

The End of the Beginning
A Sermon on Mark 16:1-8 by the Rev. Philip Major
March 31, 2024 ~ St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY

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. This is the final verse in the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of Mark was the first of the Gospels to be put into written form, about 35 years after the first Easter. The most ancient copies of the Gospel of Mark end with this sentence: *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.*

As you might expect, the people who thought they were important, the bishops and priests of the church, were not really comfortable with the ending of the Gospel of Mark. I can only guess that they liked the endings in Matthew, John, and Luke much better. So it seems that, one or two hundred years after the first Easter, they began attaching some extra verses to the Gospel of Mark. They added a variety of short and long endings that resolved some of the tension, additional verses that answered some of the questions.

But the Gospel of Mark comes to a close with this passage, which is ripe with tension and unanswered questions: *The young man 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. 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.* There are many unanswered questions, but Mark is leading us to a conclusion; the story is not over. The story of God's work in the world has just begun.

Mark has been leading us to this conclusion ever since the first verse of the Gospel. Mark chapter one, verse one, announces: *The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.* Let's take this at face value. The Gospel of Mark tells the story of the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. So today we have heard the end of the beginning of the story. The story of God's work among us and through us has just begun. The work of resurrection has just begun.

This is a beautiful message, and a powerful message, but it is not always an easy message for us to understand and accept. You and I are much more comfortable with more conclusive statements. We are much more comfortable when everything is settled and known and understood. Yet, everything is not settled, and known, and understood.

When we learn that the story is not over, we often protest or object. We insist we know the end of the story. We don't know the end of the story.

Seven years ago, the massive bell in the belltower of St. Paul's stopped ringing. We aren't exactly sure what happened, but we were pretty sure that the story of St. Paul's massive bell, ringing five or seven or twelve times on the hour was over. We were pretty sure we would never hear St. Paul's bell sounding loudly through our downtown neighborhood, ever again. Some of our members did a bit of an investigation and discovered it would cost \$10,000 to repair the church bell, so that it would ring again. After that, the issue was pretty well settled. We put this question on the back burner, and nobody had thought much about it for the past six years. As far as we were concerned, the story of St. Paul's church bell was finished.

We were sure the story was finished, until ten weeks ago. On January 21st a music group was holding a concert at St. Paul's. It was Sunday afternoon, and I was resting at home. At 4 p.m. I received a phone call from Derrick Lane, our faithful security man. He was just a little bit frantic. He told me the church bell was ringing, and had been ringing, continuously. I remember saying to Derrick, "That's not possible. It must be someone else's bell. Our church bell stopped ringing seven years ago."

At about the same time Jim Potts received a phone call from Betsy, who lives just a few blocks from St. Paul's. She told the same story. "St. Paul's bell has been ringing for quite a while. It's very loud, and people are starting to complain." Jim had a similar response. Something on the order of, "That's not possible. Our church bell stopped ringing seven years ago."

We were quite sure that the story of our church bell was settled. We were wrong. We often do not know the end of the story, even with simple, mechanical things, like a church bell.

Even more than with simple, mechanical things we have made, we do not know the end of the story of God's work through us and among us. The Gospel of Mark tells us that the story of God's work among us and through us has just begun. The work of resurrection has just begun.

As I grow older and more mature, one of the things I am gradually learning is that it is a very good idea for me to spend plenty of time listening to people who are older and more mature than me. One of the things I have learned from older, more mature friends is that we do not know the end of the story.

A few weeks ago I was talking with one of our oldest members. His name is David, and he has been attending St. Paul's for about 70 years. David has moved a bit further away from Syracuse, so he doesn't get to attend worship in person very often. But, just as many of you are joining us via the LiveStream broadcast this morning, David often joins us in worship through the LiveStream. David observed that especially when he watches the LiveStream, he sees many people he has never met before. He told me he was surprised.

When we talked, David expressed his surprise and gladness that somewhere around 25 or 30 new people have started worshipping at St. Paul's in the past three years. Then David told me something I had never heard before. David said he never expected anything like this to ever happen at St. Paul's. He was pretty sure that the membership of St. Paul's would get smaller each year, as had been happening since about 1970. Nine years ago, back in 2015 David, agreed to serve on the first task force which eventually led, eight years later to the beginning of construction for the *Open Doors* project.

Beginning in 2015 David put a tremendous amount of time, energy, and resources into ensuring the success of *Open Doors*. David told me that, when they started the work, he thought that right about now, in 2024, St. Paul's might have declined to the point where we would have a very small congregation and just one or two staff members, with perhaps just a half time priest. With this in mind, David thought it would be extremely important to make sure our building was ready to be a home for many other organizations, such as *The Syracuse Orchestra*, or *Syracuse Friends of Chamber Music*, or *A Tiny Home for Good*. David thought the day was coming very soon when St. Paul's building would be used mostly by other groups, and little used by a congregation that was shrinking steadily, year by year. When we talked a few weeks ago, David said, with a smile on his face, something to the effect of, "I'm glad to say I was wrong about that."

We often do not know the end of the story, even with simple, mechanical things, like a church bell. One thing we can be sure of is that we do not know the end of the story of God's work through us and among us. The story of God's work among us and through us has just begun.

God is not finished with us, and God is not finished with you. You may have this impression that your best, most productive years are behind you. You may feel overwhelmed with fears or anxiety, like the women, fleeing in terror from the empty tomb. But the story has not ended for you, just as it was not ending for Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome. Like them, you and I are at the end of the beginning. God is not finished bringing more love into the world around us. God is not finished bringing more love into the world through you, through your words and through your actions. The work of resurrection has just begun.