

The Next Steps

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Psalm 118
Mark 16:1-8

What kind of ending is this? Or is it even an ending, I wonder?

Flight, fear and silence.

Not what we bargained for on Easter. We're here to celebrate unequivocally. But we're left with a strange finale to Mark's story. It's abrupt, ambiguous, unsettling. You can scarcely call this version of the resurrection triumphal. Instead, it raises questions, leaves much unresolved. A little too much like our own lives.

The unbounded joy of this day is restrained in the gospel of Mark. Yet it's the tale we have before us on this particular Easter. Here we get an unromanticized conclusion that doesn't really offer closure — or at least not the kind most of us might want.

This morning, we gather in the company of these three women, friends and followers of Jesus. We have much in common with them. We find ourselves here to encounter what they encounter, to respond with them, to wonder at the strangeness of what we discover.

For them, after all the agony, there are questions that remain open. What happened? What does it mean? What comes next? There is an awful lot that's not clear.

That's why, of course, attempts were made to correct Mark's mistake by re-writing the finale later. It would be best, some thought, to present a better image of the 12 disciples, an indisputable picture of the risen Christ, some proof of power. No matter what Mark intended. The often-footnoted verses 9-20 are the efforts of those who wanted a more palatable ending to the story ... one where everything is clear.

We, I suspect, understand something about this revisionist hope. This is how it is for me, and perhaps for some of you: Not only because of my own questions and doubts about the mystery of resurrection, but maybe even more because of what I know about the anguish of the world's peoples, it seems almost irreverent to say that I know the truth of new life coming from death.

Who am I to speak these words to a genocide survivor, or a mother watching her child die of hunger? What right do I have to proclaim resurrection to a friend battling deep depression, or a woman battered by someone she thought she loved? No matter what I have seen and believe, I hesitate to speak too boldly or loudly because it seems an affront, a disrespect to those who have suffered much. So I understand why some wanted to alter Mark's ending. It would be good to see Jesus and hear him at this moment, as was described in some of the encounters in the other gospels. It would be reassuring to know in an incontestable way what we believe and experience in faith.

Marked by the agonies of our time, we yearn for a decisive and unambiguous trust that life does come from death. Maybe this is what this story offers — the tomb IS empty, Jesus is not confined there ... but little else is so clear in Mark.

Here, the community of disciples whose names are best known is scattered and confused. Many of them, who were closest to him, have struggled to trust him throughout the stories Mark tells in the gospel. And now the most prominent among them — Peter, James, John — seem to have vanished. It appears that the powerful who were responsible for Jesus' death knew who he was, saw the threat to the status quo that he represented and acted decisively. Some of his followers are less certain about things.

But the women, thank God, have at least shown up. Unlike Peter and James and John and all the other disciples who are absent, they've come this morning. The women may have been shaken, may be unsure, but they have made their way to the tomb.

It is hard to talk about even now; I have hesitated for much of my life to speak of it. He was so remarkable, the way he traveled from town to town, healing and preaching, bringing hope where there was only despair. And yet in the end it seems all people want to talk about is his death.

We had been with him in his ministry, and we were there until the end. We watched as our beloved Jesus was tried and tortured, was killed like a common criminal.

Then before we could get any of our men to take him down from the cross, Joseph, from Arimathea, asked Pilate for Jesus' body. Joseph — he had watched from a distance all week. Was he doing this because he cared about Jesus or because he wanted him out of the way? He certainly couldn't have loved Jesus the way we loved him. Joseph didn't know Jesus the way we knew him, the way we know him.

Joseph took his body, I didn't see where. Mary Magdalene and Jesus' mother Mary followed at a distance to make sure they knew where he was laid. When they told me how Joseph had just wrapped a flimsy cloth around Jesus, not even covering him adequately, not praying or anointing him, I knew we had to go as soon as we could. But it was the Sabbath so we waited, a very long day, not much rest for a Sabbath. It was agonizing: weeping, wondering what we would find.

We spent the last money and energy we had to buy the oils and spices to anoint his body. After all he had done for us, after all the healing he had offered — after all we are Jewish. He needed a proper burial.

Oh my Jesus.

On the way to the tomb, we whispered to each other, our grief, our memories. Mary J. — that's what we call Jesus' mother since so many of her sons' names start with J — Jesus, James, Joses, Judah.

Mary J. began talking about how hard it had been these past few years, following her son. She wasn't intending to follow him all over the countryside as he taught. But early on, after he had started walking and preaching, he came home for a short visit. We knew that he was being followed by huge crowds. but then the religious leaders began to follow him as well. They were there not so much to learn as to create diversion — division.

Many of us were taken with his message. He preached straight from the Holy Scriptures. He was helping people, he was calling people to see their oppression; he offered new freedom. Of course those who held the power, the Roman authorities and even our own Jewish leaders, were threatened. When thousands of men, women **and** children, flock to see a rabbi — it creates chaos. It was a new day for some of us and a warning for others.

Mary J. spoke of that time, when he came home — presumably for a reprieve. There were so many people that Jesus and his closest disciples couldn't even sit down at table to eat. They hadn't learned how to take a break from all the healing. Mary J.

was starting to worry that something wasn't quite right with Jesus. She had some of her brothers go try to talk some sense into him. But he wouldn't listen to them.

I was there, later that day when Mary J. herself came with the rest of her sons, to try and talk to Jesus. I know she didn't want to stop him from preaching. She just wanted him to rest from his work, to come with her and have a hot, home-cooked meal. One of the people closest to the door told Jesus that his mother and his brothers were outside, that that they wanted to talk to him. But he just said, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Where is my family?" And then he looked all around at those of us there, and we were a lot of people I can tell you. He opened his arms wide and he said, "This is my family." He pointed right at me, Salome, and said "Here is my mother and these are my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, is my mother, my brother, my sister."

He had me, right there. I had only come out of curiosity, to hear what he had to say since he was home again. There had been so many rumors flying around that I figured: why not see what all the uproar is about. But now, he had looked right at me and called me his mother. He had named all of us his family.

When I told Mary J. about it later she said to me, "Salome, if he has included you in our family — then we are sisters. If this son of ours won't let us feed him at home, I guess we will have to follow after him and feed him as he travels."

And so we did, we became part of Jesus' traveling group. The men got most of the attention, but we could often hear Jesus when he was telling stories or explaining parables even though we were not in the inner circle. I sometimes wondered if he didn't talk just a little bit louder so we women could hear too.

I could go on and on about following Jesus all over the countryside and into the towns too. Oh, the stories of the women and children that he healed, the way he challenged the religious leaders ever so gently at first. I could tell you about how he tried to get away from the crowds — that would have taken a miracle in itself. I could talk all day about Jesus, but to really understand him, to really make sense of his life and then his death? I am still trying to understand that.

His death, that was one of the hardest things I have ever gone through. He had called me mother; it was as if I lost my own son. And Mary Magdalene, she was like a sister. And of course for Mary J., who had birthed him. The pain was excruciating for us all as we watched him suffer. We could do nothing. So when we saw that he had died, the two Marys followed his body to the tomb with plans to take care of him, as we had always done.

That Sunday morning, when we went to the tomb, I am not sure what were thinking. Mary had seen Joseph and another man roll a huge rock in front of the tomb. From what Mary J. and Mary had said about that stone, we would never be able to move it by ourselves but we had to go, we had to try. We remembered that Jesus had said that he would suffer and die and rise again in three days. We didn't really know what that meant. We had been most worried about the suffering and death. But rising? We approached the tomb fearfully. We carried nothing with us but our immense grief, the few oils we could afford and the great love that Jesus had shown us.

When we arrived and saw that the stone was removed, we were not sure whether to rejoice or cry. Now what would we find? Was his body still there? Had

animals gotten to him? Had the Romans stolen him? Had the religious leaders been so threatened they took his body away?

We approached with caution. As we bent down to see inside we saw a young man, younger than Jesus, sitting there. He was dressed, not in the flimsy linen cloth that Joseph had gotten for Jesus' body, but in a white robe, like what a martyr would wear. I thought I was hallucinating but then he spoke, "Don't be amazed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the one who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. Look, there is the place where he was laid."

He knew who we were looking for, he knew what had happened to him. How could we not be amazed? But he went on, "Now. Now — go to the disciples and Peter. Tell them 'Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee, where you will see him just as he told you.' "

Tell the disciples and Peter. We three who had been so faithful were given the responsibility to tell Peter and the others. Peter, James and John had been the inner circle with Jesus, but at the end Peter denied even knowing Jesus. Now we were to bring him back in?

It was all too much; I didn't know what it meant. Even after all the unusual things we had seen Jesus do: blind people receiving sight, people who couldn't walk stand and leap, a dead girl raised to life, evil spirits cast out. **This** was still too much. We didn't know what to do. In our tears and terror, we three old women ran.

We ran away. And that was the end. We didn't say anything to anyone. How could anyone begin to understand? How could anyone, even the other disciples, believe what we had seen?

And yet, here I am, telling you. Little by little, over the years we have talked. We couldn't help it. Our lives had been changed by following Jesus.

We had to leave Jerusalem and make the long trek back to Galilee, that was where we lived. When we got home we continued living in the way that Jesus taught us, we continued following.

And in a mysterious way it was as the young man had said, we did see Jesus again. As we followed what he taught us, we saw Jesus. He is alive. Christ is risen.