

I thank and appreciate all of you who were either startled or snickering or worried when I introduced the gospel from the seventeenth chapter of Mark.

It warms my heart to know you're paying attention.

I said it because I happen to think the first chapter of Mark is also the seventeenth. Mark's gospel, the shortest and the earliest of the four, has sixteen chapters.

When it was first published, it wasn't part of the Bible yet; there was no gospel of Luke printed right behind it, no other writings in the new literary genre of gospel with which to compare it.

All the first reader had was a parchment with what would later be divided into sixteen chapters, the last of which ended in mid-sentence, like a dropped cell phone call.

The women are at the tomb, and the body of Jesus is not.

A young man says to them,

...go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, being afraid because

The end has no ending; it doesn't even have a period, which Mark rolls away like a stone.

The women are terrified and not talking.

The silence is deafening.

There are no other gospels with tidy conclusions to read.

There is nowhere to turn.

The only option is to go back to the beginning...which is Mark's intent, except that Mark would say we aren't going back to the beginning, we are going *forward* to the beginning.

It's resurrection from the dead, after all--the end is not really an end, but The Beginning.

Thus Mark, chapter seventeen, verse one:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Who appears to his disciples, in Galilee, just as he told them.

This may explain why Simon and Andrew and James and John dropped their nets without so much as a word and followed him.

The voice that called them was coming from the other side of death; the man they last saw dead in the water now walks along the lakefront approaching them completely and absolutely alive, which is enough to make anyone repent or believe or follow or anything else he tells you to do.

When a man comes back from the dead and invites you to jump in the backseat, who worries about the network?

Immediately they left....and followed him.

It is why we have worship first, then the annual meeting.

The kingdom of God shows up; then people repent and believe.

This is always the pattern with the good news of God: it is news to which we respond.
Biblical theologians call it "Indicative-Imperative": first God acts, then God invites us to re-act.

First creation; then tend the garden.

First exodus; then ten commandments.

First the resurrection; then the repentance;

First kingdom come; then thy will be done, on earth after it is in heaven.

First the gospel of the Lord; then the reports of the staff.

First, God loves you, and your neighbor; then, and only then, love God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself.

Only after the music starts do the disciples begin to dance.

"That's nice, Pastor, but can we get to business?"

I've seen it over the years in the frustrated faces of well-intentioned council members trapped in twenty minutes of devotion -- twenty minutes, for Christ's sake -- when there is important hand-wringing yet to be done over the budget that will take at least an hour and a half.

Sure, we can have a potluck celebration, but only after the annual meeting, as a reward for accomplishing our constitutional duties.

There will be no play time and no dinner until you have finished your homework.

There will be no free time until the weekend, which if Mark were running the world, would probably be called the weekstart.

Work hard, then die, then God will decide whether you did enough to punch your ticket to paradise.

As Lutherans, we don't believe that, but as Americans we act like we do.

We take no time to look up and see the risen face on our lakeshore; there is far too much fishing to be done, too many nets to mend, to waste our time just looking around unproductively at what God has done on earth as it is in heaven.

God helps those who help themselves, it says in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, which is somewhere in the Bible, right?

As if we were the music and God's dance is waiting for us.

Even for those of us who live in chapter 17, who live on this side of the resurrection and name our church after it's easier for us to ask for God's blessing and sign-off on our agenda than to repent and believe and follow, for at least a couple of reasons.

One is that Jesus is so vague and maddeningly unspecific.

There is no agenda; no set of rules or instructions, which is why Matthew interrupted his revision of Mark and launched right into The Sermon on the Mount: to keep us busy with something.

The church has long found it much easier to follow Robert's Rules than Jesus' call, which is an invitation into an open and uncertain future, a tidy end stolen away and replaced with a messy beginning.

In the most recent issue of *The Lutheran*, Pastor William R. White wrote.

A few months ago, a parishioner approached me with this question: "When I listen to Christian radio, I hear a lot of people talking about the necessity of discovering God's plan for our lives...."

*Yet when I come to our church I don't hear anyone even referring to a plan. Why?
When we study the call stories in Scripture, we discover that they are not only
dangerous, they aren't detailed.
They seldom appear to have the look of a plan.
God's directives are more general.
We are called to do good and not evil.
God calls us to love our neighbors and even our enemies.
God calls us to go into the world and tell God's sacred story.
Furthermore, we are urged to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and visit those
sick and in prison.
All of this God does without providing a blueprint.
At best we are offered a rough outline, with God trusting us to work out the
details. (White, "Sounds Like a Plan", The Lutheran, January 2009)*

Today we will go through the agenda of the annual meeting, written by us because God didn't fax anything in.
But first we hear the call, the unspecific summons grounded first in good news, and it scares us, and it should.
The call, as Pastor White mentioned and explained earlier in his article, is dangerous, which is the other reason we'd rather follow Robert than Jesus.
The background, which if Mark's wise literary circle is to be trusted is also the foreground, is shadowed with trouble.
Jesus appears with good news exactly after John was arrested, literally *handed over*, the same thing that happened to Jesus on his way to the cross, the same thing he says will happen to his disciples in chapter thirteen, and chapter twenty-nine.
Good news breaks into a world of bad news.
Resurrection happens to the dead, which happens to those who follow Jesus.
People fished out of the water and into the kingdom are fish out of water; they die.
And then, after they die, they live.
It's a tough sell, especially with no specifics and an agenda that only reads, *Take up your cross and follow me*.
And taking up a cross means putting down the nets; following Jesus usually means leaving behind the father and the family business and the familiar.
What we think we need, what we treasure most, like support and specifics and a plan and a period at the end of the sentence, is all left behind.
And so is death, and despair.
Because when Jesus reaches the water's edge, he keeps walking.
When Jesus comes to the end, he keeps going, and keeps calling.
And so we keep repenting, and believing, and following.