Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But 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. 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.

On June 11, 2007, right after Sarah and I got married — in fact about 72 hours after Sarah and I got married — I sat down to say farewell to the previous season of my life, to the people with whom I had spent so much of the decade prior, people I loved dearly, people I cared for dearly, people with whom I had spent many nights in both agony and ecstasy, namely, I sat down to watch the series finale of the Sopranos. Tony and Carmela and I, not to mention their kids and their friends and all the extended mess of the New Jersey mafia that came with them, we had gone a few rounds together for a healthy portion of my 20s and here just as I had entered the next stage of my life so too we would spend one more night with the Sopranos and surely they would find a good way to say farewell.

There were questions going in. I mean, it’s a mafia story, and usually, in a mafia story, the protagonist doesn’t make it. Would Tony survive to the credits? He’d made so many enemies over the run of the show. Any of them might surface. Or maybe he and the family would just gather up for a meal one last time and that would be a wrap. Well, some of you already know. And I’m now going to spoil the end of the Sopranos now. I think the statute of limitations on this is up. But in what has become a somewhat infamous sequence of television. In the final moments of the show, Tony meets up with Carmela at a diner. He puts “Don’t Stop Believing” by Journey on the jukebox. Their son AJ comes in and sits down with them. Their daughter Meadow is fighting outside with a parallel parking spot. A curious man in a Members Only jacket walks past the table, but you hardly even notice him the first time you watch.

And then, out of nowhere. In the middle of a phrase. In the middle of a shot. As if the power had gone out simply and only to the television on which I was watching. The show just ends. It just cuts to black. There’s nothing. And I thought, alongside millions of other viewers, I thought something had gone wrong with my TV. I thought something had gone wrong with my cable. I was sure that HBO was surely broken. Or that the internet was broken. Something wasn’t right. This couldn’t possibly be it. This
can’t possibly be it. I have a sense of what an ending should look like and this is not an ending, this can’t possibly be it, it’s just . . . Did they forget to upload part of the show? Was someone in the HBO control room right now actively being fired? This couldn’t possibly be it.

Except it was. Interpretations abound, they still abound of course, but that was the end of the show, the most abrupt and unfinished ending I had ever witnessed, second only to today’s Gospel reading, the “Short Ending” of the Gospel of Mark. The women come to the tomb, looking to anoint Jesus’s body. Instead, they find a young man, who tells them that Jesus is not here, that he is risen. He tells them to go spread the word and to meet Jesus in Galilee. Instead, the women run out of the tomb, as Mark says, “for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The end? We don’t see the women go to Galilee. We don’t see them talk to the disciples. We don’t even see Jesus risen from the grave, which seems like the most glaring and obvious omission. Compared to the resurrection accounts in the other Gospels, Mark just steers his story straight off a cliff. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. And, then? This can’t possibly be it?

Of course, we are hardly the first readers to be unsettled by this. In fact if you have the Gospel of Mark open in front of you, your copy may very well continue; many translations include a number of following verses, which very closely resemble some of the accounts in Matthew and Luke. This is because even some of Mark’s earliest readers couldn’t quite take the suspense of it. They couldn’t take the abruptness of the ending. The ending was a problem that needed to be fixed, so they fixed it; they took some of what they found in Matthew and Luke and they smoothed it over, nothing to see here, but there’s absolutely no critical doubt about where Mark’s original version ends. The original director’s cut is very much intact. All you have to do is stop after verse eight. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. Cut to black.

What are we supposed to do with this, this half-done story, this unfinished Gospel? It feels like false advertising. I’m willing to bet that you came to worship this morning in part because of the promise of Christ risen. We gathered in liturgy this morning around the proclamation of Christ risen, he is risen indeed — in the other Gospels! Read the other Gospels and find these women come to the tomb to see the man himself, to see Christ risen, but this Gospel has no Christ risen in the flesh. It has only hints and suggestions. Only dreams and aspirations. He will meet you in Galilee! Go tell the disciples! But Galilee is a long way from Jerusalem. This is a threadbare hope. An incomplete grade, at best. And by comparison to the other testimonies, which find Jesus at the tomb in his fullness, or at least close at hand, Mark has nothing to offer here but just an empty hole in the ground.

Perhaps it’s not the story we would have ordered up for this particular morning. When I was in college, back around the time of Sopranos Season 1, I was living in a row house with a few guy friends and collectively we were not known for our housekeeping skills. But one day I had this thought, as I was sitting on our second-hand grey couch, and looking at our third-hand gray walls, and noticing our fourth-hand gray carpet, I had
this thought that what might magically make the room better would be a nice plant. Now, I am terrible at keeping plants alive, and only marginally better now than I would have been then. I didn’t know what I was signing up for, it just seemed like something alive would tie the room together. So off I went to this little boutique garden store in the neighborhood, with no idea what I was doing other than I thought a plant would go over there really nicely.

So I told the woman at the store what I wanted. A plant. Something about yea big, yea high. And most importantly, something that I wouldn’t have to work on. Something that didn’t need me. Because I am bad at plants, I needed a plant that could survive having me as its primary caregiver. I needed a plant that was done already. I know that doesn’t make sense. I’m just trying to convey what was in my head at the time. I wanted the plant equivalent of that Super-Instant Kraft Mac & Cheese where you don’t even have to add milk, it’s just water and then you eat it. I needed that, as a plant; a plant that came with a bow on it and looked green and pretty and wouldn’t need me for anything.

I think sometimes I come to Easter morning looking for just that kind of story. Something bright and pretty. Something with a bow on it. Something that doesn’t need me. But that’s not the story we get to tell today. That woman in the plant store looked me up and down and read me instantly. Then she looked at her plants knowing I think that she was sending one of them off to its doom. And then sure enough, I took one of her plants home. I don’t know what it was. She told me it was hearty, and that you barely had to water it, and that it barely needed sunlight; she told me it was almost impervious. And I set it right in that spot in the room where it pulled the room together. And it looked beautiful. And perfect. And alive and abundant and healthy and good. For about three months. And then it was dead. Because there’s a difference between being almost impervious and actually impervious. And because there was no version of that story that wasn’t going to need something from me.

Of course the women who come to the tomb aren’t expecting Jesus risen and gift-wrapped in his fullness. They’re not expecting pretty with a bow on it. But they are expecting an ending. They’re expecting something to be over. They’re expecting to find his body, to do their last ritual with his body, to say a final farewell to this chapter of their lives and then turn the page and move on. They’re expecting not just that the story will be done, but also that the story will be done with them. But instead, of course, it’s just beginning. Instead, of course, God has more work for them to do. Tell the disciples! Go to Galilee! Jesus will meet you there! For these women, there’s no cut to black, there’s no fade to credits, there’s no abrupt ending to this Gospel; quite to the contrary, they might have thought it was over, but God had only just begun.

This, I think, is the real, staggering, and awe-inspiring, and terrifying power of the Gospel of Mark on Easter Sunday. It’s not actually about how the book ends. It’s about how it never ends. It’s about how something opens here in these final verses, something that can’t go back. It’s about how something is unleashed here in these final verses, something that can’t be reburied. It’s about how God takes this ending, this
universal ending, he was supposed to die, he was always supposed to die, that’s how this goes, it’s how it always goes, but God takes this ending and tears it open. God takes this death and tears it open, God takes this whole creation and tears it open, God takes the stony ground into which all things are inevitably buried and tears it open. And what the women find is a hole. A hole in the ground. A hole in creation itself. A hole in this dark tomb in which we pass our days. A hole in the earth. No longer an ending. But instead, perhaps, something, waiting to be grown.

Friends, I wish I could gift-wrap this story for you. But the even better news is, it’s not finished yet. We don’t gather up on this Easter morning to proclaim that Christ was risen. It’s not a story that’s over and done and once a year we dust it off and tell it to the kids. We don’t even gather up this Easter morning to proclaim Christ has risen, like somehow we can still hear echoes of it. No, the Gospel we stand on this morning says in no uncertain terms, in the fullness of all the voices of all creation, the story’s not over. The story is just beginning. The story is happening right now.

Christ Is Risen. Here and now.

In this sanctuary. In your living room. Christ Is Risen. Here and now.

In all the corners of this congregation in which we make our worship. Christ Is Risen. Here and now.

In the highest boardrooms of power and in the lowliest corners of our city. Christ Is Risen. Here and now.

In the busy streets where we march for justice and in the quiet hospital rooms where we gather in prayer. Christ Is Risen. Here and now.

And now, in the loneliest chambers of this ever-long year, and in the most frantic places of our anxious hearts. Christ Is Risen. Here. Now.

In every corner of God’s creation. Everywhere. Christ is burst the tomb and leaves a hole behind. And now all of it is torn open and claimed. And ripped open and embraced. And cracked open and loved. By the grace of God which has been and is now and ever shall be.

And through the crack you can hear the angels sing:

Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Amen!