

Soul Tending: Resurrection

Mark 16:1-8

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Perhaps you will recognize these words. “And they all lived happily ever after. The End.” Sound familiar? Of course, these words are the ending of all the fairy tales we learned growing up. Cinderella married the Prince, and they all lived happily ever after. The End. Snow White married the Prince, and they all lived happily ever after. The End. The Beauty, Belle, married the Beast who turned out to be a Prince - and they, too, all lived happily after. The End.

As children, we delighted in the familiarity of those words. A happy ending feels good and right. Everything gets tied up neatly in a bow. The good people get what they deserve. The bad people get what they’ve got coming. Princesses and Princes prevail, and all is right with the world once more.

But, as adults, it’s a different story - or a different ending, at least. We recognize that happily ever after is often not the way things play out - particularly for people who are not princes or princesses and do not have easy access to a fairy godmother, seven dwarves, or a singing candlestick and teapot. Yet, I think that we never lose that desire for the story to feel complete, the plot resolved, and, we still hope, have a happy ending.

So, when we read the Easter story in the gospel of Mark, we are startled by the end. “Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.” And that’s it. No “Alleluia”. No “He is risen”. No “guess what boys, we found out first”. The gospel just ends there with silence, terror, and dread. In fact, the words in the Greek are “trauma and ecstasy”. The women are so overwhelmed by emotion, they don’t do anything. The story just stops.

For us, it feels abrupt, upsetting, and certainly incomplete. We know how it’s supposed to end. The women rush back to the disciples to announce the good news and then Jesus makes an appearance and tells them to go out into the world and share the gospel. A far cry from Mark’s ending.

But I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s look at the story as it unfolds.

As we near the end of Mark’s gospel, we learn that three women - Mary, Mary, and Salome - are headed out to Jesus’ tomb so they can anoint his body with oils and spices. No doubt they are still grieving. After all, they just watched this man they were devoted to be crucified. Unlike the twelve (or now eleven) disciples, these three stayed and watched until they saw Jesus breathe his last. No wonder they felt traumatized. He was the center point of their world, their teacher, mentor, healer, and savior who had been forced through a mock trial, beaten and humiliated by soldiers, and then made to carry the horizontal beam of his cross as they paraded him through the city. So different from the triumphal parade as he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday.

The next day was the Sabbath, meant to be a day of rest, though rest seems doubtful for those who just lost Jesus. So, it's not until the next day, early in the morning, when they set out for the tomb where Jesus lay. On their way, they begin to discuss a problem. Who will roll away the gigantic stone that seals the tomb? The stone was intentionally heavy to deter graverobbers, so it's unlikely they could move it themselves.

Much to their surprise, they discover that someone has already pushed the stone out of the way. When they enter the tomb to investigate, they are shocked to find that Jesus is gone, and a young man is sitting there instead. The young man tells them that Jesus isn't there, he is risen, and instructs them to tell the others. But they don't go. Instead, Mark tells us, "Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid."

In the early church, Mark's ending was so unsettling that a number of people tried writing a different ending to Mark - one more aligned with Matthew, Luke, and John. They tacked these endings onto the rest of the gospel. We'll take a look at a couple of them in two weeks.

However, there are many scholars who, after years of research and debate, have concluded that Mark intentionally left his gospel incomplete. His words didn't get lost, nor was he distracted. This ending was purposeful.

If that is true, why would he do that? Why leave the story unfinished? Why deny us our happy ending? Perhaps Mark is trying to tell us the story isn't over. Perhaps the silence of the women is an invitation for us to speak our own stories, our own need for redemption, our own brokenness into this grand story of God's victory over hate and cruelty, violence and death. We, too, have lived in trauma and ecstasy. We, too, long for a new beginning. Perhaps Mark leaves the story unfinished so that each of us, across generations, cultures, languages, each of us can finish it in conversation with our own lives.

Rev. Serene Jones writes: "God is present not only in the loud hallelujahs and glorious proclamations of a grand, churchly Easter morning ... God persists as well in the midst of speechlessness, in death, in the outer regions of our own experiences and of our social lives, where life unfolds underfoot, as it were. God redeems the nether regions of life where we are broken by violence and by love and by the sheer exhaustion of the labor it takes to go on. Here, where we expect to find him dead, the tomb does not hold him."

Mark reminds us that it need not hold us either. I don't know what keeps you entombed, what stories from the past constrain you or burden you, shame you or frighten you. Only you know for yourself. Perhaps there is abuse in your history, a failed marriage, a church which has hurt you, or a system that rejected you. Perhaps you still hear a parent's voice doubting you or a coach criticizing you. Perhaps you still carry regret for the harm you caused someone else. What is standing between you and living fully, embracing life as the whole person God created you to be?

Whatever it may be, the message of Easter is that if God can roll away the stone that blocks Jesus' tomb, God can roll away whatever stone blocks yours. Jesus is risen! He defeated the systems of power and dominance, abuse and cruelty that paved the way to his death. And with his resurrection, we are freed from whatever stands between us and wholeness, us and the love and life God has given us. We have only to invite God to roll the stone away, to say, I want to be

free of guilt and self-blame, insecurity, resentment, and fear. I want to live authentically myself on the foundation of God's love for me.

The ending of the Gospel is ours to write. That is what Easter invites us to. That is what it means to live a resurrection life, to embrace the new beginning God offers us. The rest of the story is up to us. With this new beginning comes choice and opportunity. We get to choose where we go with this gift we've been given.

In her poem, "The Summer Day", poet Mary Oliver writes:

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?

Friends, your one wild and precious life is God's gift to you on this Easter. Don't let the cruelty of this world, the overwhelming or unexpected, the traumatic or ecstatic leave you silent and afraid. Don't let the end of your story be written by characters from your past. Grab hold of this life! Burst out of the tomb! And as you do, reach out a hand and bring someone else with you!

Christ is risen!
He is risen, indeed!
May it be so. Amen.