

Let us begin today in prayer.

Lord Jesus, on this day you demonstrated that the powers of sin and death, powers that have us in their grip, are no match for you. You entered the domain of death and defeated death. You took on the sins of the whole world and triumphed mightily.

We not only praise your name for your victory, but we are also bold to ask for a place within your triumphant reign. Teach us, in each day of our lives, to live in the light of your resurrection, to follow you into the realm of life and light, of forgiveness and peace. Amen.<sup>1</sup>

As we gather here on this Easter morning, we come together to once again hear the Good News that Jesus has triumphed mightily over the powers of Sin and death through his own death and resurrection.

And yet, today's Gospel reading from Mark doesn't quite paint that picture. Mark's Gospel ends abruptly, with an empty tomb, an angelic revelation that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and the instruction that the women should go find Jesus' disciples and tell them. And then we're told that they fled in terror and told no one, because they were afraid.

Now if you'll pick up the Bibles in front of you and flip to the ending of Mark, you'll see that this isn't the end of the story. Most of our Bibles have a little notation before verse 9 that says, "The longer ending of Mark." And the Gospel continues for twelve more verses. It includes several post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and his ascension into Heaven. And, we're told that the disciples "went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere."<sup>2</sup>

The historical study of the Bible seems to indicate that Mark intended for his Gospel to end at verse 8. The earliest existing manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark end here. And, given the significant stylistic differences between the longer ending and the rest of Mark, it is highly likely that this longer ending was added on at a later time. We can only suppose why this might be, but perhaps it was some copyist's attempt at trying to tie up this dangling loose end in Mark. I tend to believe that Mark very intentionally meant for his Gospel to end at verse 8. He meant for there to be this dangling, loose thread, because the story of Jesus is not yet finished.

And yet, there is one character for whom our story is finished. That character is represented by Satan: Sin and death.

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Mel Gibson's 2004 film, *The Passion of the Christ*, represents well this final end for Satan. How many of you here saw this film? I can understand if many of you did not. It is extremely violent, and certainly not something you'd pop into the DVD player for a relaxing evening at home. While Gibson did rely on many extra-Biblical sources that we Lutherans don't recognize as authoratative, this film is very theologically sound.

One of the ways that this film triumphs best is in its representation of the atonement – that's theological-speak for the attempt to explain how sin can be forgiven by God.<sup>3</sup> There are many theories to explain how Jesus' death brings us back into right relationship with God. And yet, there is no official dogma or single authoratative church teaching that declares exactly *how* Jesus' death obtains this for us.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the 2,000-year history of the Christian church many theories of atonement have been put forward. They can be gathered together into three major groups. The most widely-accepted of these theories, particularly in the Western world, is called the "ransom theory." We hear echoes of our captivity in need of ransom in our confession when we say, "We confess we are captive to sin and cannot free ourselves."<sup>5</sup>

One of the earliest explanations of this ransom theory, dating from the 4th Century, is called the “fishhook theory.” It goes like this:

Christ’s death on the cross was an elaborate trap laid for Satan. Satan, it was argued, held humanity so securely captive that God was unable to liberate them by any legitimate means, and thus resorted to divine deception. The humanity of Christ was the bait, and his divinity the hook. Unaware of Christ’s divinity, Satan was trapped through his humanity.<sup>6</sup>

One early Christian writer explains it this way:

[The purpose of the incarnation] was that the divine virtue of the Son of God might be like a kind of hook hidden beneath the form of human flesh... to lure on the prince of this world to a contest; that the Son might offer him his human flesh as a bait and that the divinity which lay underneath might catch him and hold him fast with its hook... Just as a fish when it seizes a baited hook not only fails to drag off the bait but is itself dragged out of the water to serve as food for others;

so he that had the power of death seized the body of Jesus in death, unaware of the hook of divinity which lay hidden inside. Having swallowed it, he was immediately caught. The gates of hell were broken, and he was, as it were, drawn up from the pit, to become food for others.<sup>7</sup>

This is where Gibson's film represents theology so well. It begins in the Garden of Gethsemane, with Jesus in extreme anguish as he prays to God. Satan is roaming free as tempter on earth. Satan says to him:

“Do you really believe that one man can bear the full burden of sin? No one man can carry this burden, I tell you. It is far too heavy. Saving their souls is too costly. No one. Ever. No. Never.”

Jesus then prays, “Father, you can do all things. If it is possible, let this chalice pass from me... but let your will be done, not mine.”

And Satan asks, “Who is your father? *Who are you?*”<sup>8</sup>

And so the hook is baited. Jesus – truly man and truly God. But to Satan, Jesus appears just as any other man, any other sinful man on whom Satan has a rightful claim.

Finally, at the end of the movie, just after Jesus breathes his last, we see the ground shake, the curtain of the Holy of Holies in the temple torn in two, and Satan cast down into captivity in hell. He had taken the bait. For attempting to lay claim to one on whom he had no claim – sinless Jesus – Satan is defeated. His grasp on humanity is broken, all through the life of one man, Jesus Christ.

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Remember back at Christmas I described the baby Jesus to you as the Christmas surprise? Today, at Easter, we proclaim the risen Christ as the Easter surprise. Certainly no one could have been more surprised at the true identity of Jesus than Satan. If Satan had known who Jesus truly is the trap would never have worked. But because the trap worked, *we* are now the ones who can proclaim Christ as the Easter surprise.

Those who came to his tomb on that first Easter morning were certainly surprised. So surprised, in fact, that we're told they fled in fear and told no one.

All throughout the Gospel of Mark Jesus had maintained his true identity as a secret. And yet, this is the end of the messianic secret in Mark. Even if we accept the shorter, abrupt ending to the Gospel of Mark, we know from the Gospel of John and the book of Acts that Jesus appeared many times to his disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Death most certainly was not the last word for Jesus, and it is not the last word for us *because* of Jesus. Because Jesus was given for us, we are truly free from our captivity to Sin and death.

This is our Easter surprise. The culmination of the best Christmas present ever. And so we can proclaim with confidence:

Christ is Risen!

**He is risen indeed! (3X)**

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, "The Never-ending Story," in Pulpit Resource, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Inver Grove Heights, MN: Logos Productions, 2009), 13.

<sup>2</sup> Mark 16:20

<sup>3</sup> "Atonement" from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atonement>, downloaded 4/11/09.

<sup>4</sup> "It is a commonplace to observe that there is no dogma of atonement. Although, in Christology there is dogma established at all seven ecumenical councils, no council - or pope or other plausibly ecumenical authority - has ever laid down a dogma of atonement." Robert W. Jensen, "On the Doctrine of Atonement," in *Reflections*, Vol. 9 (Princeton, NJ: Center of Theological Inquiry, 2006), at [http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/reflections\\_volume\\_9/jenson.htm](http://www.ctinquiry.org/publications/reflections_volume_9/jenson.htm), downloaded 4/11/09.

<sup>5</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 95.

<sup>6</sup> Alister E. McGrath, Editor, *The Christian Theology Reader, Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 334.

<sup>7</sup> "Rufinus of Aquileia on the 'Mousetrap' Theory of the Atonement" in Alister E. McGrath, Editor, *The Christian Theology Reader, Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 334-5.

<sup>8</sup> Mel Gibson, Director, *The Passion of the Christ*, 2004.