

Terror and amazement. “The women fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” I don’t know about you, but when I think of Easter, this isn’t the first thing that comes to mind.

The story of Easter is one of the stories of Christian faith that everyone, regardless of church background, seems to know. Some of you likely learned this story in Sunday school and over the years as you attended church regularly you heard this story and listened to many sermons about it. Some of you have read all four versions of the Easter story in your Bibles. Some of you never attended Sunday school, some of you may have never read the stories in the Bible, and for some of you, this may in fact be your first time inside a church ever. Some of you may not know all the details by heart and yet, we all know at least the gist of this story, right? Unlike the women who arrived at the empty tomb of Jesus, we are not surprised that the tomb is empty. We expect it. When we hear this story, we don’t respond with terror and amazement. We respond with Alleluias.

But do we really believe it? Do we need to? Each of the four gospels tells a story of the resurrection, and the stories in each gospel are fairly different. In their book “The Last Week” theologians Marcus Borg and Jon Dominic Crossan point to these many differences as evidence that this story of the risen Jesus, and the empty tomb are not meant to be interpreted as historical fact – A historical fact being something that could have been video-taped had the technology existed. Borg and Crossan instead suggest that these stories are told as a parable.¹

Let me be clear though. Calling something a parable doesn’t mean it isn’t true. I have said before that truth and fact are not necessarily the same thing. The stories of the resurrection are truth-filled stories and discerning what these truths are for us in this time and place is what’s really important. Whether or not we believe that Jesus was

¹ Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus’ Final Days in Jerusalem* (New York: Harper One, 2006), 193.

literally raised from the dead is not what makes us Christian. The importance of the resurrection stories is not in the facts, but in their meaning.

The scripture Mary read for us this morning is from the Gospel of Mark. Of the four resurrection accounts, this one from Mark stands. Not only is it the shortest recounting of the empty tomb. It is also the only one in which Jesus does not appear. Mark's story begins with the women who witnessed Jesus' death on the cross a few days earlier, returning to the tomb with spices to anoint his body. Before they even arrive at the place where Jesus had been laid, the women anticipated failing in their attempt to anoint Jesus. Who would roll away the stone that enclosed the tomb? It makes me wonder if the other disciples were too afraid or maybe too grief-stricken to accompany them. But the women carry on, even though they can't imagine how they will possibly be able to complete their task.

As they arrive at the tomb, they discover that the stone has already been rolled away allowing them to enter. I wonder what they were thinking in that moment. Did they think someone had stolen the body, did they remember Jesus telling them that he would be raised on the third day? Or were they simply shocked and scared? A young man in a white robe is there in the tomb waiting for them. He must have noticed the women's sense of fear and concern as he greets them with "Do not be alarmed." He tells them that Jesus has been raised from death and is not there and instructs them to go and tell the disciples that he will meet them in Galilee just as he said he would. But according to Mark, the women did not tell the disciples. They were filled with terror and amazement and said nothing to anyone.

That's the end of the story according to Mark. The women said nothing to anyone. The end. This ending was deemed unsatisfactory by the early church in the 2nd or 3rd century and a longer ending was added. Human beings are not typically fans of loose ends. We usually want to see everything tied up in a bow, everything explained and resolved. But we don't get that with Mark's original ending. We are told that Jesus as gone ahead of the disciples to Galilee and beckons them to come and join him. If this were a TV show, the screen would go black and the words "To be continued..." would

appear. I was struck by this text this year – the disbelief, the confusion, the fear, the uncertainty. Many of us experienced moments in our lives like that. Maybe you are feeling like that right now. In those moments of despair and fear, it is almost impossible to imagine a different reality. And yet, while Mark didn't write a follow up episode to this story, we know it didn't end as it is written.

Someone clearly said something or the story wouldn't have been written in the first place. Karoline Lewis writes "Yes, someone clearly said something. But the witness of the resurrection was never meant to prove that it happened, to verify that someone finally moved from fear to faith, or to confirm that somebody summoned enough courage to do what Jesus told them to do. The resurrection was never the end of the story. Jesus goes ahead of us, goes first, preparing the way for us to march for our lives. To anticipate resurrection when the world sees only death. To insist on resurrection when death has appeared to have won the day."²

The resurrection is just the beginning. Maybe that is what the women were afraid of. It is interesting that when they heard the news of the resurrection, there is no evidence that they rejoiced or celebrated in any way. Jesus was risen! Why aren't they celebrating? Maybe it seemed too good to be true. Maybe they were still in shock. Or maybe they were terrified because they knew their work as disciples was not over, but just beginning. The empty tomb, the resurrection, the women were quite possibly terrified and amazed at powerful way God was at work in the world.

This is the story of Easter hope. After all, as Charles Campbell asks, "If stones are rolled away without human effort, if Jesus really is raised from the dead, what other human assumptions about wisdom and folly, power and weakness, will likewise be proved false?"³ The story of the resurrection tells us in no uncertain terms that God is at

² Karoline Lewis, "No End to the Story," *Dear Working Preacher* (blog), March 26, 2018, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=5121>.

³ Charles L. Campbell, "Resurrection of the Lord, Year B," in *The Lectionary Commentary: Theological Exegesis for Sunday's Texts*, ed. Roger E. Van Harn, vol. The Third Readings: The Gospels (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 284.

work in the world in ways that we cannot fathom. Resurrection was not the end my friends. It is only the beginning.

This story doesn't end with terror and amazement, not only because we know that the story continued, but because we continue the story of resurrection in the world. We are called to show up in hope, even when a situation feels hopeless. We are called to imagine God's realm on earth and to live our lives as if we know it to be true. We are called to continue Christ's work of love and justice. Christ is brought to life again and again when we serve as his hands and feet in the world. We are called to keep walking our path, even when there are stones in the way and we can't imagine how they will be moved. We are called to believe that there is life beyond our imagining, even with all we see is death and destruction.

Yes, today is the day we celebrate Easter and resurrection is only beginning. The promise of Easter is not only what God did 2000 years ago, but what God is still doing. God is beckoning us into new life, inviting us into new possibilities in which hope and love have the last word. Easter is far from over my friends. May we refuse to let fear and death have the final say. May we have the courage to proclaim that nothing we encounter is stronger than God's love. Alleluia!