

Again and Again: The Sun Rises

You would think that Mark would end his story of the “beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God with a satisfying resolution, a happy ending. But he doesn’t. Anxiety rises after Jesus has been laid in the tomb. It has been growing all through the quiet of the Sabbath. The women are so eager to get back to the tomb with their spices and ointments, they can barely wait for sunrise.

On their way, they wonder who will move the stone for them. In all their preparations and planning, they seem to have forgotten this very important detail. The women apparently didn’t know the tomb was sealed and guarded, or they might have expected the guards to help them move the stone. It’s big, and they know they can’t move it themselves. So the anxiety builds.

When they arrive at the garden tomb, they are surprised to find the stone already removed, but this doesn’t bring them comfort. It only raises their concern. Who would have done such a thing? How would they have done it?

This heavy, custom cut stone had rolled down a sloped trough to its destination over the door of the cave. Pushing it back up the slope would mean working against the law of gravity. Moving that stone would take a miracle.

The women step into the tomb. If it’s like the one we saw at the end of my trip to the Holy Land, there are two small rooms, carved out of the rock hillside near Golgotha. There is a small chamber just inside the entrance, and it opens into the place where a body would be laid.

Bodies were not embalmed after death but were laid in a place where they could decompose undisturbed. The spices were to cover up the smell of decomposition, which the woman assumed had already begun. After a year or two, the bones would be placed, in an ossuary, which was either a container or a room for the bones, and then the tomb would be cleaned and prepared for another family member.

There would be places for two or three bodies to occupy the tomb at one time. Jesus must have been laid in the place on the left, because a young man dressed in white is occupying the place on the right.

According to the other gospels, this is an angel. He certainly speaks with more authority than a human would. And he knows things the women don’t know.

The anxiety in the women rises again. Now the women are experiencing more than concern about possible vandals or thieves. They begin to recognize that what

they are seeing is evidence of something beyond human knowledge. They realize that they are listening to a messenger from God, and any encounter with the living God is cause for fear and trembling.

The messenger tells the women five things.

1. Do not be alarmed – that’s usually how angels start their conversations with people.
2. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified – you’re in the right tomb, this is the place.
3. He has been raised – apparently, this needed clarification.
4. He is not here – and to finally convince them
5. Look, there is the place they laid him!

These poor women don’t even have time to process so much information before the messenger gives them an order. “Go”, he says, “Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

I heard Elias Chacour speak while I was in Israel. He is a retired archbishop of Akko, Haifa, Nazareth and All Galilee of the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. He describes himself as a “Palestinian-Arab-Christian-Israeli” but he’s quick to tell you that he was not born any of these things. He was born a baby, just like all of us were.

Chacour has worked for peace among Israelis and Arabs throughout his life. Now that he is retired, he spends his time in Ibillin, where he built a school for children whether they are Christian, Muslim or Jewish.

We had a seminar with him provided by Educational Opportunities, which provided our tour of the Holy Land.

Before he would share his thoughts with us, he asked us to answer a question: “Why have you come to the Holy Land?” He didn’t get many responses, so he kept prodding us. “Why are you here? Did you come looking for Jesus? He’s gone. Didn’t you get the memo? He isn’t here! He is risen! He has sent you out to spread the good news into all the world. Go do it!

Archbishop Chacour was, for us, like that young man waiting for the women at the tomb. It wasn’t comfortable hearing Chacour’s questions, and it was even less comfortable hearing his urgent call to action. Listening to him, I could understand why the women were frightened.

But why does Mark choose to let the story end at this point, with the women running away, too afraid to speak?

There's a lot of speculation among New Testament scholars about the ending of Mark's gospel. These eight verses are the only ones we can be certain belong to the original manuscript. It doesn't include any post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. There isn't any joyful realization that he is truly alive, just as he said he would be.

So over time, different endings were tacked onto Mark's story, to make it more complete. Check out your bibles and you will see where the story ends, and where something else was added later on.

Maybe Mark intended to write more. Maybe he actually did, and that ending disappeared before there were any copies made from it. Most scholars think Mark knew exactly what he was doing. But if Mark wanted to shock his readers with an abrupt ending, wouldn't it have been great for the story to have stopped right after verse seven, at the announcement of the resurrection?

But it doesn't. Mark gives us one more verse. He tells us that the women are terrified, and they run away, telling no one anything of what they have just seen. And that's the end of the story, according to Mark.

Let's look at our art for today.

It is entitled "The Promise" by Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity. She says this about her art:

Just after sunrise, they come to the tomb. They come to do what far too many cannot do in the wake of COVID's rage – to touch and anoint the body of their loved one, to provide a proper burial, to honor the life lost with a memorial.

However, the women at the empty tomb are left with what many who are grieving today are experiencing – dread and terror. Mark's gospel originally ends this way (we believe that verses 9-19 were added later.) Not with Mary running to tell the disciples, not with exuberance and joy, but with fear and silence. The women are numb.

How could it be this way? Who stole the body? Did we come to the wrong tomb? Jesus is going where? Galilee? How?

The young robed man's words probably feel like a mirage induced by their grief or lack of sleep – or both.

In this painting, I imagine what the women see in the moment before they turn to flee from the tomb. Instead of a dry, cracked desert, I imagine instead that they see

the story of creation, happening again before them. As the horizon breaks open, I imagine light and wind sweeping over a deep sea, giving shape to what was once a formless void. I imagine the heavens blooming like an iris, giving birth to glimmers of radiance. I imagine darkness that still lingers – for in these shadows, there is sacredness too. I imagine the winding path they followed to get to the tomb, previously lit only by starlight, now illuminated with promise.

They may be overridden with fear and trembling but their story does not end here. There is a way forward. In this liminal space, once again. God proclaims that their fear – this new, uncertain way – is still held within the promise of resurrection. For this, I believe is the promise of this life: That the story of creation happens again and again.

What is Mark's ending is not really an ending at all? What if Mark's deliberately incomplete conclusion launches us back to the beginning of the Gospel, the beginning of Jesus ministry. "You're looking for Jesus? the young man asks. "He's not here. You just missed him! He's gone on ahead into Galilee. That's where you'll find him."

Galilee, the place where Jesus began his ministry, the place on the margins of Israel, the place where the first 9 chapters of Mark's gospel take place. Jesus is leading the way back to Galilee, so that's where we need to go to find him. Back to the beginning.

This is one technique sometimes used in ancient novels – an author would sometimes leave a book's ending ambiguous, requiring the reader to go back and start over, and this time pick up new understanding, then re-read again and unlock even more meaning as they go. Mark's gospel is supposed to be read, not in a straight line from beginning to end but in a circle.

If you want to see the resurrected Jesus, go back to Galilee. Read it again, look for the risen Jesus here. This time we see that Jesus is blessed and claimed by God from the very beginning. "You are my beloved. With you I am well pleased."

In Galilee, Jesus doesn't just miraculously feed thousands – when he spreads out the feast, the desert becomes green grass – and now we get the hint! This is the Messiah! In Galilee, Jesus doesn't just perform an incredible magic trick by walking on water, he calms the chaos and takes on the divine name: I AM. It's in Galilee that the disciples see Jesus transfigured on the mountaintop and surrounded by the presence of God. When we go back to Galilee, we see that every appearance of Jesus is a resurrection appearance.

Go back to Galilee. In chapter 2, Jesus takes Peter's sick mother-in-law by the hand and raises her up and she is healed. In the same chapter, he commands a paralyzed man to raise up and he gets up, he raises, takes his mat and goes home. In chapter 5, Jesus raises a child from the dead. In chapter 9, Jesus takes a little boy who couldn't speak or hear, raises him up and heals him. When we go back to Galilee, we see that Jesus has been about the business of resurrection all along. Go back to Galilee. That's where we find the risen Jesus in Mark's gospel. And it's also where we find Jesus now. Jesus isn't in the tomb. HE IS NOT HERE! We don't find him sitting around waiting for us. Jesus has moved onto other pressing business and the angel invites us to get on the move with him. Go! Gather his disciples and meet up with Jesus. Not in the centers of power. Not at the Temple. Not in some vision of hope for the sweet by and by. In Galilee, the symbol of the margins of society.

If you want to find Jesus, if you want to find God, go back to Galilee, to the places that seem the most godforsaken. Jesus is there, healing and feeding, driving out demons, preaching hope to the broken hearted, and raising people up. Where the world sees only death and loss and pain, Jesus is at work bringing resurrection! What are the places in our world that seem dead and deserted? What are the places on the margins that we hardly even notice? Where are the places in your own past, your own experience that seem beyond hope? The resurrected Jesus is waiting there for us.

Where is the resurrected Jesus? He's in Galilee, that refugee detention center on the southern border – a place that feels beyond hope. Jesus is there working life in the hands and hearts of those refugee children.

Where is Jesus? Jesus is in Galilee, at George Floyd's memorial site, the place where he was held down by a policeman's knee for 8 minutes and 46 seconds while he yelled "I can't breathe."

Jesus is marching for justice for George Floyd's sisters and brothers in every Black Lives Matter protest.

Where is Jesus? He's in Galilee, holding Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders until they feel safe from harm.

Where is Jesus? He's in Galilee, you know, in Myramar province where over 300 protestors against the coup –de-tat have been murdered by the police during protests.

Where is Jesus? Jesus is in Galilee, in the chemo ward of hospitals all over the world, speaking words of comfort and peace. Surrounding people with resurrection hope, bringing new life in the midst of their suffering.

Where is Jesus? He's in Galilee, that place in your own heart that you've tried to forget. The broken relationship, the feelings of failure, the places of need and uncertainty and fear. Jesus is there raising and healing and feeding and he invites you to join him there.

Where is Jesus? He's not here giving us proofs of resurrection or making sure we get our doctrine right. Jesus is on the move, and he invites us to go with him. In Mark's gospel, you get to write the end of the story. And the ending is not for the faint of heart. Even his most faithful, persistent followers, are, in the end, paralyzed with fear and awe, and Mark's ending (or maybe we should call it Mark's beginning) gives us the opportunity to step into their shoes.

What will we do with our fear? Will we wall ourselves up like we're in a bunker, hiding in fear from the outside world, waiting at an empty tomb for Jesus to show back up again? Or will we gather our sisters and brothers and follow Jesus back to all the little Galilees in our world.

Will we join Jesus in the work of resurrection? It isn't enough to know the truth. It isn't enough to follow Jesus to the grave. The gospel calls us to act and to speak: Go and tell. To go where Jesus goes and speak the truth about the good news of resurrection life that we've seen there.

Central United Methodist Church, on Easter Sunday, we gather at the empty tomb with a decision to make. Will we live in fear, or will we go and tell? The ending is yours to write. Amen.