus sent out, from the east to the west, the sacred and undying message of eternal salvation. Amen.

*This longer ending was written circa the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE.*

After Jesus rose up early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and reported to the ones who had been with him, who were mourning and weeping. But even after they heard the news, they didn't believe that Jesus was alive and that Mary had seen him.

After that he appeared in a different form to two of them who were walking along in the countryside. When they returned, they reported it to the others, but they didn't believe

them. Finally he appeared to the eleven while they were eating. Jesus criticized their unbelief and stubbornness because they didn't believe those who saw him after he was raised up. He said to them, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the good news to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever doesn't believe will be condemned. These signs will be associated with those who believe: they will throw out demons in my name. They will speak in new languages. They will pick up snakes with their hands. If they drink anything poisonous, it will not hurt them. They will place their hands on the sick, and they will get well."

*After the Lord Jesus spoke to them, he was lifted up into heaven and sat down on the right side of God. But they went out and proclaimed the message everywhere. The Lord worked with them, confirming the word by the signs associated with them.*

### **Message: Creative Living**

Fan fiction, if you are not familiar with the term, refers to an entire body of literary effort. Fans of particular books or characters (*Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, *Twilight* or any book or even TV show) write additional story lines, perhaps focused on existing characters or even creating new ones and inserting them into the story. The notorious, notoriously poorly written *Fifty Shades of Grey* began its life as fan fiction for the *Twilight* series. Fan fiction is so popular that even fictional characters wrote fan fiction for other fictional characters: *Big Bang Theory's* Amy Farrah Fowler wrote fan fiction for *Little House on the Prairie*.

The volume is enormous. These efforts are neither written by nor endorsed by the original authors. One of the challenges of reading fan fiction is, if not a thorough-going fan of the originating work, one will miss many of the references. Fan fiction is considered by all, even its authors, to be "outside the canon" (interesting term 😊) of the original work. It does however presume that readers will be fans and there for "get" all the references to the canonical work.

There are some evaluative criteria for evaluating the genre. As one may imagine, fan fiction varies in writing quality, varies in its faithfulness to the original work, and varies in creativity. By those criteria, the fan fiction at the end of the gospel of Mark is a "fail" in almost every category. To give whoever wrote it credit, they did recognize that Mark's gospel ended mid-sentence, and deemed it an inadequate ending. As you heard today's shorter and longer endings, they read as though they were assembled by a committee who used plumbing tools instead of those for writing. One can almost hear the joints being forced together.

"They promptly reported all of the young man's instructions to those who were with Peter. Afterward, through the work of his disciples, Jesus sent out, from the east to the west, the sacred and undying message of eternal salvation. Amen." Those words offer a startling contrast to Mark's last words – "They told nothing to no-one because they were afraid was why." Clearly the authors of this ending realized the Easter sun would have risen and set unproclaimed had the women told no one. To their credit, the behavior these secondary authors described was more characteristic than Mark's of the women who had been the silent if faithful disciples of Jesus all along. Then they couldn't resist tying the whole story up with a neat little bow "Amen." Boring!

Nearly 200 years earlier, but still almost a century after Mark finished (or failed to finish) his gospel another author struggled with that same sense of *gospel interruptus*. This author provided more "occurrences" than the first shorter ending; snatching first a page from Jesus' appearance to the woman at the tomb from Luke's gospel; then we get a thread of Luke's road to Emmaus appearance; then John's Easter night upper room, where Jesus' chastised the disciples for their failure to believe; but nonetheless sent his imperfect, un-believing disciples into the world, ala Jesus' charge from Matthew. The promise of demon-tossing, snake handling and tongues (they must have been reading the Apostle Paul) added a little drama; then a two-sentence summary of heavenly and earthly history. Yawn!

Mark's gospel story was so important that later authors couldn't bear to leave it unfinished; couldn't bear to have the story end at an empty tomb, with frightened disciples who told no one even that; couldn't bear the gaping hole in the story of how anyone knew about Easter, if the silence of the earliest version had prevailed; couldn't bear not to include the resurrection appearance stories so popular in the other gospels.

So, fans of Jesus, fans of the gospel, and faithful members of the early church, they fixed the story, added to it, borrowing heavily from other gospels' post-Easter reports. But as fan fiction, while it referred to other canonical sources, even back to Mark itself, it was defective in two major ways: 1) It was boring! It had none of the personal and odd details that made the original gospel, or all the other encounters to which it referred, interesting, relatable, worthy of fire-side communal telling, mysterious or awesome or, if truth be told, worth saving by the church. 2) It filled in all the holes by omitting them entirely—something which none of the other gospels did, even if they didn't end in mid-sentence. Throughout, the stories have quirky details, intriguing gaps in logic, or story-telling, or reports of action or conversation—all the things that make a story true and real, because they don't tie up every loose thread. These endings are proof that there is something worse than stories with gaps and logical omissions—a story without any of those things.

The problem is that the shorter and longer endings have great distance from the original gospel. The authors' passions were invested in the mechanics of finishing an apparently unfinished story by relying totally on canonical sources and adding none of their personal, faithful experience—which they clearly had—otherwise why would they have bothered?

Given that everyone agrees that these twelve verses weren't part of the original, does any of that really matter? As an example to the faithful down to our own age, it does. None of us would argue that the story of Easter, the story of Christian faith and life, the work of Christ in the world ended on Easter morning. If it had, we wouldn't be here; we wouldn't be worshipping; looking to the future and committed to mission and ministry. It falls to us then, in our time and place to keep the story alive and powerful.

The task before us, however, is not creative writing, but creative living. Do our faithful lives include the engaging details of a quirky humanity and a God whose love and power, even now stretches our imagination? Are our faith lives boring? Do we live as though we have never encountered the living Christ? Do we act as though faith's experience is all poached from the canon with no personal experience and no personal commitment? Are our faith lives mechanical without passion or imagination?

If we are even slightly concerned that we are drifting; that we need to pump up our game; then let's each accept a simple challenge from the shorter and longer endings of

Mark. This week, let's reflect on our lives of mission and ministry to be sure we are living lives of fan-fact-ion, not fan fiction. Let us name the things true to us about our faithful living—something with spiritual logic that does not need to be entirely contained by earthly logic or limits. What are the quirky human gap-ridden experiences that confirm for us that Christ is alive in the world today and compel us to act?

Think about the sacrifices and offerings we make or could make, not because of any benefit that accrues to us, but because we have encountered the living Christ and have been called to follow him into the world. Evaluate our options for service not against time management models, but according to the extraordinary potential of Christ in each of us and all of us together.

As the world gradually opens up after a pandemic, let us remember that Mark didn't write an ending to the story of Christ, because it isn't supposed to end. It wasn't supposed to end back then, and it isn't supposed to end with us. As an Eastertide people, let us live creatively with joy, hope and commitment leaning with excitement into the possibilities of ministry for all the days ahead.

### **Prayer for Others and Ourselves**

God of all creation: In this season of growing light and warmth, we begin to turn our minds to the out of doors, to caring for lawns, to preparing garden beds, and planting flowers. In this season of Eastertide, we remember that through all of Lent we prepared the soil of our souls for new growth. Let us continue to nurture the new life you have planted in us, and reap the rewards for the hard work you and we have already done.

In silence, we, your people, remember all the blessings in our lives ...

Help us to work with our parents and children and friends and spouses in continuing to develop those relationships which give us so much joy and strength. In our workplaces, community, schools and church, let us create, to celebrate and participate in ever-expanding occasions for affirmation, the learning of new skills, the service of those less well-off and the development of relationships, so that all your children might become more fully the ones you have created us to be.

In silence, we, your people, remember all those people who are in need of comfort, care and healing ...

Grant us an awareness of your grace and a sense of ourselves as vessels of it, so that we are moved to serve the hungry and the homeless, those in need of vaccines and health care, led to write sympathy cards and offer compassion in its many forms. Widen our vision in ways that informs our minds, guides our voting, and increases our connection and responsibility to all your people – those alive now and in generations to come.

We pray in the name of the one who lived and died for each one of us and for the whole world. It is his prayer we raise in one voice...

## **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come,  
thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day, our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,

for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.