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Easter 1B
Peace, Seattle
April 8, 2012
Mark 16:1-8

END AS BEGINNING

It started out a simple project. My old 1970 Rebel wagon was starting hard and running sluggishly. I was going to give it a basic tune-up and adjust the timing—something I could manage on my own without too much trouble.

A few adjustments here and there, I thought, and it'll be as good as new. Oh, how wrong I was! For the symptoms, once exposed, pointed to a deeper ailment.

One thing led to another, and before long, there I was sitting at the kitchen table, car manual in hand, with the Rebel's carburetor spread out before me.

I called for reinforcements, and my friend Andy confirmed that the Rebel needed much more than a tune-up or a rebuilt carburetor. The distributor would have to be replaced, a valve job was in order, and in fact, he said, I'd probably be better off in the long run if I rebuilt the entire engine.

Three months later, after untold numbers of trips to the auto parts store and untold hours under the hood, the rebuilt engine was back in, and the REBEL seemed poised to go.

But before I could turn the key, there was a problem to solve. I had a can full of nuts, bolts, and washers that had come out of the Rebel but had not gone back in. Somehow I'd missed something crucial along the way. This wasn't the way it was supposed to end!

> "The women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Did Mark really intend for his Good News story to end this way? With no appearances of the risen One, no sharing about the empty tomb, no evidence that the first witnesses said anything to anyone at all?!

CAN THIS BE RIGHT?

It is true that, throughout this gospel, time and again, Jesus enjoins those on the receiving end of his ministry to keep silence:

- "Say nothing to anyone" he orders the leper, newly clean. (1:44)
- "Keep silent!" he commands the demon spirits. (3:12)
- "Don't tell a soul," he warns a father after snatching his girl out of death's grasp (5:43), and after opening the ears of the deaf man (7:36), and the eyes of the blind man. (8:26)
- And when, in chapter 9 after the lightshow on the mountain of Transfiguration, we find Peter, James, and John blathering in befuddlement, Jesus insists yet again:
  "Tell no one about what you've seen until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead."

Well! The "after" has arrived! The moment for going public is here at last! The big launch, the time for shouting good news! And what do we get? Silence. Total, utter silence.

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Not only have all of the guys—his inner core of disciples—gone missing; this clutch of women who endured his crucifixion, who stuck it out long enough to see where his spent body was laid—and the massive stone over its mouth; these women, confronted with the empty tomb seize up completely.

And fleeing in fear and astonishment they say nothing to anyone. Is this how it's supposed to end? Not with a bang, but with a whimper—and a whole can full of loose ends and knotty questions?

Mark's resurrection story is the great unfinished story of the New Testament. And if we're unsure about an ending that stops—quite literally—in mid-sentence, we're not alone. The stark incompleteness of this ending was too much for many early Christians to accept.

Where St. Mark leaves us hanging, some filled in the blank by appending two alternatives—the first a one-verse, condensed "happily ever after" version; and the other an eleven verse extended version, designed to tie up loose ends and install nuts and washers in a way they thought was more fitting.

But what if we receive the "incompleteness" of Mark's gospel not first as a burden laid upon us but rather God's gift to us? What if Mark's gospel ends precisely where God intends—which is precisely where we live our lives—in the gap between the empty tomb and the final fulfillment of God's redemption?

Mark wrote his story of Jesus for a community that lived in that gap, and that's where you and I live, too: In that space where love and fear both remain possibilities; where economies falter, homes go underwater, jobs remain elusive, and leaders fail us; where violence still claims innocent lives, solutions still elude us, and the stones that block our way, whether large or small, are always very, very real. Life in the gap.

Shin Dong-hyuk knows that gap. And the book Escape from Camp 14 tells his story, the story of the only person born in a North Korean prison camp who has ever escaped to the West.[1]

Born in Kaechon and raised within the walls of the country's harshest concentration camp, life for Shin was, from an outsider's perspective, a living hell. But for him, it was simply the way life was. Having been born in the camp and having never experienced life outside of the compound, he thought the whole world was like this, and had no imagination that life could or should be different.

In Camp 14, living was reduced to its most elemental level and every day was a struggle for survival. Every day held out the possibility of punishment if one transgressed the rules, or reward if one behaved in a manner that satisfied the camp's guards. And every day he was famished.

Shin purpose in life was to work as a slave and to spy on his family. His mother left at 5am each morning for work in the mountain mines and when she returned around midnight she had no time for her son, and often beat him.

Love had no content. Compassion no meaning. Friendship and closeness didn't exist, everyone was on his own, everyone else could be an informer.

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[1] Blaine Harden, *Escape from Camp 14: One Man's Remarkable Odyssey from North Korea to Freedom in the West*. (New York: Viking Press, 2012). I first heard about Shin's story when listening to the Diane Rehm Show. Interviews Shin has had with other journalists are widely available via YouTube as well. Background information for this sermon came from several of these sources.

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When Shin's mother and an unknown brother attempted to escape, Shin, age 12, was tortured and forced to witness their execution.

A decade later, working in a camp factory with a prisoner who'd come from the outside, he learned for the first time that there was another world, a different world with different rules, beyond the camp. He and his friend Park planned their own escape. And one day, while collecting firewood near the prison fence, with the guards for the moment absent. They carried it out, but Shin alone succeeded in getting free.

Away from the camp for the first time in his 26 years, the world his eyes saw astonished him with its color, its beauty, and its abundance of food. Joining a group of rag sellers he traveled through North Korea until, finally, he crossed the border into China, and from there went to South Korea and finally the U.S.

Shin's adjustment to life beyond barbed wire has been a difficult one. He has embraced the story of the God who took on human flesh in Jesus, he's learning what love and friendship mean, but Shin is still living life in the GAP. Because of what he did back in Camp 14 to survive and to escape, he carries a crushing burden of guilt.

Having been liberated from what he knows now was not true life, but a tomb, Shin struggles daily with the decisions and choices he must make as a free human being who is on the receiving end of caring and compassion for the first time.

> "All the paths of life…which we walk," writes Karl Barth, "are the same, now or at any later time… they all lead to the edge of the precipice. We cannot bridge this precipice but its bridging has been made [known] in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."[2]

I know how I want Shin's story to end. I know how I want your story, and mine, to end. And happily ever after wouldn't be bad. But Mark's unfinished story doesn't get us there. A glimpse around us this morning tells us that fear is not gone from this world, nor violence, nor systems of incredulous injustice.

But we who have been claimed by Christ dare to live in hope because he who was crucified has been raised, and now we know that the cross is not the end of the story—his or ours. For the God who raised Jesus from the dead can be trusted to bring to completion in our lives and in this whole needful, broken world, all that he has begun.

Instead of tying up loose ends, Mark leaves us with a story whose next sentence is written with our own lives. Sending us to Galilee, our risen Lord promises that it is there he will meet us—where it all began; in our daily lives, among our families and neighbors, in our vocations, at our schools.

This is where our lives begin again. This is where the God who is in the business of rolling stones away—lives on in me and in you. And this is where Jesus Christ, the stone which the builders rejected, becomes the cornerstone of a whole new world.

Let us pray: Risen Lord! Calm our fears, open our eyes, guide our feet, embolden our witness.

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[2] Karl Barth, *"Threatened by Resurrection,"* from *Come Holy Spirit: Sermon, by Karl Barth and Eduard Thurneysen.* T & T Clark a Continuum imprint. Excerpted in *Bread and Wine: Readings for Lent and Easter,* (New York: Orbis, 2003) p. 300.

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Take whatever is unfinished in our lives and make them whole. Make us certain that because you live we shall live also, and that nothing in this life, no circumstance, sin or failure, past, present, or future, will be able to separate us from your love. Amen.