

April 4 Multiple Endings

My oldest two, in their early years, were fussing and crying and running to daddy about some travesty of justice they had just suffered. I put them on the couch side by side and took a seat right in front of them. Back then, I was an experienced 35 year old parent who believed every conflict could be solved with the wisdom of Solomon. My goal was the kind of resolution we saw between Wally and Beaver Cleaver. You know, “gosh beav, I’m sorry.”

*OK, who started the hitting, I asked as if someone would fess up? And in almost choreographed style, I heard **he did** and **she did** at the same time. *Let’s back up a little. Were you both playing in the same room with the same toys? Yes. What happened? He hit me. No I didn’t. She hit me.**

We’re missing something here. What made you angry at the other? She hit me. No he hit me. After several minutes, I finally discovered that they became locked in a tug of war over a toy which they each reached for before the other. Each was hitting the other’s hands so they would let go.

Solomonic wisdom eluded me that day and I was never able to discern who started what. So I sent them to their rooms, took the toy outside and cut it in half.

Thankfully, Solomon didn’t have to do that. He found a way to keep the baby whole.

We have the same reconciliation at work in Matthew Mark Luke and John. Even though they are 4 different gospel accounts of the life death and resurrection of Jesus, they proclaim a unified message of good news. While they view Jesus from different angles, there are common threads throughout. Chief among these revelations is the Easter story. The details differ but the basic story line is the same.

When we come together on Easter Sunday, we do so to celebrate victory over death and everlasting life. We also contemplate the meaning of the resurrection. What did it mean for those first disciples; how did it change them? What difference does Jesus’ resurrection make for us today? We get some perspective on this by looking at the **four ways these gospel writers conclude** their records. In those endings, we get a glimpse of what the resurrection meant.

Matthew wrote our most familiar conclusion. We know it as the Great Commission. The resurrected Jesus commands his disciples to **make disciples** all over the world. In this we see that the resurrection has a universal impact.

Luke is the only gospel that records Jesus’ return to God the Father; what we call the **ascension**. Luke, the only Gentile gospel writer, also ends with an affirmation that Jesus fulfilled the Jewish law and prophets. In this he affirms that Jesus did not start a new religion but completed what God had already been doing in covenant with Israel. Jesus was the pinnacle of God’s salvation history.

Matthew ends with a commission; Luke with the affirmation that Jesus has completed our salvation.

John’s gospel seems to have **two endings**. Have you ever noticed that? It should not surprise us; preachers often give conclusions that aren’t conclusions at all. My favorite Lou Lolley line is what she has said to Dr. Lolley through the years. She says, you passed up 4 or 5 good places to end that sermon before you stopped.

Chapter 20 in John seems like a conclusion. Listen to it. After the resurrection and appearances of Jesus, he says, *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.* ³¹*But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

The ending in chapter 21 is the one we read earlier, which includes the story of Simon Peter and Jesus on the seashore with Jesus asking, *Simon, do you love me?* Jesus gives Simon two commands before he leaves: **feed my sheep** and **follow me**; a different emphasis than Matthew's Great Commission.

And then there is **Mark's gospel** where we find the strangest ending of all. Please turn to **Mark 16**. Your Bibles should indicate that only **verses 1-8** are found in our oldest manuscripts, meaning that those latter verses were almost certainly later additions. Someone added a concluding phrase to v. 8 while another added several verses beyond 8.

According to our oldest manuscripts, this is how Mark's gospel ends: A white-robed man in Jesus tomb said to the women who had come to anoint Jesus, ***Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But 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.'*** *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.*

That's it: women fleeing the tomb in fear saying nothing to anyone; no message to the disciples mentioned; no appearances by Jesus; no commission; no ascension. What's up with that?

There are several theories afloat about this abrupt ending that doesn't seem like an ending at all. Some say Mark died before he could finish the work. Others say the original ending was lost. Some even guess that chapter 21 of John's gospel is the lost ending of Mark.

But what God preserved for us is a gospel that leaves readers hanging.

In the movie **Game Plan**, the hero is watching the big basketball game with his buddies. They're all into it because it's coming down to the wire. Their team has the ball and time to set up one last shot to win. The player shoots from behind the arch and they're all leaning forward with hearts pounding, waiting for victory or defeat, while the young daughter takes the remote and changes the channel. I'll skip the mayhem that followed, but this seems to be the way Mark's gospel ends; ball in mid-air. Actually, it might be more accurate to say that Mark's gospel just stops.

This leaves me with many questions, one being What if this abrupt ending was Mark's intension? What if he ended his account in a way that would draw others into the story, wanting to know what happened next?

Maybe Mark was ahead of his time. Not every television series uses this device but many drama's do. At the conclusion of each episode, the audience is left hanging. They want to see what happens next but they have to wait until the next week. The goal isn't resolution; it's hooking the audience so they want more. The series 24 does this well.

Back in the day, this worked very well on me as a fan of *Lost in Space*. Each episode would end with that robot saying "warning Will Robinson, warning." And then the picture would freeze and text was added to the bottom of the screen that said.... "to be continued." It sure worked on me. I'd always be sure my homework was finished when that show came around.

What if Mark wanted to leave those who heard about the resurrection on the edge of their seats, eagerly asking, "well, what happened?"

Some have called Mark's conclusion *The Unfinished Easter*. But this may have been Mark's way of saying that the followers of Jesus needed to write the rest of the story. The

resurrection set a new kingdom in motion; it buried our sinful nature and raised us up to walk in new life. It planted gospel seeds in the ground that would bear fruit.

Perhaps Mark believed this to be his mission; to share the gospel in a way that called people to ask, seek and knock. What would our lives be like if we lived on the edge of our seats with eager expectation about what God was going to do next?

Have you noticed how many strange religious stories come out of Texas? CNN reported yesterday on a church in Corpus Christi Texas that is trying something different to get people to church this Easter. They are giving away 2 million dollars worth of merchandise to those who attend. You simply register when you arrive and you may win a bicycle, gift certificates or a new BMW. I don't suppose our finance committee is going to do something like this, but they are creating expectation; they will have people in the seats and on the edge of their seats.

The first Wednesday night dinner I attended here at FBC I told the story of another Texas pastor, Browning Ware. He was serving a county seat town in central Texas as a young pastor. One Sunday, when it came time for the sermon, Browning went to the pulpit and said, *I don't have anything to say this morning.* And then he sat down and the service was concluded...really early.

No one had ever heard of such a thing before. What did it mean that a pastor had nothing to say on Sunday morning? What was going on? Well this was the talk of the town over lunch and beyond. What would the pastor do at the Sunday evening service? Because only the Baptists had evening services in that town, the church was filled with Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians and even some backsliders.

When Dr. Ware came to the pulpit that evening, his first words were, *I want to speak to you tonight about the power of expectation; a power that overcomes apathy and moves us out of our ruts.* And could see this power plain as day.

The power of expectation of faith happened because of Easter. No one had ever heard of such a thing as someone rising from the dead after three days. What did it mean; what was going on? Just look at what powerful expectation did for those disciples who were paralyzed by fear after Jesus was crucified. When they believed Jesus was alive, they came alive. They went from hiding under their seats to sitting on the edge of their seats. They went from thinking their lives were over to eagerly anticipating what God would do next. And this was not the result of some gimmick, but because of what God did in raising Jesus from the dead.

Does our faith exhibit the power of expectation? What would move us from fear to expectant belief? From fear about the economy to generosity that expects God to bless.

What would our congregation be like if we responded to the words of William Cary who proclaimed do great things for God and expect great things from God?

What would your life be like if you stopped waiting for God and started finishing Mark's gospel knowing that the power that raised Jesus from the dead was at work in you.

If we expect God to be silent and distant, that will define the nature of our faith. If we expect God to speak and act in our lives, we will truly become a resurrection people.