

He Goes Before You
Mark 16:1-8
Easter Sunrise Service
April 12, 2020
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I don't like movies and books and TV shows with bad endings. The ending determines a good movie or book for me. One of my all-time favorite movies is "The Shawshank Redemption." (made in 1994) The reason I like it is because it has a really great ending. But the great ending is not the original ending.

The movie is about a young man named Charlie (played by Tim Robbins) who is arrested for the murder of his wife and her lover, and given life in a prison called Shawshank.

The main part of the movie is Charlie's life in prison and a friendship that he develops with a man named Red played by Morgan Freeman. I don't remember exactly how many years Charlie spends in prison before he finds out that he is innocent. He was drunk the night his wife was murdered and doesn't remember what he did that night. He tries to get a retrial to no avail.

Towards the end of the movie, Charlie successfully escapes. Even though he doesn't tell his best friend of his planned escape, he gives clues to Red of where to find him if Red ever gets out of prison. At the end of the movie, Red is released on parole and eventually figures out where his friend is.

Red breaks parole, gets on a bus, and heads towards Mexico. As he rides the bus, you hear Red's thoughts: "I'm a free man at the start of a long journey whose future is uncertain. I hope I can make it across the border. I hope I can see my friend and shake his hand. I hope the Pacific is as blue as it has been in my dreams. I hope."

At the words "I hope," you see the bus driving off into the distance. That was the original ending of the movie. They showed the movie to a test audience, and the audience hated the ending. They had just been dragged through 2 hours of film showing Charlie's 19 years of prison life. It is an exhausting, violent, heartbreaking, gut-wrenching two hours. Now, at the end of the movie, they don't get to find out if Charlie and Red ever see each other again.

I remember watching this part of the movie, and thinking: They've got to get together. They've just got to get together. I've never been so emotionally involved with a movie. I

knew if the movie ended with Red saying “I hope,” not knowing if they ever got together, I would throw something at the screen. I HAD to see them together.

Well, the people who made the movie listened to the test audience and added 30 more seconds onto the end of the movie. The scene is of the blue Pacific Ocean, Charlie working on an old boat on the beach. He looks up, and sees Red coming towards him walking barefoot in the sand. The camera pulls away as the two old friends greet one another in a big hug. Every time I see this part of the movie, I sob like a little child. The “I hope” becomes a reality.

This is a great ending!

I am telling you all this because the Gospel of Mark has several endings. I read it to you earlier. The original ending ends abruptly at verse 8 with the women fleeing from the empty tomb in fear at the news that the tomb is empty and some man in white telling them that Jesus is risen. The last word in this story of the Resurrection is “afraid.”

Is that any way to end a story? Especially about a resurrection? It’s worse than ending a movie with “I hope.”

Mark’s gospel starts out with the words “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.” If you were writing this “good news” would you end it with women running away in terror at the news of a resurrection? Would you point out that the angel told the women to go and tell the disciples the good news but they were so afraid that they didn’t tell anyone? The resurrection is a marvelous triumph over death. Wouldn’t you end the story more upbeat, perhaps a bit more triumphantly instead of the word “afraid”?

Well, many others thought so. Over the years, people have tried to fix the ending of the Gospel of Mark. If you open a Bible and look at verse 8 of Mark 16, you may see a little letter next to the word “afraid.” It is a footnote. The footnote says the oldest manuscripts end at verse 8 with the women running away in terror. Since the oldest manuscripts end here, this is the original ending of Mark.

But if you look in most Bibles, there are 12 more verses with several paragraph headlines. The first headline says “The Shorter Ending of Mark” and the second headline says “The Longer Ending of Mark.” These are verses that have been added onto Mark to make the ending better – just like the scriptwriters of “The Shawshank Redemption” did.

These are various endings that people have added on to make the ending better.

I can't say for sure that Mark intended to end his gospel this way, but I can say this: I am glad it ends this way...with the word "fear." Because it speaks to us today for we are living in a world of fear. A world dictated by a lethal virus.

What's so great about Mark's ending is not that we have conclusive evidence of the Resurrection (the other Gospels do that), but that we are given hope. "He is risen...Go, tell his disciples...that [Jesus] is going ahead of you...and you will see him" (verse 7). *He is going ahead of you and you will see him.*

There is hope that the Risen Christ goes before us and that we will find him, not in the tomb, not the place of death, but out there, ahead of us, in a world living in fear. We celebrate Easter not to simply remember a resurrection in the past, but experience the presence of the Risen Christ in the present and to follow him into the future.

He goes before you.

So, if you are afraid today, know that Jesus is alive and with you today, and goes before you in this world.

And if you know someone who is afraid, tell them the Good News that he is risen and goes out before us. We are to go out into the very incomplete, broken, and ragged world to give the hope and life that Christ came to bring. We don't end the story with fear. Or, I hope. Rather, we present the certainty that Jesus goes before us.

Now, that is great ending.

Alleluia?

Alleluia!