

Easter Day 2018. Our lives are an open ‘γάρ’

“It was only when they were high on the hill, two figures black against the snow, in the shadow of their house, the Scully’s feet began to hurt” Tim Winton, *The Riders*.

OR “She looked up and across the barn, and her lips came together and smiled mysteriously.” John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*.

OR “Odysseus obeyed her, with a happy heart. And presently Pallas Athene, Daughter of aegis-wearing Zeus, still using Mentor’s form and voice for her disguise, established peace between the two contending forces.” Homer, *The Odyssey*.

OR “And they all lived happily ever after.”

OR simply “The end.”

That is how stories end. Not with ‘and’, ‘but’, ‘for’, ‘so’, or the sharp intake of breath which suggests that there is more still to come. Stories end ... with an end; but not Mark’s gospel. Mark’s gospel ends with a little three letter word, ‘γάρ’ (pronounced ‘gar’). The problem is that ‘γάρ’ is a conjunction.

Lots of people know the famous retort of Winston Churchill when an editor altered a passage which he had written in which a sentence ended with a preposition. He apparently said "This is the kind of impertinence up with which I shall not put!" There are arguments for ending a sentence with a preposition, but not with a conjunction. The ‘but’ in my last sentence is a conjunction. It is a way of saying – ‘there is more to come in this sentence’. As the name for the type of word suggests it ‘joins’ what has been said to what is coming next.

But Mark’s gospel finishes with ‘γάρ’. No other book in the ancient world finished with ‘γάρ’. It just wasn’t done. It doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t finish the story.

When Mark’s gospel was copied and recopied scribes tried to make up for Mark’s ‘silly mistake’ and added some suggestions of alternate endings. You may have a Bible with some of those printed but they will be (or should be) always in square brackets to show that they are later additions. Mark’s gospel, the last words of which we read this morning (Mark 16:1-8) ends without ending. And that is deliberate.

The Jewish people, who included Mark, and Jesus, and all the disciples, and most of the first readers and hearers of this gospel, lived with a very strong sense of story. They lived with a real and connected sense of ‘the story’. ‘The story’ of the people of God. ‘The story’ of thousands of years and thousands upon thousands of people interacting with God. The story wasn’t on the outside of them – something to read and hear and study. It was on the inside. It was part of them and their lives. The Jewish people of Jesus’ time, and before, and since, knew in their hearts that they lived at the front of the wave of a story which began with the ripples created when the Spirit of God moved across the waters (Genesis 1). The story recorded in the Scriptures was their story, shared story, and they identified with it deeply.

We caught a glimpse of that on Thursday evening when we placed the celebration of the Passover in the context of our celebration of Holy Week. When members of the continuing Jewish community celebrate Passover they say “In every generation each person should regard themselves as though they had personally gone up out of Egypt.” They looked back, as we do also. They looked back to tell and re-tell and share the stories SO THAT they could then look forward with a richer sense of who they were, why they were there and how their lives had been shaped.

For people of ‘the story’, being at the front of the wave came with a responsibility. That responsibility was to live faithfully the unfolding of the story, to live richly and deeply and to live in such a way that their lives became rich parts of the story on which future generations would look back and from which they would draw strength and inspiration as they then lived forward.

This whole week has been a retelling of the story to set it in context. This morning, at the service which began before dawn with lighting of the new fire, we began by reading from the beginning and by setting our celebration in the context of all that has gone before. Some years we read lots of passages. Some years we read a few highlights of the story. Whichever pattern we use the reason is to draw us into the richness of the surge of the wave which surrounds and propels us forward in our engagement with the life which is before us.

We may need reminding of that, but I think we pick it up intuitively also. As Australians that sense of a shared story is part of our culture. Easter often falls close to Anzac Day, a time when the simple words ‘Digger’ and ‘Aussie battler’ and even ‘Mate’ echo in us symphonies of resonance, print in our minds reams of history and weave threads which stretch back over several generations entwining us in a tapestry which is OUR story.

We are invited to encounter the same resonance, connection and context as we share the story today of the first witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus. They had come to the tomb, grieving but wanting to ‘do something’. They looked where they expected to see Jesus’ body and heard those startling words. “ἡγέρθη, οὐκ ἔστιν ὧδε.” “He has been raised; He is not here.” (Mark 16:6)

The words disturbed them so deeply, moved them so profoundly, that these women got up and ran. ... and ... What did they do next? That is what comes after the ‘γάρ’. The story ends without ending.

Do you want to know what happens next? Read on. Read in the rest of the New Testament. Read the stories of the early church. Read the lives and the trials and struggles and joys and amazing transformations in the lives of the people whose hearts were grabbed by the profound truth encapsulated in those few words. Death is turned on its head. Life is viewed, from this moment on, through a different window.

No, not ‘viewed through’. Like the disturbance which moved the women so much that they got up and ran WE are invited to jump through that different window – not just to observe a different world as an interesting phenomenon, but to become immersed in it ourselves! A world in which love overcomes fear, love transforms hate, love gives birth to joy and hope. A world in which love triumphs!

The reason for the ‘γάρ’ is that the wave rolls forward. The point of the story is not for us just to look back and to hear, with interest, how, ‘those people long ago’ responded to the news that Jesus is risen. We have just heard it. The news is here. It confronts us. What will we do now? Our lives also are an open ‘γάρ’. And ...?

For most of us isn’t our first Easter. This isn’t the first time we have heard the words. This isn’t the first time we have heard that “He has been raised; He is not here.” – though you may not have heard them in Greek before. “ἡγέρθη” “He is risen!” Alleluia!!

For most of us, since the first time we heard that news, the wave has rolled forward. Perhaps we have been moved to live acts of compassion and mercy. Perhaps we have been stirred deeply with a passion for justice and a desire to share our hearts and lives with others – in Nepal, in Syria, in Rwanda, in South Sudan, in the parklands of our city and in other places.

Perhaps we have been inspired to discover hope, and life, and have such compassion with those who share our lives, share our world, share our neighbourhood, that we walk with them and talk with them and allow the unfolding in that sharing of what makes the journey sustaining and fruitful for us – we care so deeply about them that we share ‘the story’ with them.. Perhaps ... perhaps lots of consequences have become ripples and surges in our lives.

These acts are part of the wave which rolls with greater force and deeper resonance because the wave of our story includes that startling fact “ἡγέρθη” “He is risen!” And ... the story continues. Each of our lives is an open ‘γάρ’. What now? What next?? Life is changed by the resurrection, the defeat of death, the life of Christ.

What happens now is over to you. Live forward. ... 'and' ... 'so' ... what are you going to do about it???

'γάρ'?

Paul Mitchell