*“Let's start at the very beginning
A very good place to start
When you read, you begin with A-B-C
When you sing, you begin with Do-Re-Mi”*

But when we are talking about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, we begin with Mark.

Listen again to the first verse of Mark’s Gospel: “*the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the son of God.”*

At first glance, this sentence seems unimportant. In fact, if this Gospel had been edited today, the editor might have recommended cutting this sentence out as it seems obvious.

And yet…

And yet, it is very important.

Mark’s Gospel embodies beginnings in many ways.

First, Mark’s Gospel is the first Gospel written, so it is the beginning of the written Gospel tradition.

According to the church historian Eusebius, who lived in the late 3rd and early 4th centuries, Mark’s Gospel was written down by Peter’s nephew, John-Mark. "*Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things done or said by Christ.”*

Second: Today is Advent 2, meaning we are still at the beginning of Year B in our three year lectionary cycle. In year B, we Mark’s Gospel more than half of our Sundays.

As we read through Mark this year, pay attention to how many times we hear the word “immediately.”

While we do not hear Mark’s sense of immediacy this morning, please believe me that the Greek word often translated into “immediately” occurs 10 times in the first chapter of Mark.

Although to be fair, the translators do use other synonyms such as: “just then” and “at once” to vary the language.

Third, our reading today is quite literally, the first words in the Gospel of Mark. So, it is the beginning of this particular book.

But even more importantly, this Gospel is the beginning of the good news of Jesus, a gospel that still continues today, in and through us, as we continue…

This first verse is not just an introduction to the book of Mark, but an invitation for us to become a part of the Gospel.

One of the odd things about Mark’s Gospel is that the original ending to the book ends with the women seeing a young man dressed in white at the tomb, running off and too afraid to tell anyone what they had seen. If you look at your Bibles, you will see footnotes, pointing out that the oldest copies of Mark’s Gospels ended with chapter 16:8.

***5****As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.****6****But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.****7****But 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.”****8****So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

In other words, Mark’s Gospel originally ended with a cliffhanger.

There are many theories as to why Mark originally ended his Gospel wit the women running way.

One theory suggests that the story of the resurrection was so well known, Mark didn’t feel the need to write it down.

But my favorite theory is that Mark’s Gospel originally ended this way to imply that we are sent out, to continue the story, to be bearers of the good news into the world.

The beginning of the gospel is Jesus coming into the world, but the end of the Gospel is not yet written, and we, as followers and disciples of Jesus are called to continue to story.

John Mark wrote the stories he heard his uncle tell time and time again, spreading the good news of Jesus throughout the world.

But the Good News of Jesus is not to be simply heard, we are called to embody the Gospel, in our whole selves- thoughts, words and deeds.

Not because we want to earn our place in heaven.

We are called to embody the Gospel because once we experience the grace of God, we cannot help wanting to share it with the world.

All around us, we see a world that worships the idols of money, power and things.

And yet, none of these idols can bring us true joy.

We dream about winning the lottery but while money can solve many problems, it often brings on a host of new ones.

And idols cannot love us or care for us. They cannot give us anything more than a brief sense of false happiness.

But God, the one true God, the maker of all things has proven his love for us.

In Jesus, God takes on our flesh and bone to walk beside us in the good and the bad.

And in Jesus, God willing dies for us as evidence of God’s love for humanity in spite of our cruel and sinful nature.

Luke tells us that on the cross one of the thieves crucified with him asked Jesus to save him despite recognizing that he deserved his death sentence,

Luke 23:39-43

*One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him: “Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!”*

***40****But the other criminal rebuked him. “Don’t you fear God,” he said, “since you are under the same sentence?****41****We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.”*

***42****Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”*

***43****Jesus answered him, “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

Jesus doesn’t ask him to prove his love or obedience, he tells the man that he is saved and that “today you will be with me in paradise.”

The story of the thief reminds us time and time again that God’s love, God’s acceptance, God’s grace is not earned. It is a gift, with no strings attached.

And isn’t that the core message of the Gospel, of the good news of Jesus, that God’s love for us, embodied in Jesus is unexpected and unearned. The Good news is the grace of Jesus, witnessed through his life, death and resurrection.

And once you experience that grace, how can we not go out into the world proclaiming it to all who will hear? Amen.