

You Are...

Mark 1:4-11; 15:33-39

Cradock Presbyterian Church

August 5, 2012

Every story has a beginning and an end. Or at least it should. Because that's how you "get the message."

That's why people hate stories that don't have a clear ending. Don't we? Do you remember all the fuss when that TV series "The Sopranos" ended? The fuss about *how* it ended? After all the killing and bloodshed, the series ends with the main mob guy, Tony, sitting at a table with his family in some low-rent diner, eating onion rings, and the scene just goes to black. Just like that! And after a few seconds of silence, the credits roll, with no sound. What does *that* mean? Does it mean his life ended suddenly in that diner – as he ended so many other people's lives? Or is there more to come – like a sequel?

So we don't know what happened to Tony Soprano. Maybe that's just as well, because he's just not that important. I mean, it's just a show! I suppose if you'd watched the series, which I didn't, you'd know who he was. As in, you'd *know* him. If you didn't, someone would have to tell you. I think that's an important point, because if you know who someone is, then you can make more sense out of their story. Who are you? If I know, then your story makes sense.

That's why I read to you those 2 passages from Mark's gospel. Mark is, as some of you know, the earliest of our Gospels. To me, it is the most direct. These passages say something that we don't catch sometimes unless we're paying attention. They tell

us who Jesus is. But they also tell us why he's so important. That's what I want to remind you about today.

Let's begin with his baptism.

John the Baptist, or the Baptizer, as it would be more accurately translated, came onto the scene for one purpose: to set up this scene where Jesus gets baptized. It's all-important because of what happens, and what God says. Mark is very spare in his words here about what happens. Other Gospels give us more details; apparently Jesus and John had some conversation before the baptism! But Mark isn't interested in that. Mark wants you to know the power of what's about to happen. So Jesus goes to John and is baptized. Immediately upon completion of this task, look what happens! Let me read it to you from Mark:

"he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."

Apparently others saw it too, or else why would Mark have known about it? The Spirit descending like a dove is a clear sign of God's favor, we know that. Those who saw it would also have understood this sign, and opinion is divided on whether or not the bystanders actually saw it too. The Gospel of Luke at least implies that this might have been the case. But more important than the dove: listen to what God *said!*

'And a voice came from heaven, " *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"'

There it is! “YOU ARE” says God; “You are my beloved Son,” as the version I grew up with puts it. Make no mistake, the voice from heaven *is* God. Put that together with the descending dove, and right at the beginning of the story, we get told who Jesus is: the Son of God.

Then why did God have to say, “with you I am well pleased” - ? Kind of goes without saying, doesn't it? Aren't most parents generally pleased with their kids? *Especially* the day they get baptized? Yeah – but this baptism begins something incredible. It begins a ministry, a mission, that changes the world forever. It begins a mission that makes sense when you get to the end.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. There's one other thing about this baptism that catches your attention, or at least it ought to. Mark tells us that “he saw the heavens torn apart,” and by implication I guess everybody else saw that too. How do you see the heavens *torn apart*? What does that even mean? It sounds pretty *violent*; at least, it's dramatic and unmistakable. Whatever was blocking heaven had now been torn out of the way by his baptism. The original language uses a word that usually gets translated “immediately;” the very *instant* Jesus is baptized, heaven is now open, no longer blocked.

But why was it done so *violently*? If you're a moviemaker, you'd call this foreshadowing. That's because at the end of his life, at the end of the story, the answer becomes clear. The need for the violence becomes clear. It's all about death, and sacrifice.

And so we turn to the very end, to the passage I read you from Mark, the 15th chapter. Jesus has been on the cross all day, since about 9 o' clock in the morning. His time has come; even to the end, some of his fellow Jews still get it wrong, still think of him as somebody Elijah the prophet might come to rescue. Then, as he was supposed to do to fulfill his mission, Jesus dies. Now *listen* to the next two verses! Verse 39 says:

“And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom.”

Do you know what curtain this was? It was the curtain in the Temple that kept people away from the Holy of Holies, the little room in the very middle of the Temple, where they believed God always was. The curtain was supposed to keep you away from God, because to get near God was supposed to kill you. You know what this means? *In his death on the cross, Jesus removed the separation, removed the barrier, between God and people, then and now. God didn't want anything separating him and people – those people, and you and me.* It's significant that at the beginning of his ministry and at the end, Jesus tore away the things that kept people from God – both here in this life, and in heaven afterwards.

There is one more important thing to point out here, and then the ending to this story will complete the beginning. You remember that at the beginning, at the baptism of Jesus, God's Spirit was at work in the descending of the dove. The dove reinforced the words of God, “You are my beloved son.” Here at Jesus' death, at the foot of his cross, stood a centurion, a Roman soldier who had been entrusted with much, a non-

commissioned officer, essentially. He was a Gentile, that is, a non-Jew. That's all "Gentile" means: anyone who is not a Jew. He knew nothing of the Jewish faith that Jesus and the people who condemned him belonged to; he might not have even heard of Jesus until that day, when he was given the task of crucifying him, and been told about him. *But God in his Spirit moved something in this man!* I'm convinced God worked in him so that he became the first non-Jew to profess Jesus for who he really was and is. It was as if God said, "Tell the world who he is!" – and this centurion did. If Jesus had been alive, the centurion would have been saying, "Jesus! You really *are* the Son of God!"

If you put together these two facts – that the Temple curtain's tearing apart meant *everyone* could come to God, and that this centurion, a non-Jew, came to believe – then you can only come to one conclusion. Jesus fulfilled his mission. Now God was available to everyone, Jew and Gentile alike. In fact, God began calling people to come home to him as Father; that means we are all his children. Not even death can get in the way of belonging to God! That, my friends, is the Good News which remains in effect for you and me.

You know what that means? Did you catch that? God is saying to you and me, in effect, "Listen! *You are* my beloved children. And I have plans for you. Nothing can get in your way anymore; you can always come to me."

Take that for your comfort, and take that for your strength. Nothing the world can throw at you matters much anymore. *You are* God's children; God has adopted you, taken you in to his very own family. You can always draw near, and take your place by

his side. You can always trust in God as the one who cares what happens to you and with you even when the rest of the world has turned it's back. Don't be afraid to reach out! Just remember who *you are*: the beloved ones of God. That's the beginning and the end of your story – now, and forever.