WHEN THE END IS NOT THE END

Scriptures: Mark 16:1-8; Acts 1:1-11

If you are over 45 years old, you may remember a television show from the 1960s called *Lost in Space*. It was about a family of space pioneers who were marooned on a distant planet. The family's name, by the way, was Robinson. Get it? Swiss Family Robinson. That's as clever as the show ever got. It had bad acting, stupid plots, and lousy special effects, but my 10 year old friends and I watched it every week. We watched it because of the way it ended. Each week the family faced some crisis: lack of food or water, attack by aliens, or treachery by one of the crew members of the spacecraft, and each week the crisis was solved or averted. But that was not the end of the episode. After the crisis passed, the show went on for another 2 or 3 minutes, and suddenly a new crisis threatened the family. Then the show stopped, and a caption appeared on the screen that said, "To be continued," and we were left hanging for another week.

I feel somewhat the same way about our first scripture reading: the last 8 verses of Mark's gospel. At the end of Mark three women come to Jesus' tomb early on Sunday morning to anoint his body with spices. They worry about how they are going to move the stone away from the mouth of the tomb so they can get in. But when they arrive, they find that the stone is already rolled away. Then a young man dressed in white tells them that Jesus is not there; he has been raised from the dead. The young man says, "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." Then we come to verse 8, the last verse of the book. Verse 8 says, "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." The End!

What kind of way is that to end a gospel? It reminds me of *Lost in Space*. The characters encounter some new frightening phenomena, scream, and bam!—the show ends. At the end of Mark's gospel someone needs write "To be continued."

Actually a number of ancient writers did just that. If you look in a pew Bible, you will discover that there are two additional endings to Mark's gospel that were added after the original ending. These additional endings are found in some old Greek manuscripts of the Bible, but they are not found in the oldest Greek manuscripts, which means they were probably added later by people who did not like ending Mark wrote.

And who can blame them? In Mark's gospel we never see Jesus after he rose from the dead. We hear about it from the young man dressed in white, but that is it. The women at the tomb are too frightened to tell anyone. They probably think no one will believe it anyway. If the story of Jesus ended the way it does in Mark, we would not be celebrating Easter right now because no one would have found out about it. The women would have kept the story to themselves, and the disciples would have never gone to Galilee to meet Jesus. They would have remained huddled in their upper room, afraid to stick their heads out the door.

But we know that Mark's gospel is not the end of the story. The proof is that we are here today celebrating Jesus' resurrection. Obviously people found out about it. Maybe the woman

changed their minds and told the story. Or maybe someone else told the story. We don't know what happened, but one way or another the story got out. If it hadn't, we would not be here.

Which brings me to our second scripture reading. Now, if you can reach or share a pew Bible, turn with me to Acts 1:1-11 (NT, p. 118). As Paul Harvey would say, "Here is the rest of the story."

(Read Acts 1:1-11)

You see, Mark's gospel was not the end of the story. The disciples found out about Jesus' resurrection, because they met him in Galilee, and after appearing to them Jesus sent them out to tell his story to the whole world. And that his how we happened to be here in Spokane, Washington, twenty centuries later celebrating Easter.

But now I want to go back for a moment to Mark's gospel. Why did Mark end his gospel the way he did? On *Lost in Space* it was a ploy to get people to watch next week's episode, though I suspect that only worked for 10 year-olds. But Mark's gospel does not have a sequel. Why does Mark's gospel leave us hanging at the end?

I think there is particular significance to the way Mark ends the gospel right at the moment when the women have heard the news of Jesus' resurrection but have not yet seen Jesus for themselves. Why does Mark end the gospel at that particular moment? Because that is exactly where we are. Think about it. We who follow Jesus today are in exactly the same position as those women at the tomb. We have *heard* about Jesus' resurrection, but we have not yet *seen* him. And yet, even though we have not yet seen him, we are sent out to tell other people about him, so that they can meet him for themselves.

In a very real sense, the women at the end of Mark's gospel are in the same position as the disciples at the beginning of Acts. Remember what happens at the end of our second scripture reading? As Jesus ascends to heaven, two men in white robes stand next to the disciples. Once again someone appears in a white robe. This time the men tell the disciples, "This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

At that moment in the story, the disciples have not yet seen Jesus return in glory. True, they have seen Jesus alive after his resurrection, but they have not yet seen Jesus return and establish God's kingdom. Neither have we. So we, like they, must tell people about him before we see him for ourselves. We have to tell people about him, so they will be ready to meet him, so they will *want* to meet him, when he comes.

Let me close with a story. In May Walt Disney pictures is set to release *Prince Caspian*, the second movie in C. S. Lewis' series *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The four British children whom we met last year in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrope* are brought back to Narnia to rescue a lost prince. As they search for the prince, Lucy, the youngest of the children, sees Aslan, the great lion who saved them in their previous adventure. Aslan is C. S. Lewis' symbol for Jesus. The problem is that Lucy is the only one of the children who sees Aslan. The others

do not see Aslan and do not believe that Lucy has seen him. As a result they go in the opposite direction from the way Aslan wants to lead them, and they get completely lost.

One night when the children are cold, hungry, and tired, Aslan appears again to Lucy while the others are sleeping. This is from C. S. Lewis' book *Prince Caspian*:

> "Lucy," Aslan said, "we must not lie here for long. You have work in hand, and much time has been lost today."
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> "Yes, wasn't it a shame?" said Lucy. "I saw you all right. They wouldn't believe me. They're all so…" From somewhere deep inside Aslan's body there came the faintest suggestion of a growl. "I'm' sorry," said Lucy, who understood some of his moods. "I didn't mean to start by slanging the others. But it wasn't my fault anyway, was it?" The Lion looked straight into her eyes. "Oh, Aslan," said Lucy. "You don't mean it was? How could I—I couldn't have left the others and come up to you alone, how could I? Don't look at me like that. … Oh well, I suppose I could. Yes, and it wouldn't have been alone, I know, not if I was with you. But what would have been the good?" Aslan said nothing. "You mean," said Lucy rather faintly, "that it would have turned out all right--somehow? But how? Please, Aslan! Am I not to know?"
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> "To know what would have happened, child?" said Aslan. "No. Nobody is ever told that." "Oh dear," said Lucy. "But anyone can find out what will happen," said Aslan. "If you go back to the others now, and wake them up; and tell them you have seen me again; and that you must all get up at once and follow me—what will happen? There is only one way of finding out."
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> "Do you mean that is what you want me to do?" gasped Lucy. "Yes, little one," said Aslan. "Will the others see you too?" asked Lucy. "Certainly not at first," said Aslan. "Later on, it depends." "But they won't believe me!" said Lucy. "It doesn't matter," said Aslan. … He got up and walked with stately noiseless paces back to the belt of trees through which she had just come, and Lucy went with him, laying a rather tremulous hand on his mane. … "Now, child," said Aslan, when they had left the trees behind them, "I will wait here. Go and wake the others and tell them to follow. If they will not, then you at least must follow me alone" (pp. 136-139).

Lucy is like the young man dressed in a white robe. The other children are like the women at the tomb. They have heard that Aslan is alive. They have heard that he is coming back. But they have not yet seen him for themselves. But they must follow him without seeing him in order to see him later on.

That, friends, is the story for us. All of us here today are like those women at the empty tomb. We have heard that Jesus is alive. We have heard that Jesus is coming, but we have not yet seen him. Nevertheless, we must follow him and invite others to follow him, because that is the only way we will ever discover what he can do in our lives.

- Ken Onstot
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