

Edited Jesus

A Morning Message for Sunday Morning Worship
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
April 10, 2016
Text: Mark 16:1-11

When was the last time you received a beautifully worded hand-written letter from someone? That's a real question, not a rhetorical one! (pause and react to responses). So I think we can agree that letter writing is a lost art, along with writing itself. It has become yet another thing we leave to the professionals, but it shouldn't be. Writing, the task of putting pen to paper in the act of stringing together letters to make words, and words to make sentences, and sentences to make paragraphs, and paragraphs to convey thoughts, is a skill we too often take for granted. Talk to any teacher and you will hear their laments about how poorly students write these days. The ability to pull together a series of coherent thoughts on a topic is becoming ever more elusive in our society when instant information and sound bytes are what seem to matter most. Implied too often is the thinking that if it can't be contained in the 30 character cap of a Twitter message, it's not worth saying. So too has texting and instant messaging taken their toll on the written language with incomprehensible abbreviations (LOL) and "emojis" (☺) replacing actual words.

As I writer and lover of the written word myself, I confess that I do take an inordinate amount of satisfaction in a well

turned phrase. I revel in the challenge of writing a sermon each week, which now and then might warrant being morphed into the occasional opinion piece for *The Westerly Sun*. I loved the amount of writing required for my degree work at Harvard choosing that program *because* it required a Masters dissertation, not in spite of it. So, too I love to read well written articles in newspapers and journals and I can lose myself for hours in a really good book. Truth is I have had a love affair with the written word for all of my life. I wrote my first poem at the age of 7, my first short story at the age of 8 or 9 and my first sermon at the age of 16. I worked on the school newspaper in middle and high school. I wrote for publication for the first time in my 20's and have been published numerous times since. It is thrilling, I admit, to see your name on that credits page for something you've written. The notion that someone you don't even know is reading your work, perhaps even being moved by it, is humbling even as it is energizing.

What you don't know about writing for publication unless you've done it is that it is a very arduous, labor intensive process requiring a ridiculous amount of time and energy and a very thick skin. The thick skin comes in because the most grueling part of the publishing process is the editing. That's when the editor assigned to work with you on a given project returns your manuscript, the one filled with your blood, sweat and tears, and it

is completely ripped apart. I mean there is red ink everywhere! “Change this! Make this more concise!” or the dreaded “I have NO idea what you’re trying to say here. Start over.” Yikes! When I would receive a manuscript back from my editor at *Seasons of the Spirit*, I would need a week to process the edits so I wouldn’t have a complete meltdown. Your natural instinct in this situation is to become very defensive of this writing you’ve put your heart and soul into. So, I learned to look at the edits once, and then walk away, allowing myself to feel all the emotions they evoke, mostly anger if I’m honest. Then I went for a walk. A few days later, I looked at them again and they still smarted but I could see her point, here and there. Then I went for a walk. A few days after that, I sat down with the edits and began to see what she was talking about and so the rewrite began. Writing the first draft is a tremendous amount of work, for sure. Doing the rewrites, though, is agonizing because to do them, you have to let go of your original ideas and trust the wisdom of the editor. And that is really, really tough to do. But, it has to be done. So, you do it and the writing is always the better for it.

I wanted us to do some thinking about editing as part and parcel of the writing process as we consider this week’s account of the resurrection in the Gospel of Mark. This is the oldest Gospel of the four, written around 66 CE, roughly 35 years after the crucifixion. It is undoubtedly the product of an oral story-telling

tradition which was ultimately written down. Mark is the shortest gospel in length and is also distinctive on two other key points. It does not contain any sort of birth narrative. No Mary and Joseph trudging to Bethlehem and placing Baby Jesus in the manger. No angel chorus singing to shepherds. No kings on camels coming to visit. Mark begins with the baptism of Jesus by John and then it's off to the races.

The ending of the Gospel of Mark is also unique among the four gospels because it's ending is not consistent with Matthew, Luke or John. The original ending of Mark is at verse 8a. "So they (the women) went out from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." *They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.* That is the original ending of the Gospel of Mark. Our pew Bible shows Mark 16 as continuing on through verse 20, but that's a much later edit of the original work. Scholars know this because all of the oldest copies of this Gospel, and there are several, do not contain verses 8b-20. Those verses are just not there in the oldest manuscripts. So, then, how did they come to be in our Bible? Why did someone think it was important to change the ending of the oldest Gospel, editing a text already considered sacred? And perhaps most importantly, why did the original author of Mark choose to end his Gospel as he did? Why was this foundational story of the Christian faith – of Jesus – edited so blatantly?

Well, if you think about it, you can probably surmise how this flagrant editing happened. Picture a monk hunched over a writing table, a long sheet of vellum rolled out in front of him with squib pen and ink pot beside it. This ancient monk is laboriously copying the text of an ancient scroll onto this unblemish new one. He's getting tired because he's already spent the last year copying over the other gospels – Matthew, Luke and John – so he knows the stories they contain about Jesus by heart. His writing hand is cramped and there are permanent ink spots on his feet from those moments when he was a little too enthusiastic dipping the squib into the ink pot and some splashed out. Soon, he thinks. I'm almost done. I saved Mark for the last because I know it's the shortest. And he labors on. Then he stops.

“Wait a minute,” he thinks. “Where's the rest of the story about the Resurrected Jesus? The Risen Christ isn't even in this story! And the women don't tell anybody! That can't be right! It can't be!! Something must have happened to the rest of the story. Maybe Mark was interrupted before he could finish. Maybe he ran out of ink and never got anymore. Maybe somebody told him the story wrong! Oh no! I'll fix it....” And that's what he did. At some point in the distant past, someone entrusted to copy the Gospel of Mark made an editorial decision that Mark's original ending was wrong and they fixed it. And, if you look carefully, you can see that Mark has not one, not two, but three different

endings! The first one is Mark's original ending at verse 8a. The second one is visible in verse 8b – a sentence which is totally and completely different in style and language from the rest of Mark. The third ending is what we see in verses 9-20. This is actually the oldest of the new endings to Mark, having been added sometime toward the end of the second century. Verse 8b was formulated and inserted sometime during the fourth century. These two different endings were edited in to Mark's original gospel at two different times and then over the centuries, gradually came to be accepted as part and parcel of Mark's Gospel as we know it today.

So, we may be able to understand how these edits happened – somebody decided at some point that Mark had made a mistake and left off the ending all the other gospels had so the ancient editor added it in. But that doesn't answer an important question – *why* did Mark end his Gospel as he did? If we set aside the notion that Mark just omitted the rest of the resurrection story by mistake, then we have to ask why he ended the story as he did with no resurrected Jesus seen – only an angel proclaiming the resurrection to the terrified women who ran off and didn't tell anyone what they had witnessed. Now, obviously the women told someone because here we are sitting in a Christian church this morning 2000 years later. Of course they told someone. So why

did Mark leave that part of the story out? If his decision to do this was intentional, and I think it was, why did he write this ending?

Theologian David Lose gives us some ideas to consider. First, the ending is consistent with two themes Mark emphasizes throughout his entire Gospel account of Jesus. One is that the people who should know what's going on, don't. Mark consistently portrays the disciples as clueless and confused about Jesus, never quite sure why he does what he does. Several times in Mark, Jesus gets exasperated with the disciples for exactly this reason so why should this be any different. The disciples let the women go to the tomb alone to anoint Jesus' body even though they knew the women would never be able to roll the stone away. So, they weren't there when they should have been. This brings us to the second theme in Mark – people who do know what's going on with Jesus cannot be trusted to tell anyone. Time and time again in Mark's Gospel, the disciples let Jesus down. They don't do what he asks and they don't bear witness to what they see and hear, at least not as consistently and faithfully as Jesus hopes they will.

Mark, it would seem, is an excellent judge of human nature. He knows that people are easily distracted away from what's important, easily frightened away from doing what needs to be done, too quick to look away and remain silent. I believe that's why Mark ended his Gospel the way he did. He knew there was

only one person that could be relied on to tell the rest of the story to the people who needed to hear it most. There is one person who has seen and heard everything about the good news of Jesus because Mark has just told that Good News in the gospel the reader has just finished reading. So that person Mark is counting on to carry the news of the Resurrection to the rest of the world is.... YOU and ME. You and me! We are the ones Mark is counting on to tell the Good News of the empty tomb, of the resurrected Jesus to everyone we know. The truth is that Mark, like every really good author, is doing so much more than just telling us a story. Mark is making us part of the story because his original ending leaves no doubt WE are the ones to go and tell what we have seen and heard about the Risen Christ. We are the end of the Resurrection Story in the Gospel of Mark because Mark knows that's the only way the story will live on past the pages of an old manuscript. That's the only way the story will become and remain real to all those who follow the Risen Christ.

So, dear friends, as we consider together the Risen Christ we follow and all the stories we know and cherish about him, we should give thanks for Mark's gift to us of the unfinished Gospel, because the ending to Mark's Gospel is us. Each and every one of us. Who knew? You do, now. So, who will you tell? Amen.