

“At Home with Christ”

Ambiguity! Now there's a word that most people hate to here. Ambiguity! Doubtfulness or uncertainty of meaning! We want all our life experiences to be ... tidy ... even more so today than with past generations. In fact, there is a counter word to “ambiguity” that is somewhat overused today ... closure! Every life event must have “closure” so that we can “get on with our life.” Ambiguous! Open to various interpretations; having a double meaning; difficult to comprehend; lacking clearness! We don't like ambiguous statements ... situations ... or stories. Thus upon leaving the theatre, how often have we said, “I liked the movie but I hated the ending? I don't think the movie had an ending! It just left me hanging.” Give us a story that has a beginning, middle, and then tie it all together with an understandable ending! Ambiguous ---out! Neatness ---in! None of this “ongoing process” stuff! Make a clear cut decisions and move on!

Relationships are often “ambiguous;” that's why they're frustrating ... more so when trying to end one ... or get closure, but nooooo ... “ambiguity” always raises its ugly head! We like to believe there is a reason for everything ... a cause and effect. “What were you thinking?” “I don't know!” “What do you mean you don't know?” “I just don't know!” “We'll you must have had a reason?” “No! No reason!” “No reason!!” Then the screaming begins. If we would accept the fact that most of life is ambiguous, simply out of our control, and that often times there is no reason for why things happen, we would be more contented, relaxed, and less crazy. But we can't because we are an “unambiguous” sort of folks ... you know ... black or white ... right or wrong ... true or false ... either with us or against us. And as the gray areas become smaller and smaller, there becomes a more “we / us” mentality ... more conflict in our life ... more polarity in our country. Consensus? That's just a fancy word ambiguity!

Tidy! Neat! Small packages! Stories with definite endings ... with a preference towards happy endings! This is why the Gospel of Mark is often not read on Easter Sunday and why the lectionary offers an alternative reading from the Gospel of John. In eight short verses, Mark has the women come to the tomb, a young man in the tomb gives them a message, and the women leave the tomb ... telling no one because they were afraid. End of story. Well that “ambiguous!” What kind of Easter story leaves out Resurrection scenes like when the disciples meet him in a locked room, or eat breakfast with him on the shores of Galilee, or others meet him on the road. Nope, not in Mark ... the final verse reads “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.” Mark's final word is “afraid?”

This ambiguous ending so upset the early Church, that various endings were written and added to later editions. They thought Mark's Gospel failed to provide proper “narrative closure,” because a more literal Greek translation reads, “To no one anything they said; afraid they were for ...” It is as if the author Mark had suddenly been dragged from his writing desk in mid sentence before he could finish his thought ... his story. It's a mystery. And therefore, maybe some day someone will write a book called “The Markian Code” ... and make millions ... and upset further the “non-ambiguous Christians.”

If Mark's ending creates discomfort and uncertainty, it is partly due to our knowledge of how the Easter story is told in the other Gospels. Easter is supposed to have post resurrection appearances, joyful seaside meals, scenes of reconciliation and forgiveness, garden embraces of the risen Lord, and the disciples' excited shout, “He is risen!” But Mark offers us none of these, choosing instead to end his story with frightened women fleeing from a cemetery in silence. This is no way to highlight the Resurrection ... or is it? Instead of wanting to tie up loose ends, let's hang with Mark's ambiguity and look closer at the text.

Because, I believe, Mark is trying to impart a different kind of Easter joy, trying to reveal another dimension of the Easter faith. As I came to the last verse and contemplated the unfinished ending, fretting that the Jesus story ends in mute fear and wondering where to go from here, suddenly an insight jumped from the page. The young man at the empty tomb, the messenger, tells the frightened women, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” The risen Lord is in Galilee? Why would this be the first place Jesus went after his resurrection? Why, on the first day of his eternal life, did Jesus go first to Galilee?

One might have thought that, upon being raised from the dead, Jesus would stride triumphantly around Jerusalem. Imagine what a stirring sight that would have been! “Pilate, you made a very big mistake,” the risen Christ might have said as he strode triumphantly into the palace and confronted all of the important, political people. Or, he might have stood on the

steps of the temple, addressing the crowd, chiding them for their fickleness and betrayal, showing himself to the multitudes. Jesus did none of that. Rather, he went on ahead of his own disciples, promising to meet them back in Galilee where the whole story began. In fact earlier, Jesus had told them that is where he would be. Mark 14:28, "After I am raised, I will go before you to Galilee." If they had been paying attention, they would not have been surprised. But Galilee, what is so important about Galilee? What sort of important business was going on in Galilee? In a word --- nothing!

That is, nothing until Jesus got there. Galilee was a dusty, out of the way sort of place. Then Jesus came to Galilee, calling disciples. People began leaving their homes, walking away from good paying jobs, trying to act like disciples. Jesus shook things up in Galilee. He did no work in the city. He never went to Jerusalem after his childhood, until the last fateful week of his life. And that is where he met his end. About four-fifths of Jesus' ministry occurred out in Galilee. In Jerusalem, his ministry ended. His ministry began, and now begins again, in Galilee.

Jesus is not here, not here at the cemetery. In fact, even though we have come to this beautiful sacred place of worship, he is not here. Jesus, the Resurrected Lord, is going on before us to Galilee. That is, he will meet his disciples in a rather ordinary place, a place where their discipleship began. They had met Jesus in Galilee. He had called them first to follow him in Galilee. They had attempted to be disciples mostly in Galilee. They heard him preach, received his teachings, saw him heal, and saw him feed ... their primarily experience of faith was in Galilee. Jerusalem was another matter. There, they abandon him; they betrayed him; they left him to die upon a cross.

On the First Easter, they must go back to the beginning and start all over. They must go back to where they first met Jesus, review in their minds all that he taught them, look with fresh resurrected eyes at all Jesus did and said ... then perhaps they will better understand. They must converse with the Risen Lord, reconcile with him because of their betrayal and abandonment ... On the First Easter these discipleship begin to transform into apostles who must go and tell. They graduated on Good Friday and now, before launching into a career, they must go back to the beginning and be firmly grounded in the basics of their faith. There is no better place than Galilee.

How fortunate are these disciples to be able to go back and start again with the Risen Lord. We often wish, at numerous times in our life, that we could go back in time, and change things. We would like to undo a few things, or do things differently, or make different choices. Hindsight is a great teacher. These disciples are fortunate. The Risen Lord has not left them, frightened and hiding in Jerusalem. He calls them out and back to Galilee, where he will meet them ... meet us. Yes, even us! We are to remain confused and doubtful no more! We, too, are to start again, from the beginning and leave behind our past. We are to leave behind the empty tomb and go out to those ordinary places where we will meet Jesus. We followed Jesus into Jerusalem, we've been to the Table, we been to the Cross, we've been to the Cemetery ... now it is time to move on to our Galilee. Where is Galilee for us? North of Jerusalem ... yes, but also located in the opening chapter of Mark: "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God." In other words, the story isn't over.

We must read the Gospel of Mark again but this time with post-resurrection eyes. Our first read of Mark tells us that the saving action of God in the world is always hidden, ambiguous, and sealed off from the obvious explanation. Going back, rereading Mark, we see Jesus breaking through into human life as one who is powerful, but also as one who will suffer and die. In other words, we see God, whose power is a strange, suffering power. We go back to Galilee, and the second time around every story in the Gospel of Mark is a post resurrection appearance. What we see is a God who surprises us at every turn in the road, a God whose power is expressed finally in weakness.

Easter is a fresh start for the disciples. Easter is a fresh start for you for me in our journey of faith. We do not leave Jesus on the Cross. We do not hang around the empty tomb, the cemetery, wondering where he's gone. He is not there. He is in Galilee where he will meet us. Jesus is out where you live, at home. And we need not hang around here all day because he is waiting to meet us at home ... we need to get home to Christ. There is something about the risen Christ who loves to meet people in the most ordinary places. That's good, because most of us live in ordinary places, like Galilee.

I believe the Gospel of Mark has no ending, because you are to write its ending with your life. Easter is not just this one Sunday. Easter is the beginning of your life lived in faith. The women may not have told anyone (though I suspect they eventually did) which I think means the ball is in your court. Will you tell? Will you live your faith? Will you go and tell others. Will you be an Easter witness? The women ran away from Easter, at first. They were amazed, they were afraid. But you at least have come toward Easter, not running, but walking, expectant, joyful, and hoping. Your Easter life begins the second you walk out those doors. Go back home for Christ awaits you in the ordinary places of your life, in the ordinary people who surround your life. Go and tell ... and bring some closure to this story! Amen.