

Easter 1965: four squeaky-clean, shiny kids pose for a picture before heading off to church. That's me, #3, in the hand-me down coat with sleeves six inches too short. Every year my parents made my brothers and me pose for a picture like this on Easter. Coats, ties, polished shoes. "Smile for the camera, stop fighting, let's not be late for church."

But Easter Sunday isn't always so squeaky-clean and shiny, is it? As a pastor, I can recall making hospital visits to sick children on more than one Easter Sunday. I remember a young woman from my former congregation passed away unexpectedly one Easter. And we can all remember last year, when Easter worship was online only, because of the coronavirus stay-at-home order.

Easter is a joyful festival day for Christian believers. But it's not an automatic one-day pass from life's troubles and the world's problems. Families still fight. Wars still rage. People still get sick. Lousy, ungodly things happen in our world every day; and they happen on Easter, too.

Our Bible story today, from Mark 16, tells us about something that happened on the very first Easter Sunday. We've been studying the Gospel of Mark in our church for the past few months; and, as always, Mark has a bold, unique take on the events of Christ's life. Mark describes three women who were the first witnesses of the resurrection: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome.

Early Sunday morning, they went to the place where Jesus had been buried on Friday afternoon. Like the other followers of Jesus, they were gloomy and sad. Their

beautiful Savior had been killed, crucified, buried. But when they arrived at the tomb, they found the stone rolled away from the front of the tomb. An angel sat there, and he delivered the incredible, joyful news: "You are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. Go, tell his disciples."

This is the best news ever! The Lord Jesus is alive! The first Easter was not just squeaky-clean and shiny. It was the most momentous, dazzling day in the history of the world!

So what happens next? Mark tells us. But he ends his Easter story mysteriously, abruptly. Verse 8: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid."

And that's all Mark tells us. That's the final verse of Mark's Gospel, in fact. He leaves us hanging. We've been learning so much about who Jesus really is, from Mark's epiphany. We've been traveling the reality road with Jesus, and realizing so much about ourselves and our sinful condition. We've seen Jesus betrayed, convicted, crucified, as the sacrifice for our sins. And, now, after all that, on Easter morning -- just when Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome hear the glorious good news of Christ's resurrection; just when everything seems to be turning out perfect -- Mark ends his story with these three women running away, fleeing. They're frightened and confused. They keep the angel's message to themselves, and they stay quiet.

Every time I read this ending of the book of Mark, my first reaction is to say, "That story's not complete! Easter can't end this way! It's unfinished business! Easter's supposed to be victorious, triumphant, and perfect in every way!"

But then I remember all those Easters, even in my own lifetime, when everything wasn't so great. I reflect on all the unfinished business in my own life. I consider the many ways in which we modern-day Christians are just like those three women. And I end up thinking that maybe Mark's abrupt, strange ending is actually quite perfect.

I believe that there's a tremendous lesson for us all to learn from Mark's unfinished story. You see, God is still finishing the story of Jesus Christ in us. He sent his Son to do for us what we cannot do ourselves. Jesus died and rose to rescue us, to forgive us, to save us, to give us eternal life. But while we're still here in this world of struggles, while we're battling with temptation and sin every day, our stories are still going on. Like Mark's Gospel, they're unfinished.

But here's the real Good News, the real Gospel, for Easter. For those who put faith and trust in the crucified, risen Jesus Christ, God is writing the next chapter in your life.

The Gospel, you see, is not so much about humans doing this, or humans accomplishing that. It's not about the three women at the tomb being perfect, faithful witnesses to the resurrection. And, thank the Lord, it's not about you and me being squeaky clean, or looking good on the outside, or somehow having enough faith to keep God happy.

The Christian Gospel is 100% about what God has done for us in his Son, Jesus Christ. The great Good News of Easter that we are here to celebrate is 100% about God's power, God's plans, God's prerogatives.

The Easter Gospel is about a caring, loving God bringing his gifts to his people, and accomplishing his purposes in us. The same unstoppable power that broke open the tomb and raised his Son from the dead is at work in us today. Easter is

about God writing the next chapter in your life, and God bringing renewal to my life. And how exciting it is to think about what God might do next in us! Because there's plenty of unfinished business in our lives, isn't there?

On this Easter morning, we may be dressed up and acting festive. But we still have our sin struggles, don't we? We all do. We're all still coming up short, in our lives of discipleship and faith, just like the women and the men in the first Easter story. But God is still finishing the story of Jesus Christ in you and me. He's not done with us yet.

God wants Christ's story to keep changing your story. God wants you and your loved ones not just to look squeaky clean on the outside; but to have Christ's compassionate, sacrificial love bubbling up in your day-to-day family lives, in your social lives, in your work and school lives. God wants his church today, just like on that first Easter, to tell the story of the cross and the empty tomb, to spread the Gospel, to bring Christ to the people of our community and to bring people to Christ.

Today, on this Easter Sunday 2021, we modern-day believers stand gratefully with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. They were imperfect Christians. So are we. But our story's not finished, is it? The triumphant Good News of Christ's resurrection opens up the next chapter in the story of Jesus Christ in you today.

A blessed, happy Easter to you and yours, in the name of the living Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.