

## “Have You Been to Galilee?”

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Based upon Ezek. 37:1-14; Mark 16:1-8

“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.” Does anyone else here find that ending a bit dissatisfying? This is Easter, a day that is supposed to be filled with joy, laughter, and triumphant shouts of “Christ is risen!” In some churches, today is the day when alleluias, which have been boxed up for the whole of Lent, are finally let loose in worship, and in most churches this is a day to praise God with extra enthusiasm provided by trumpets and flowers. Easter is not supposed to be about fear, and it’s certainly not supposed to be about silence. In the same way that a musical piece must end on the tonic note of the score, not the dominant in order to sound good and feel resolved, a gospel is supposed to end on the high note of Christ being raised, the disciples being empowered, and the whole world being filled with promise. Mark’s ending does not do this, and as a result it feels wrong to most people, as seminary professor, Don Juel, experienced when he saw the Gospel performed in a one-man show. When the young actor got to the end of the gospel in his performance, he stuck to his script, which meant that after he said verse 8, he simply walked out of the room. The audience was left confused and even upset. “Is the show over?” they wondered. What should they do? It seemed wrong to applaud fear and silence. Instead of leaving buzzing about how inspiring the Gospel was, they left grumbling about the weird ending.<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding how we feel about it, however, the overwhelming majority of scholars insist that *Mark* originally ended with verse 8. They don’t agree on why Mark ended his gospel this way, or agree that he made the right choice in doing so, but they agree that he intended to go no further. The two other endings that appear in your Bible after verse 8, were added decades, and even centuries later, after *Matthew*, *Luke*, and *John* showed the Church how it could be done. “Let’s just add a hint of the road to Emmaus story,” some editors thought, “and a little of Mary finding Jesus in the garden, and that good bit about Jesus commissioning the disciples like the other gospels have. Then the whole of Mark’s gospel will read better.” And it does, sort of; the happy parts are good. But you can tell they aren’t authentic. Mark, for whatever reason, wanted to end with fear.

That’s more than a little bit of a downer for Easter, but if you think about it, fear at least, is a whole lot easier for us to wrap our minds around than the miracle of the Resurrection. As Fred Buechner put it, “Anxiety and fear are what we know best... Wars and rumors of war... We have heard so much tragic news that when the news is good we can’t hear it.”<sup>2</sup> Every day the news gives us reasons to be afraid. So, it’s easy to believe that death and evil and pain win for the same reason. But to believe that everything truly is a new creation in Christ, that Jesus really did come back from the dead and that we have every reason to hope that all will end well, well, that’s

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<sup>1</sup> Juel, Donald H., *The Gospel of Mark* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 172.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Faith That Matters: 365 Devotions from Classic Christian Leaders* (New York: HarperOne, 2018), 85.

a lot harder to do. To do that takes stepping outside of our experience and making a serious leap of faith.

Mark doesn't say why the women who went to the tomb that morning couldn't make that leap and remained afraid and silent. Up until that point they had actually been far more faithful than the male disciples. Perhaps the women were afraid because they saw the angel. The entire Bible testifies to the fact that encountering a real-life angel is a scary thing indeed. They also could have been afraid because they were still shattered by the crucifixion. They had only just begun to comprehend the fact that their beloved leader, a man they thought was God's chosen Messiah, had been killed like a common criminal. Now his body was missing and a stranger was saying impossible things had happened, and they just didn't know what to think. But perhaps they were afraid because they believed the angel. What did it mean that Jesus was raised? Did it mean that it was the end of time, Judgment Day? Because if so, that is a scary thought. Then again, it was no less scary to think that it wasn't the end, but that Jesus, who they now knew was God and not just a rabbi or prophet, was waiting for them in Galilee to give them a job. We will never know what frightened them most. But it isn't hard to imagine why, when faced with so many unknowns, the women chose to hunker down, remain quiet, and wait to see what would happen.

Yet, as the angel tried to tell them in verses 6 and 7, what was actually happening should not have been a surprise or cause for concern to them. It should have been cause for joy and hope because "just as Jesus had told them" he would be, he truly was raised and was waiting to greet them in Galilee. *Just as he told you.* Jesus had told them five times actually, in the *Gospel of Mark*, exactly what was going to happen: that he would die, and on the third day rise again. The angel seemed to think that this should have been enough for them to come to the tomb anticipating the miracle, not being alarmed by it. The scene makes me think of another from the movie, *The Princess Bride*, when the hero, Wesley, comes back to rescue his beloved Buttercup after supposedly being killed at sea. When he catches up with her and confronts her for having become engaged to King Humperdink in his absence, he says, "I told you I would always come for you. Why didn't you wait for me?" "Well," she replies thoughtfully and rationally, "you were dead."<sup>3</sup>

"Why are you afraid?" the angel effectively asks the women in his attempts to calm them and share the Good News. "He told you this would happen." "Well," the women at the tomb reply with their reaction, "Jesus was dead." We say the same thing when we are presented daily with the choice of running to Galilee to be with the risen Christ or retreating into hiding in fear. "Why are you so afraid?" God asks us, showering us with blessings and Easter grace each day. "Don't you remember Jesus rose? Don't you remember he is waiting for you in Galilee?" "Well yes," we reply, "but children are being separated from their parents at the border." "Well yes, but climate change is threatening the world." "Well yes, but violence and rage have replaced kindness and love." "Yes, but Notre Dame burned down." "Yes, but I have cancer, or might lose

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<sup>3</sup> *The Princess Bride*, film directed by Rob Reiner based upon the book by William Goldman, (staring Cary Elwes, Robin Wright, Mandy Pantinkin, Chris Sarandon, and Christopher Guest), (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, 1987).

my job, or am all alone.” In other words, “Yes, we’ve heard the Easter story, God, but bad things are happening that feel far more real to us than the new life filled with hope that you’re talking about. We haven’t gone to Galilee because frankly, given all that is going on, we didn’t think you’d be there.”

The prophet Ezekiel had his own moment like this when God showed him a bunch of dried bones lying in a battle field. Israel and Judah had been crushed by enemy empires. The few who had survived were in exile in Babylon. “You see these bones?” God asked him. “Well yes,” said Ezekiel, probably thinking “and thanks, by the way, for the reminder that we’re all doomed.” “Mortal,” God replied, in so doing highlighting the power differential between them. “Do you think these bones can live?” Ezekiel looked at the bones and knew in his heart that dead meant dead. He had seen his people be wiped out. So, part of him must have been tempted to say, “Of course not!” But he had also dealt enough with God to know that it was probably a trick question. So, instead he said, “O Lord, God you know.” “Indeed,” God replied, “I do know and I am telling you they can live. Prophecy to the bones and watch them live.” And right before Ezekiel’s eyes the bones became enlivened and animated again even though such a thing was impossible. Now God wasn’t creating a zombie army in that moment. The whole show was just a vision. But the transformation made God’s point very effectively nevertheless. “I’m telling you that Israel will live again,” God said, as Ezekiel stood wide-mouthed in amazement. “It will live because I say it will live. And when it does, you will know that I am God, and that what I say I’m going to do, I do.”

“Jesus told you,” the angel said to the women. This is what our Easter faith is supposed to hang on, not whether his words are consistent with our experience or understanding of reality. The essence of the Gospel in *Mark* is that God came in Christ with a plan. God came and did what was planned, dying and rising again, so that we would know that God was God, and that therefore whatever God promises will come true. One of those promises was that the kingdom of God was near. In Christ, it was going to start breaking into the world; and wherever it did, extraordinary things were going to happen because all things are possible with God, and nothing on earth is powerful enough to stop God’s plans from being fulfilled, not even death. The Resurrection confirms not just that Jesus was God, and that God loves and forgives us, but also that God does what God says God will do. Thus, French philosopher Gabriel Marcel said that “Hope is a memory of the future.”<sup>4</sup> The empty tomb reminds us of what Jesus told us in the past about God’s plans for the future, therefore we have hope, even though there is darkness, pain, and suffering in our present. Our hope is grounded not in our experience, but in the power and promises of God.

When we read Mark’s ending, we know God’s promise was fulfilled, which is why it is so frustrating that the women don’t. “The story doesn’t end with you hiding in silence,” we want to shout. “Jesus really was raised. Get up already! Share the good news with everyone and go to

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<sup>4</sup> This idea is developed in the *Sketch of a Phenomenology and a Metaphysic of Hope* in Marcel, Gabriel, [Homo Viator: Introduction to the Metaphysic of Hope](#), trans Emma Craufurd and Paul Seaton (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2010), 23-62.

Galilee because Jesus will be there.” I believe that Mark ended his gospel the way he did to provoke this very response. He wanted his audience, which was consumed with fear after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, to recognize that not even that cataclysmic event meant that God was dead. He wanted them to remember all that Jesus said, and remember the Resurrection. He wanted them, like Ezekiel, to play a part in continuing the story by prophesying to the bones of their time and making them rise and live with the power of Resurrection hope. We are called to do the same thing. We are called to go to Galilee in our hearts and minds, back to the center of Christ’s ministry; we are called to take his saving grace into ourselves, remember his teachings, and make the Resurrection real for the world in us.

Rowan Williams put it this way: “The believer’s life is a testimony to the risen-ness of Jesus: he or she demonstrates that Jesus is not dead by living a life in which Jesus is the never-failing source of affirmation, challenge, enrichment, and enlargement – a pattern, a dance, intelligible as a pattern only when its pivot and heart become manifest...”<sup>5</sup> “The resurrection is more than an idea we talk about of believe propositionally,” author Jim Friedrich added while quoting Williams. “It’s something we become, something we ‘prove’ in the living of our stories.”<sup>6</sup>

But how do we prove it? How do we dwell in Galilee in the face of grief and fear? We do it by following Christ’s way, by embracing the Resurrection grace we are given each day with joy, and by trusting in God’s transforming power. Preacher Joanna Adams tells of a day when she witnessed how the Good News works. Anne, a member of her church who was a wonderful woman who wrote award-winning children’s books and was a bright human spirit died at a too young an age from cancer. Adams buried her in the pouring rain, reading, rather than feeling the liturgy which included Jesus’ proclamation, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Then the crowd of mourners gathered at Anne’s house. People had brought a lot of food as they always do. They were hanging out in a circle eating brownies when someone told a funny story about Anne. Suddenly everyone was laughing. In that moment, she said, it felt like they were laughing at death. “It was an Easter laugh that bore witness to the rolled-away stone, the empty tomb, and the power of God to snatch life from the very jaws of death,” Adams wrote. “If you are wondering where Galilee is, I wouldn’t get out my map... On that spring afternoon some years ago, Galilee turned out to be a kitchen in Atlanta. Galilee is everywhere the spirit of the risen Christ can be found.”<sup>7</sup>

We live in a time when many people experience anxiety and fear. But that is not the only reality we know. As Christians we know through the rising of Christ that God loves us and forgives us. We know through the rising of Christ that God is with us, and we know that nothing is more powerful than God, who plans to redeem the world. The world’s story will end well because it is God’s story, not just ours, and God has a particular happy ending in mind. We know this because the risen Christ told us, and then showed us. Even in Mark’s depressing version of

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<sup>5</sup> As quoted in Friedrich, Jim, “*Don’t explain it,*” CHRISTIAN CENTURY, April 10, 2019, 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, Joanna M., “*Good News Indeed,*” JOURNAL FOR PREACHERS (Easter 2004), 39-40.

the Gospel, the story does not end with a stone in front of the tomb, it ends with a tomb with the door wide open and a messenger promising Jesus is waiting for us in Galilee. It also ends with our knowledge that someone talked, or Mark would not have been able to record the story decades after it took place. God always finds a way. So, if you get nothing else out of Easter, get this bit of good news, to God, dry bones do not have to mean hope is lost, and fear and death will not have the final word. We always have reason to hope, and we can dwell in that hope even now, if we remember God's future and trust God more than our fears. We can make Galilee here and now.

Jurgen Moltmann sums up the Easter good news this way. He said, "We are called to hope! Let us go forth from our anxieties and learn to hope from the Bible. Let us reach out beyond our limitations in order to find a future in a new beginning. Let us take no more account of barriers, but only of the one who broke the barriers down. He is risen. Christ is risen indeed. He is our future. And he is our hope."<sup>8</sup> Christ is risen! No "yes but's" about it. So, let the people of God shout "Alleluia!" and with our lives say "Amen!", which in classic Easter, time-bending fashion means both "I tell you the truth," and "So be it." Christ is risen! Amen and amen.

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<sup>8</sup> As quoted in Delaplaine, Joan, "A Future Full of Hope," THE LIVING PULPIT, *Hope* Issue, 2006, 16.