

**A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at  
Clarence Presbyterian Church on March 31, 2024.**

**A NEW STORY**

*<Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 114:1-8; Mark 16:1-8>*

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Risen One, O source of life and light, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

Charles Dickens is known to us today as one of the most prolific authors of the 19th century, whose writing reflected the honest realities of daily life among all the classes in the Victorian age. One of our culture's most famous opening lines comes to us from Dickens in, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." During his lifetime, he wrote over a dozen major works and a number of short stories. But there was one story - a serial - which, at the time of his death, had only six complete installments out of an intended twelve. *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* remains, to this day, a work with an unknown ending, and an abrupt stop to the story.

We might feel as if a similar remark could be made of Mark's gospel, and what was - or perhaps wasn't - recounted in this first resurrection story.

In recent weeks we've been commenting on how John's gospel, written so long after Jesus' life and ministry, is unique in its own ways. Today we see with almost staggering reality one of the ways Mark's gospel is unique from the others. Already known for its brevity and straightforwardness, we can now add a new dynamic to Mark: no direct appearance of the resurrected Jesus in the recounting of the events of that first Easter morning. All the other gospels include an encounter between the risen Lord and one or more disciples; Mark offers us only a message offered from a mysterious, white-clad man, presumably an angel: "Do not be alarmed...he has been raised; he is not here."

We might be tempted to find this ending a tad...unsatisfactory, or even unfulfilling. As we gather in the beauty of this day and the joy of this fellowship, marking one of the holiest days of our year and the defining aspect of our faith, we might find ourselves wanting...more. We want the miraculous appearance. We want the divine encounter. We want the presence of Jesus, resurrected and present among us. Instead, we are left, almost merely, with an empty tomb and a few discarded grave robes.

And with all the questions that we might consider in response to this narrative dynamic, one that I would ask of us this morning, which I would ask of myself as well, is, "What story are we living in?"

Because there are two stories, this morning, which are colliding into each other with all the earth-shattering power of tectonic plates, and we, gathered in worship here and in spirit with believers around the world, we are in the nexus of the two of them.

On the one side, we have the story of Good Friday. This is a story with which we are intimately familiar. It is the story that is being written and proclaimed almost every day through our news and through our earthly living. It is the story of grief and sorrow, of hopes unrealized and dreams scattered. It is the story of the empires of the world prevailing over the kingdom of life for which we yearn. It is the story of death, and we are beyond familiar with it.

We have a tendency, inculcated within us, to believe one story over any other. Regardless of our hopes, regardless of our desires, regardless even of what we may have been taught and learned in church...we have a tendency to believe one story, so immersed in it as we are: the story of Good Friday. And we become, in life, the story we believe.

In many ways, without the appearances and encounters of the disciples with the risen Lord, Mark's gospel gives the impression of leaving us uncomfortably close to the Good Friday story, to the unrealized hopes, to the discomfort of the unknown. And in such a perspective, it sets the view for so many of our other stories in life.

When I was younger, I remember my mother reading to me C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. Each night at bedtime, she would read one chapter and I would let my mind be filled with the images the words encouraged and described. Each night, the characters came more and more to life in my mind's eye, becoming more real. And then we reached the point wherein Aslan, the great lion, the King-Beyond-The-Sea, having offered his life in exchange for Edmund's, was killed by the White Witch. The chapter ended, and I was left with the reality, the scene of an awful loss.

What story are we living in?

It seemed to take forever to get to bedtime the next night, and to hear how the story continued. And in all that time, as I went through my day, the only thing I remember now is that I felt like I was living in the Good Friday story. I didn't have such words to describe at the time, but that's what it was.

The original ending of Mark's gospel, with its abrupt ending and lack of an appearance of the resurrected Jesus, seems to keep us in the unknown and dismay of the Good Friday story. Unless, of course, we are able to go back to the message offered by the angel and hear it, truly hear it, in its fullness. Setting aside our fears and anxieties.

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here...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."

Throughout the gospel of Mark Jesus is teaching the disciples, proclaiming to them and reminding them what is to happen: he will be crucified, he will be buried, and on the third day he will rise again. Furthermore, in Mark's gospel, Jesus tells the disciples more than once that he will meet them again, after these events, in Galilee, the place where they all began together.

And this morning, as we celebrate and proclaim the fullness of Easter and the resurrection, we are invited and called into this other story, this truer story than the one which has been peddled to us so often and so ubiquitously.

It is the story, not of death, but of abundant life in the face of death. It is the story, not of hopelessness and despair, but of hope realized and fulfilled. It is the story of a kingdom of life, a covenant of living, which is characterized by the richest and most fulfilling of sustenance.

As Isaiah puts it, “a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow and well-aged wines strained clear.” Furthermore, it is a story in which all that threatens to oppress and hold us down will be thrown off. “The shroud that is cast over all peoples, the covering that is spread over all the nations will be destroyed; the Lord of Hosts will swallow up death forever. And God will then wipe away the tears of sorrow and suffering, of grief and mourning and pain and anger from all eyes.” It will be the kingdom of life, made possible by the resurrection of Jesus, overcoming death with life, and life abundant at that.

And this story, which broke into the world so long ago, is continuing to break into the world even now. It is the story which, after my day of living with Aslan’s death, supplanted that narrative with one of redemption and promise. It is the story of faith and strength in the face of fear and uncertainty. It is the story which invites and exhorts us into living, into proclaiming, into good news realized for all who are in need, all who yearn, all who hunger and hurt. And the realization of this story comes before we even glimpse the presence of our resurrected Lord.

Rev. Katie Haynes Murphy, of Grove Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, NC, puts it this way: “And so, in the empty tomb, we see there is another story. There is another eternal, indestructible Kingdom where all are welcomed and none are coerced; where those hungry for food and those hungry for justice are filled; where the poor and the poor in spirit are blessed; where those who weep are comforted; where the meek inherit the whole earth; and where the children of God are peacemakers - reconciling and blessing, transforming their enemies, for love’s sake. In that empty tomb, in those clothes laid aside, [we see] that there is a life which swallows up death.”

This is our new story, again and again. The abrupt ending of Mark’s gospel is, in all likelihood, an exhortation to not just passively receive the story but to continue the story. To come to such an abrupt end draws us back into the story again, returning to its beginning and living into it more deeply. It is an invitation away from fear and into faith, actively lived-out, day in and day out. It is the story which, in truth, has no ending, but only renewed beginnings. It is not incomplete, but rather completes itself by restarting anew each time.

The world today is faced with two stories. Which one are you going to live into? Amen.