

Soul Tending: Resurrection

Mark 16:1-8

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When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. 3 They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) 5 Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. 6 But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. 7 Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." 8 Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. (CEB)

All my favorite stories end with flight, terror, and dread, of course. Certainly Easter, one of the two bastion days of the Christian faith, is all about silence.

Of course not—Easter is bombastic and triumphant, filled with John and Matthew's storybook revelations, the ones where Jesus sticks around to have a heartwarming moment and Mary Magdalene gives the first Easter sermon. Easter is for the stories where the fear of the crucifixion is sloughed off in the bright light of the resurrection morning, the cold shadow of the tomb wholly overwhelmed by lilies and trumpets and stained-glass symphonies that easily segue into satisfying brunches (ham optional, deviled eggs necessary).

But Mark—oldest and shortest gospel, most immediate in his determination to tell the story—was not interested in trumpets or brunch. There's a saying that in every Good Friday is the promise of Easter for those of us who live in this next chapter of the story, the ones who know the ending. But Mark understood that the reverse is true; in every Easter is the specter of Good Friday, not because the triumph over death is incomplete but precisely because it *is total*; resurrection isn't impressive unless someone really and truly died first.

"When the Sabbath was over," Mark grounds us at the beginning of today's reading. We as readers have no break between the burial and this dawn; chapter 15 ends with Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph watching from a little way off as Joseph of Arimathea wraps Jesus' body and lays it in the tomb. The grief of the intervening days, the fear, the anger, the confusion are all off-stage, as it were, narrative sacrifices as the story continues "when the Sabbath was over." Yet we feel them here from the very beginning, feel their clouding effects; anyone who has grieved knows that grief distorts your memory and ability to reason.

"Very early, on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb," Mark writes, and our centuries of art have three self-assured women making their pilgrimage to their friend with all the grace of women who were culturally well-aware of how to honor their dead.

The three days have taken their toll, though; as they walk, the women ask each other, “Who’s going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?”

Tombstones, low and circular things, are incredibly heavy not just to deter graverobbers but also for any animals who might be looking for a safe place to sleep—or for an easy meal. It’s plausible that the women would not have been strong enough to move it, yet they went to the tomb anyway with spices in hand. They had no full plan, no smooth comfort in the next step. This isn’t a beautiful trip on a glorious Easter morning but a desperate, fierce defiance of the thought that their friend, their teacher would have to spend even one more minute alone and unloved in a borrowed tomb. They couldn’t not go for this final goodbye, even if they had no idea how it was going to work. The only version of their love that held integrity demanded they gather up their spices and go.

They arrive and the stone—a very large stone, the Greek makes sure to point out, because Mark may be short, but he is a storyteller, and he wants to make sure we’re paying attention enough to be impressed—is rolled away. Without question or discussion, the women go in. This is the part of the story where we would yell at the screen or the page for the character not to go into the creepy basement where the murderer is definitely lurking; the tomb had no windows or secondary exit and was carved into stone. Even if there was no human threat, what if the stone suddenly rolled back and trapped them inside? In a world strange enough that the stone was rolled away in the first place, it could happen. Where is their sense of safety! Of self-preservation! What fool walks into a tomb?

These fools. These first saints, trailblazers who have watched a man die an incredibly humiliating death and still show up to say there has to be more to the story. Safety doesn’t recommend that they enter, but their grief does. These women moving through the lightening shadows of dawn with hands full of sorrow and spices need to find out whether something has happened to Jesus, the One they love, whether at human or animals’ hands. Their love rooted in integrity demanded that they go into the tomb just to see—and something has indeed happened.

“Don’t be alarmed!” says the man sitting in the tomb who startles the women, and we who are reading for the first or the four thousandth time immediately know Something Is Up because only angels say “do not be afraid” when it is absolutely the correct response to be startled. Of course, the women were startled; no one expects to find a living person in a tomb, especially if it’s a different person than the one who was buried there to begin with. “Jesus isn’t here,” the man continues, “go, tell the disciples that you’ll see Him in Galilee.” Here we see the glimpses of lily-laden Easter; although Mark is the only gospel where Jesus Himself doesn’t make an appearance at the resurrection, we see the imprint, the promise of the resurrected Christ. Let’s go to Galilee, we think, let’s go, Good Friday is over, see, it is Sunday, there is hope.

“Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

One of the most powerful things about Mark’s abrupt ending is the reality of the weight of it. We have not seen the three days of waiting, fearing, grieving, wishing, but these women have. Their world fell apart, and in this oldest of surviving endings, all those emotions come out in response to the announcement of Jesus’ resurrection: when the Sabbath was over, the women went to the tomb and met a man who said Jesus wasn’t there, and they left—not only left but *fled*, overcome with terror and dread.

They fled. These three women watched at the crucifixion and wept with Jesus; they stood in silent witness as His body was buried in the stone. When the other disciples fled in terror, they stayed—but this? This was apparently the last straw, this man in white telling them a story that was far, far too good to be true. How dare he say such a thing, speaking to their deepest hope that lay mangled at the foot of a cross?

“Mark’s version is disquieting,” writes Episcopal author Debie Thomas. “We get no glimpses of the risen Jesus. Peter and the other disciples are nowhere to be seen. When a young man in a white robe tells Mary Magdalene and her two companions that Jesus has been raised from the dead, the women don’t cry out in joy; they respond with ‘alarm,’ ‘terror,’ and ‘amazement.’ The angel’s announcement of Good News inspires neither belief nor transformation. We witness no Easter proclamation, no narrative arc from hopelessness to certitude. Instead, we witness fear, flight, and silence.”¹

And yet today is Easter; we have observed Good Friday and done away with it, arching forward to this most Christian of holy days. Someone told the story, clearly, because for two thousand years we have been telling it again; today, the Hallelujah chorus still gets sung, Christ is still declared risen, and the deviled eggs still arrive and are devoured because the thing about Easter is that it isn’t a neatly packaged story of erased grief in the face of daffodil joy. Easter is the hope that claws open the tomb and bursts into the darkness. Mark gives us a wild and beautiful mess, a cliffhanger ending about a God Who will not be limited by our desire to ignore all the ways Good Friday lingers in our own souls. Thomas continues, “isn’t the really good news this? That the truth of the resurrection doesn’t depend on the religious performance or the spiritual stamina of us flailing human beings? It doesn’t matter one bit if we believe on the spot or not. The tomb is empty. Death is vanquished. Jesus lives. Period. We are not in charge of Easter; God is.”²

Does it give you peace, Church, to be reminded that Jesus lives whether you remembered the deviled eggs or not? Does it give you hope that God is at work in the world even when the stories we are creating are full of death and destruction instead of resurrection? I find it the most reassuring possible thing that joy does not wait for us to create it; hope does not wait for us to give it permission; the Christ does not wait for us to come to the garden and free Him because He is already on the way, telling the story, inviting us to follow along to all the new, messy, beautiful adventures yet ahead.

Professor Audrey West writes, “At the beginning of his ministry in Mark, when Jesus calls his disciples, he invites them to ‘follow me’... The same Greek phrase appears in the episode at Caesarea Philippi, when... [Jesus] calls the crowds with his disciples and teaches all of them, ‘If anyone wants to follow *opisō mou*, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’ (8:34). Thus, from the beginning, the proper place for a disciple of Jesus is behind (or after) him, recalling that Jesus is ahead of them—even when they are unable to see him. If Jesus ‘goes ahead of us in death, can there be any doubt that he will be there ahead of us wherever life might take us?’”³

¹ Journey with Jesus – Slow Easter

² Ibid

³ Commentary on Mark 16:1-8 – Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, 2024

Besides being Easter, today—March 31—is also Trans Day of Visibility. The international day of celebration was created in 2010 by trans advocate Rachel Crandall—the head of Transgender Michigan so this is a homegrown holiday.⁴ The only thing that recognized transgender people at the time was Trans Day of Remembrance, a day in November that honors those who are killed for being trans or gender-nonconforming. Trans folk were only given Good Friday and Crandall wanted there to be more to the trans narrative than violence and death; she wanted there to be a day that revels in trans joy, in the fullness of life that we live, in the ferocity of the promise that we cannot be erased no matter how many people try, in the Easter resurrection that says we remember the dead and fight like hell for the living.⁵ On this day, we take time to recognize that the stories of trans people are still unfolding, still going on ahead to Galilee, still filled with fear enough to flee sometimes but also ferocious in the unyielding wonder that our resurrection stories are so much more powerful than the systems that condemn us to death.

Good Friday never goes away, but the intensity of Easter is not from the lilies or the trumpets or even the deviled eggs; it is the sheer, reality-bending power that there was death and then *there was life*, there was hope, there was a new and open door to the ongoing story, there was grace enough to keep going even after flight and silence. On Easter, we celebrate life; abundant life, beautiful life, messy and glorious life. We celebrate the love that goes to a tomb that might be unopenable; we celebrate the courage to walk into a lightless room and find out; we hold close the fear of being asked to tell a story that will change the world without even the reassuring words of the risen Savior to help bolster us and know that fear is not the end of what God is doing with and through us.

Nancy has been leading us through Lent using the poetry of Mary Oliver and chose for today, for Easter, the poem “The Summer Day”:

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?⁶

⁴ Transgender Day of Visibility/GLADD

⁵ On Trans Day of Visibility, founder Rachel Crandall-Crocker reflects on year 15:NPR

⁶ The Summer Day/Library of Congress (loc.gov)

You don't need to fully know what a prayer is to marvel at Easter; you don't need to be able to be idle and blessed to recognize the gut punch of Good Friday. If you need to take time to flee in fear, that's okay. Once you come back, what do *you* plan to do with your wild and precious story, your unfolding resurrection, your invitation to Galilee, your recognition that the sorrow lingers but the hope overwhelms? God invites you, beloved, to see that Jesus is not in the tomb; He has gone on ahead, risen, alive, beckoning. Will you follow, stepping into the power of Easter one hesitant stutter-step at a time? Will you let yourself grieve, hands full of spices and heart full of hope, until the tears turn into joy that transforms both you and the world? It doesn't have to be today, no matter how powerful the hymns are, but we're headed to Galilee past a broken cross and an empty tomb to tell an impossible story of wonder. Christ is risen; we are changed; let us go and tell the world that it matters, oh, it matters. Amen.