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“Still Afraid on Easter”

Mark 16:1-8

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When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed. You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He's been raised. He's not here. Look, there's the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he's going ahead of you to Galilee; there you'll see him, just as he told you."

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.

—Mark 16:1-8

The young parents in this room are trying really hard. They want their children to love Easter, but it is tricky. Easter starts so far behind Christmas. For one thing, Easter keeps moving around. So parents mark it in big yellow letters on the calendar in the kitchen, "Happy Easter!"

They learned a couple of years ago that egg-dyeing kits are nostalgic, but not actually child or adult friendly. So they have hidden plastic eggs all over the house. Our mothers used to make a big deal about new clothes, so they buy their children new clothes, even though the children do not care at all.

Easter does not have real presents, so parents make

the candy a big deal. The most opinionated parents know that some Easter candy is way over-rated and will not make your children love Easter. Cadbury Creme Eggs are famous, but the imitation yolk and egg white is singularly unappetizing. Easter candy corn is a mistake for everyone involved. Chocolate-covered marshmallow eggs look better than they taste. Generic jelly beans taste like fake candy. Easter Peeps divide families into those with taste and those with none. Chocolate crosses. No one should be nibbling on a cross.

Good parents help their children love Easter by filling their baskets with good candy. Reese's Peanut Butter Eggs somehow make Reese's even more irresistible. Hershey's fun-sized candy bars with Easter wrappers. This is self-explanatory. The best Halloween candy gets an Easter makeover. Hollow chocolate bunnies. I know this is controversial, but the hollow ones get eaten and the solid ones hang around.

Parents do what they can to make Easter a big deal, but it is uphill. The menu on Easter is not clear, but eating ham on a holy day that began with Jewish people raises serious questions. We are not sure how far family should be expected to travel for Easter. Spring break gets in the way. Spring allergies get in the way.

And the story is hard. Christmas is about a baby being born. How sweet is that. Easter is a resurrection, which is confusing.

Twelve-year-olds make their parents crazy, "So Jesus is a zombie."

Thoughtful parents try to explain, "No, not a zombie. The story of Easter is a powerful metaphor for life and

death. Easter is an archetypal pattern for the pathway to hope.”

The twelve-year-old is looking for Reese’s.

Easter should be the highlight of the church’s year, but it does not always feel like it. We hope the choir, brass, organ, overabundance of lilies, and embarrassment of bunnies will make us feel joyful. But the first Easter had no brass, organs, choirs, eggs, candy, or giant bunnies.

If we really want it to feel like the first Easter, Easter could feel frightening like the first Easter, sad like the first Easter, or confusing like the first Easter. The disciples are afraid to go out in public. They are in real danger. They want it to be over.

These brave women stay at the cross to the bitter end and watch Jesus’ burial. They want to anoint Jesus then, but everyone is in a hurry to get the body into the tomb before the Sabbath begins. They do not want the last people to touch Jesus’ face to be the soldiers who killed him.

On Saturday evening they gather the perfumes and oils they will need. They are up before the sun on Sunday, determined to give the story a little better ending. The sounds and smells of an early spring morning—the rich odor of the damp earth and birds noisy with anticipation—are wonderful, but the women expect terrible, overpowering smells and the silence of a cemetery.

They do not have a plan. They do not know what they are going to do about the stone. They ask Peter, James, and John to go with them, but the male disciples are keeping their distance. Gravestones could be a foot thick and six feet in diameter—too big for them to push aside.

But they keep going on this futile errand, hoping against hope. They want to nudge the stone just enough to say good-bye. But the stone is not where it is supposed to be.

They think their chance to say good-bye has been stolen. They look around. They do not see anyone.

“Should we look in the tomb?”

“No. We can’t.”

“Yes, we can. That’s why we came.”

It is not what they expect. They see a twenty-year-old in a white robe sitting there. He scares the hell out of them.

He says, “Calm down. I know you’re here because you love Jesus. You’re going to love this. He’s not here. He’s not even dead. Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he’s going to meet you in Galilee. It’s going to be the best reunion ever.”

They run out of the tomb. They are terrified. No one will believe this. They could be killed for telling a story like this. If they had stayed long enough to ask questions they might have asked: “Are you supposed to be an angel?” “If Jesus is alive, why doesn’t he tell us?” “Why can’t he meet us here?”

When they finally stop running, they decide not to say anything to anyone. They are so afraid. And that is it: “They said nothing. They were afraid.”

The end. The credits roll. All of the oldest copies of the Gospel of Mark end with verse 8— “They were afraid.” Is that any way to end the story of Easter?

The first ones to copy the Book of Mark did not like the ending. A century or so later, a longer ending was

added. Many modern translations treat the four extra paragraphs like a footnote. Scholars agree that scribes added the additional verses about Jesus appearing to provide a more suitable conclusion.

The scribes have a point. This is not the way a gospel is supposed to end. We want a better ending.

We read about Jesus calling the disciples, healing the sick, and loving the outcasts. That is followed by threats, crucifixion, and burial. Then there are these women at the tomb, afraid to say anything to anyone. And that is the end?

Why doesn't Mark tell about how Mary recognized Jesus in the garden when he calls her name, how Jesus walks to Emmaus with two of his followers and breaks bread with them, or how doubting Thomas finally believes? Finish the story. Wrap it up. Give us a conclusion.

There is too much unfinished business. Was Jesus waiting for them in Galilee? How did they find him? What did he say? What did they do? How does the story end?

A variety of theories have been proposed to explain why Mark's Gospel ends the way that it does. One suggestion is that the author never had a chance to finish. Mark was so excited about how well he had written verse eight that at that precise moment he had a heart attack and died. Maybe so.

A second possibility is that they lost the original ending. Somebody spilled wine on the last page, took it out to let it dry, and forgot to put it back. That's possible.

A third theory is that they destroyed the original ending. Throughout his Gospel, Mark portrays the disciples as stupid. Maybe Mark had an ending in which the disciples

continue to be thick even after Easter. The disciples were tired of looking dense so they took the last page and ran it through a shredder. Perhaps.

Or maybe Mark knew what he was doing and leaves us wondering on purpose. Instead of the ending of a story, Mark gives us a beginning. He leaves the story hanging at its start.

The first verse in the book of Mark is “This is the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus.” The whole story is the beginning. In my Bible, Mark is eighteen pages. It is an introduction. The end of the book is not the end of the Gospel. It is the end of the prologue.

The messenger says, “Jesus is not here. He’s risen!”

Then Mark presses hard on one word, “Go. Go tell the disciples that he’s going ahead of you to Galilee. You’ll see him there.”

Jesus goes on ahead, always out there, beckoning, leading us on, waiting for us to arrive, and discover what is in store for us. Jesus has risen and left word for them to get going. Mark puts down his pen, because what happens next remains to be seen.

This Easter story has no ending, because Easter calls us into the future. The sequels are still being written. You and I write the rest of the story—especially on difficult days.

Easter is not a time to pretend things are easier than they are. Easter is for hard, frightening days. Easter does not protect us from heartache. Easter does not erase all the bad things we have done. Easter does not make us forget everything hard that has happened.

Easter does not get rid of the challenge of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus’ life was hard before the last week. He got into trouble with the rich people for siding with the poor.

He said crazy things like “The first shall be last and the last shall be first,” “Sell all you have and give it to the poor,” and “Pray for those who persecute you.”

Jesus teaches us that God is not who we would be if we were God. Nadia Bolz-Weber writes, “In Jesus, we see that God would rather die than be a part of the religious establishment. God does not lift a finger to condemn those who crucified him, but went through the depths of pain rather than be separated, even from his betrayers. God was unafraid to get dirty hands for the ones he loves. This is the God who raised Jesus from the grave.”

Most of the paintings of the resurrection are wrong—the ones where everyone is dancing around like nothing bad really happened and everything will be perfect from now on. Easter does not promise there will be no more pain or failure.

Mark’s Gospel does not end with the women dancing at the empty tomb, but with “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Easter is hope and joy, but it is not the end of our troubles. We worship on Easter to remember that God offers life in the midst of death. Easter is for those who have lost someone. When the one they loved died, they thought they died, too. Easter is the hope that God still has some life for those who think they are done.

Easter is for those who have lived through tragedies. They have been so broken that it felt like dying, but Easter leads from despair to hope. Hard days do not automatically make us better people, but some become stronger. Some choose to love, even when it is difficult.

Feeling the sadness that surrounds us can lead us to a deeper life. God can help us break through when it feels like we are breaking down. Instead of pretending sorrow

does not exist, we face it head on, and come out the other side knowing that death will not destroy us.

That is what Easter is about. Sadness will always be part of our story, but sorrow will not be the end of our story. Even when we feel trapped in our pain, trapped in our past, trapped like our life is a tomb, we know this—that there is no stone that God cannot roll away. Darkness will not win. Death will not be victorious.

God raises us with Christ to a new life of hope and kindness. We hear the promise of Easter that one day the long night will be over and the morning will break. Today, right now, the birds are singing. The sky is clearing. Spring is coming. Today, right now, God is surrounding us with love. All the death we will ever know is less than the life God gives.

We open the windows of our soul. We celebrate. We give thanks. We travel the path that leads from death to life.

Whenever we understand that Easter is unfinished business, new possibilities, expectations yet unfulfilled, Christ is risen. Whenever life triumphs over death, whenever we care for the sick, whenever we feed the hungry, Christ is risen. Whenever we listen to the lonely, whenever we love another, whenever we live with hope, Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

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