

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: April 4, 2021 Year B Easter Sunday

Text: Mark 16:1-8

Title: How Does this Story End?

Focus: Mark's Easter story ends so oddly, so badly, that a later editor wants to "fix it." But who can say that the odd or unpredictable ending isn't intentional? It draws us in, urging us to become a part of the story and write its "ending" through our own daily lives.

Gospel Reading: Mark 16:1-8

¹When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [Jesus' body]. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, "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. ⁷But 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." ⁸So 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.

Compelling Stories in Basketball's "March Madness"

On Thursday of this past week, I heard two men talking about the Opening Day of Major League Baseball season. They earnestly said that Opening Day ought to be a national holiday, like the day after the Super Bowl ought to be.

At our house, we're focused on "March Madness," the men's and women's NCAA college basketball tournaments. Tonight in San Antonio is the women's championship game. Arizona will play Stanford for the title. Tomorrow night the Gonzaga Bulldogs will play the Baylor Bears for the men's title.

What is it that draws us in?

- **Athleticism:** the talent and skill of these athletes.
- **Competition:** There is pleasure in watching athletes compete, knowing that they have set a goal as a team or as a program and have worked hard to improve and achieve at the highest level. You can see teammates pulling for each other, sticking with each other no matter what—and that is inspiring.
- There is **tension or drama or unpredictability**—That's why they call it "March Madness." Some teams have been dominant over the course of the year, teams have improved over the course of the season, and some teams have had COVID-related setbacks. The tournament is exciting because **anything can happen in one game**. Over the course of the tournament, there are always

upsets. There are buzzer beater shots and single plays that can change everything. Last night, UCLA lost to heavily favored Gonzaga. But it took overtime and a last second buzzer beater to win. In UCLA's previous game, the final seconds went their way, with Michigan missing a shot that would have won the game.

- When this tournament brings together all these teams and it's win or go home, you see the joy when they win. . .
 - **Indiana women win:** *Display photo.*
Indiana players celebrate after the **Sweet 16 win over NC State** on Saturday, March 27. Justin Tafoya, Getty Images. Indiana made it to the Elite 8 for the first time in program history by beating #1 seeded NC State 73-70.
 - **UCLA wins:** *Display photo*
UCLA's Johnny Juzang, Tyger Campbell, and Jaylen Clark celebrate after the Bruins defeated Michigan 51-49 to make the Final Four. Tim Nwachukwu, Getty Images.

And, of course, the margins are so small—the difference between winning and losing can be so minor. Both teams have of course worked hard and yet one has to win and one has to lose.

- **UCLA win, Michigan loss:** *Display photo*
Michigan's Franz Wagner reacts in front of UCLA's Jules Bernard after missing a shot at the end of the game on Tuesday. Darron Cummings, AP.
 - This is the end of UCLA's game against Michigan. In the previous picture, we saw UCLA players celebrating. In this picture, had the Michigan player's 3-point shot gone in at the buzzer, Michigan would have won, and UCLA lost.
 - As many games come to a close, you see players on the losing team console each other.
 - Last night, UCLA had the ball and a chance to win at the end of the game. It went to overtime. As the overtime period came to a close, UCLA tied up the game with just 3 seconds left. Then Gonzaga hit a 30-foot buzzer beater to win. Heartbreaking for UCLA.

While we love basketball and March Madness for lots of reasons, maybe most of all it's the compelling stories. . .

Max Abmus, ORU guard *Display photo*

- This is Max Abmus ("Ace-mas"), a sophomore who plays for Oral Roberts University, a tiny school of just over 4000 students.
- This year he has been led the country in scoring, averaging over 24 points/game.
- He excelled at basketball growing up: There was the time when he was a 13-years-old and scored 38 points in a game against 16 and 17-year-olds. When he was 14 in his ninth-grade summer, he scored 47 points against a team from

Chicago that featured multiple future high-level college players. His team lost by two points, but his opponents were so amazed by his play that they came over and asked him for his autograph.

You would think a player like that with such success would be highly recruited by a number of colleges. It didn't turn out that way: Besides Oral Roberts, the only programs to show interest were the service academies: Army, Navy and Air Force.

His AAU coach explained: "None of the [big] Power 5 conferences recruited him." They saw he could score in high school, but college coaches thought he was too small, too slight. On the team roster, he is listed at 6' 1" and a slender 165 pounds. Team rosters usually overstate those measurements; another profile measures him at 5' 11" and 160 pounds.

If part of the reason to love basketball and "March Madness" is the stories, then the story of Max Abmus fits a number of good storylines:

- He's the **underdog**. You want to root for him because he seems to be a good guy who has worked hard.
- He's the **little guy who was overlooked**. People didn't expect much from him and now he's the top scorer in the whole country.
- And his school typifies the "**Cinderella story**." Abmus has led ORU, this tiny 4000+ student private school to an upset of powerhouse Ohio State, seeded #2, in their first tournament game. They then beat #7 seeded Florida in their second-round game.
 - They played Arkansas in their third game and lost at the buzzer by 2 when Max's 3-point attempt rimmed out.

Alabama Coach Nate Oats and his wife Crystal and their daughters

(Display photo--A picture from his own Twitter account)

Coaches and athletes often talk about "**overcoming adversity**" to describe how a team learns to stick together and be determined during difficult times.

This is Alabama men's coach Nate Oats and his wife Crystal and their 3 daughters. When he was coaching at Buffalo in 2015, his wife Crystal was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lymphoma ("double-hit lymphoma") and would be undergoing chemotherapy.¹ Her outlook was bleak, and he struggled with what to do about coaching basketball and the best way to support his wife during her treatment. Nate said he was prepared to take a year away from coaching, but she wanted him to continue coaching the team. She said she'd miss the team as well and that having those games to look forward to was a diversion from battling cancer. The good news is that Crystal has now been cancer free for 5 years.

¹ See this story. Also has a link to a video.

<https://sportspectrum.com/sport/basketball/2021/01/26/alabama-coach-nate-oats-top-10-team-cancer-surviving-wife/>

Coaches and athletes talk a lot about “**overcoming adversity**.” There’s no better story about overcoming adversity and showing determination and courage than Crystal Oats battling cancer. That is truly inspiring; It’s a great story.

You might not love basketball and you might not love sports, but don’t we all love a good story, whether it’s an underdog story or a Cinderella story or an overcoming adversity story?

What Kind of Story is Here in Mark’s Gospel?

What about this story in Mark’s gospel? What kind of story is it? It doesn’t fit any classic storylines.

If it was intended to be the **Conquering Hero** story, then that story ended at the cross, if not before. In the Conquering Hero storyline, the cross would be defeat and losing. Remember earlier in Mark’s gospel, Peter was expecting something like this Conquering Hero story and rebuked Jesus when Jesus began to speak about the suffering and rejection and death that he would endure. (Mark 8:31-32).

If it’s an **Underdog Story**—of the overlooked, hard-working one who overcomes expectations, then that story is not yet realized here in Mark’s telling.

If the underdog story is stretched out into a **Resurrection Story**, even that doesn’t really fit because where is Jesus? As told in Mark’s Gospel, the risen Jesus doesn’t appear.

When Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome approach the tomb, they are wondering who will help them roll away the stone. Instead, they find the stone rolled away and encounter this “young man,” an angelic figure dressed in a white robe, who spoke plainly to them:

- “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. . .” (v. 6).

What’s next? He tells them. . .

⁷But 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.” (vv. 6-7).

There are two strong commands or imperatives here: “**Go, tell**” and yet, as Mark tells it here, they don’t go and tell anyone:

⁸So 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. As Mark tells it, that’s the end of the story. **What kind of story is that? What kind of ending is that?** It doesn’t seem to us to be a good story. It is not a happy ending.

Even Early Followers of Jesus Thought this was a Bad Ending

We can’t figure out what kind of story Mark is trying to tell. It doesn’t fit any good story line. The ending is at best odd or confusing. It makes no sense. If you have this

impression—of the story ending badly, then you’re not alone. It ends so oddly, so badly, that the early Church wasn’t comfortable with it either and a later editor wanted to “fix it.”

Mark was the earliest of the four gospel accounts to be written down, but the ending of Mark’s gospel at verse 8 as we read it today was unsettling for the early Christian Church, too. Probably around the early second century, followers of Jesus added to the ending of Mark by inserting stories that are referred to in the other gospel traditions, but aren’t in the earliest known manuscripts of Mark. The added section is vv. 9-20, which you would see in your Bible, are bracketed off and probably have a note or sidebar from the editors about what that means. Those verses differ in style and theme from the rest of Mark, which is another indication that verses 9-20 are a later addition.

Mark had a reason. . .What was it?

As I said, if we’re confused about this ending, or maybe we conclude that Mark just doesn’t know how to tell a good story or a good ending, we’re in good company.

But there’s something else to consider: Maybe Mark didn’t goof up and maybe this still odd ending isn’t a mistake that needs to be fixed. Maybe what Mark wrote and what Mark chose to leave out was all on purpose. Maybe he’s not bad at endings, but more clever than we could have imagined. Maybe this odd ending is really an intentionally unfinished story because an unfinished story will not let us go. It works powerfully upon us, drawing us in to wonder what happened next, and perhaps even to be a part of what unfolds — to finish the story.

The indicator of this possibility is the last part of what the young man/messenger said to them: “[Jesus] is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (v. 7).²

Where will we find Jesus? Where or what is Galilee? If you want to experience the risen Jesus, you have to go back to Galilee where he promises to meet us. Galilee is the everyday world of Jesus’ disciples, the place where they lived and worked, and the place where the story began. Going back to Galilee means going back to the margins where Jesus ministered and encountering him again feeding the hungry, driving out the demons that torment people, preaching words of hope to the broken-hearted, healing those in distress, and breaking down the barrier walls that separate people.

Where will we encounter the risen Jesus in our own everyday world?

- Simple, and decidedly unglamorous, but gracious acts of caregiving for the most vulnerable.

² In Mark 14:28 Jesus tells them ²⁸“But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.”

- Seeking dignity and fairness and justice for all God's people, rather than asserting one's own power and demanding one's own way.
 - In state legislatures around the country, bills are being debated and some are being signed into law that would create enough barriers or hardship to prevent people from exercising their right to vote. Given our history in America, it's hard not to see such actions as being racially motivated.
 - In some Church circles, leaders are talking about the righteous act of defiance represented by offering a cup of cold water in Jesus' name to those waiting to vote.
- How might you care for the vulnerable?

How Does this Story End?

How does this story end? The story doesn't end at verse 8. The story doesn't end with some monk in the 2nd century writing an ending that he thought was better with what is now verses 9-20.

Mark writes this open-ended gospel to draw us in. Remember those two strong, imperative verbs? **“Go and tell.”** The message of the young man at the empty tomb is for us. It is still up to followers of Jesus to demonstrate the strange, startling, alarming, amazing, awe-inspiring news: He has been raised. He is not here. We shall encounter him when we are engaged in the everyday ministries of wholeness and healing and care for the most vulnerable that are represented by meeting Jesus in Galilee.

May we pick up where these women left off and continue to write the story ourselves that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised, and is ready to meet us, just as he promised.