

Keep on believing

Part 1 of a 3-part series reflecting on the ending(s) of John's Gospel, ch20 & 21.

Rev Dan Balsdon | April 2021 | read online at www.revdanbalsdon.com

Do you ever get stuck knowing how to end a letter or an email? I don't write letters very often, but send many emails, and often pause as I end wondering what the most appropriate ending might be. 'Every blessing', 'best wishes', 'regards', 'in Christ'. Since the pandemic began I often use 'in peace and hope'.

I find it fascinating that 2 of the 4 gospels in the bible sort of have 2 endings. Mark has a shorter and longer ending in chapter 16 – depending on which original texts you look at. Often our bibles make this clear with headings and footnotes.

Headings and footnotes don't usually appear in the same way in John – but it is also thought to have a first and second ending. When we read it, chapter 20 feels to have a natural end – but then, goes on with chapter 21. Many scholars think (though not all!) that chapter 21 was added to the text of John's gospel at some stage after the first version of the gospel was created.

All the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are stories of persuasion and intrigue and encouragement. Stories of the life of Jesus, the impact he had on the communities he travelled through, and the lives he touched and transformed.

Each gospel comes from a different perspective and was written for differing communities and audiences. Some repeat stories told in other gospels; others hold stories unique only to them. Few stories occur in all 4.

After telling its version of the story – John's gospel comes to its first end as we read the last verses of John 20:

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:30-31

The phrase interpreted here as 'may come to believe' can equally be interpreted as may continue believing, or keep on believing.

Some scholars believe this second translation is in fact the one intended by John's author. They argue that one of the key principles of John's gospel is that it was written not only to persuade and encourage people to believe, but equally, if not primarily, to encourage and sustain the continuing believing of a persecuted and struggling community, who were not the original witnesses to its story.

The text we now call John's gospel comes from, probably, around 70AD, 40 or so years on from Jesus' ministry. The text therefore comes from a point in history where the Jesus-story was being passed on from the original witness to the next generation. This generation, who's faith up to now had been sustained by the original witnesses, were now themselves the custodians of the story. These custodians needed encouragement to continue believing the story and sharing its life-giving power with others, despite the fact they were not original witnesses.

2000 years on, the story continues to be passed on, so I think we can say they did an ok job.

Before we get to this first ending of the gospel, we have read another important story – Jesus' post-resurrection appearance to the disciples.

They are locked in a room together, grieving, fearful, lost. And into that room filled with uncertainty and fear Jesus appears and says, "peace be with you." and breathes on them saying "Receive the Holy Spirit".

John's gospel begins with the word that was with God and was God (1:1) – who comes to dwell among us (1:14). **An echo the story of origin what** we find in Genesis 1. Now, as we reach a climax to John's gospel the word that was made flesh and dwelt among us, now breathes the very presence of God upon us.

This promised presence flows throughout the story that is John's gospel. In chapter 14 Jesus promises the comforter will come to remind what Jesus has taught them and continue teaching more of the story to the community. (John 14:26)

John's gospel reminds us that what we read in scripture is not the whole story – that the gospel story lives on through the very presence of God – the Holy Spirit – living among us. There is more to be taught, more to be reminded, more to be said. [hence, perhaps, chapter 21 gets added in!]

If the story lives on among us and within us, that means our stories become part of the gospel story – the good news story – that is the transforming life and love of Jesus among us.

So while here in John we are told here is enough of the story that you can believe and keep on believing, by God's presence with us and in us we too have our own stories to tell of how our human story and God's story have entwined. Stories of our experience of our lives transformed by the transforming life of Christ.

These stories we can share remind us and witness to the truth that God's presence is with us, and they encourage us and others to keep on believing.

So friends, what story are you going to tell today?