My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Easter resurrection bodies, Hearts, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

Our scripture ends kind of abruptly, doesn’t it? Today’s story doesn’t have the happy ending we remember in our mind’s eye. But biblical scholars have told us a couple of things about the Gospels. First, the early church was hungry for some agreed, written accounts of what Jesus did and taught while here on earth. Second, none of the four Gospels were written down right after Jesus’ crucifixion and death in the year 33. Mark’s account was written about 40 years later, in the early 70s, after the destruction of the Temple and another unsuccessful revolt by the Jews against their Roman occupiers. Third, the early church had not yet come to the conclusion of a trinitarian God. That didn’t happen until the early 300s, some 290 years after Jesus’ death.

And so it’s little wonder that the first version of the Gospel of Mark, the one we read today, ended with just the facts: Jesus was no longer in the tomb. And the women who witnessed this event had two reactions: they were amazed, because what they saw and heard was not something that happens every day. But the Gospel also records that they fled in terror, because they didn’t know what to make of it all. And that was the end of the story for the earliest Christians.

I’ll tell you, if I had been there with them, I would have felt the same things, amazement and terror. It’s just too much to take in. Where do we go? How can we go forward? And what will that look like? And why did this happen?

We speak in metaphor when the questions are big. It’s the only way we can represent the enormity of the circumstances that surround us in the past and in the future. But our thirst for some meaning, some context, is with us in the present, our reality. And for those early Christians, Mark's Gospel as we have it in our reading today ends as abruptly as it began. There’s no background or introduction to Jesus' arrival, and none for his departure. No one knew where he came from; no one knows where he has gone; and not many understood him when he was here. And that’s no way to build a church. If we are to have faith, we have to know more.

So about 30 years later, in the early 100s, scholars tell us there were some verses added that helped us understand all that had been said, all that had been done, all that had been seen. In your pew Bibles, you’ll see these as Mark 16:9-20 with a small asterisk saying it’s a later addition. But it offers us the hope we have come to expect from Easter resurrection and guides our future. Hear now those words that have been accepted as the ending of the Gospel of Mark:

*Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.*

*After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.*

*Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”*

*So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.*

It somehow gives us that ‘and-they-lived-happier-ever-after’ quality to the story, doesn’t it? There’s some sense that Jesus had returned to Galilee, where it all began is where it will all begin again, and the tenets of faith and discipleship are clearly spelled out, in case we missed it the first time around while the Word was flesh and walked among us.

But you know what? As much as the first ending leaves us in a cliff-hanger and both fear and wonderment, it’s that abrupt ending that might be better for our faith than the certainty of the longer narrative meant to give us clarity and direction. We’ve talked about this before haven’t we? Certainty of what happens to us isn’t a realistic expectation. The world’s system or rewards do not match with what God has said is important. Jesus came to teach us what really matters, and the world has yet to prioritize the poor, disinherited, underprivileged, prisoner, or neighbor.

And yet for all of you sitting here or watching us on Facebook Live, you’re here because you believe, deep down, that God’s priorities are the ones which we should follow. Not easily follow, that’s not part of the bargain. But to follow them gives us greater capacity for God right here, right now, and it is THAT pursuit and spirit that we call the Kingdom of God. And it is the renewal of that purpose and pursuit that we celebrate as Easter. Death never has the last word. God raises us in the past, and in the future, to life everlasting. So we return to our question: what do we do with the present? I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Almost two millenia ago they asked the same question of themselves. They had their Scarlett O’Hara moment: But without you, Lord, where shall we go? What shall we do?

Mark's shorter ending and Gospel story of Jesus becomes the story of Jesus’ followers, and their story becomes the story of the readers. Whether they did, or whether we will, follow or abandon, believe or misunderstand, see him in Galilee or remain staring blindly into an empty tomb, depends on us. Quite possibly maybe is perhaps all the strength we have right now in our post-COVID reality and our everyday uncertainties, which remain large and unfulfilled. But all we can do is ask questions—but faithful ones, not the fearful ones. The decision is ours. Thanks be to God, Amen.