

AN EASTER CLIFFHANGER

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ ⁸So 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, NRSV)

When my parents were growing up, the movie theaters showed serial westerns every Saturday afternoon. Each episode ended with a cliffhanger in order to keep the kids coming back week after week. The kids were mesmerized as the good guy, with the white cowboy hat of course, was left hanging by his pinky finger on the edge of a rocky gorge, ready to plunge to a sure demise. What would happen next? No one knew for sure. And so the excited moviegoers left in suspense, wondering and speculating all week about their hero's fate. Those moviemakers were on to something. They had hit upon a surefire way to pack those theaters each and every week. It's a formula we've seen repeated in the world of entertainment time and time again.

I may not have seen the serial westerns in the theaters, but I grew up with my own set of cliffhangers. I sat glued to the television as another episode of “The Wild, Wild West” ended with James West tied down to the railroad tracks, or the “Happy Days” episode that ended with Fonzie riding his motorcycle, suspended in mid-air, or Sam Malone proposing to the unseen woman at the end of the season in “Cheers,” or the most famous television cliffhanger of them all, the season finale of “Dallas” in 1980 when for the whole summer, we asked the question, “Who Shot J.R. Ewing?” And the list goes on and on. No matter what your taste in television, your current favorite show will probably end the season with some kind of attempt at suspense.

Most of us would never consider Bible stories to be suspenseful. We know how the stories end, the major ones at least. But in our Easter text this morning, the one found in the Gospel of Mark, we encounter the ultimate cliffhanger. At first glance, it seems like the traditional Easter story, cut and dried, but when we see where it ends, it becomes something else.

It starts out on the Sunday after Jesus' death. Because the Sabbath began at sundown on Friday, Jesus' body had to be quickly placed in the tomb in order to keep the

commandment against work and to avoid touching the body. So on this sad Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome come to Jesus' tomb to properly prepare his body for burial.

They arrive at the tomb to find the stone rolled away and no sign of Jesus' body. Instead, they find a strange young man dressed in a white robe, who we presume is an angel, sitting inside the tomb on the right side. I love the detail that the angel is sitting over on the right side. I picture the poor angel just sitting around, biding his time, waiting for someone to arrive so he can tell them the astounding news and then get back to whatever it was he was doing before God sent him on this urgent errand. The text says when the women saw the angel they were "alarmed." Other translations say they were "amazed," "terrified," or "frightened." Sometimes, when we hear these familiar stories, we forget that they were real people with real feelings. But when we put ourselves in their place, their emotions are understandable.

For starters, these women were depleted before they even arrived. Anyone who has lost a loved one has no trouble imagining their agony in seeing their friend murdered on a Roman cross. No doubt throughout the weekend they relived the horrifying experience over and over again in their minds. And now, for the first time since putting him in the tomb, they trudge with heavy hearts to the grave wondering how in the world they were going to get that enormous stone moved so that they might properly anoint the body.

Perhaps they felt some relief that someone had moved the stone. At least that would make their heart-wrenching task easier. They walked in expecting to see the body of Jesus just as they had left it on Friday afternoon. But instead, instead they are floored at the sight of some unknown guy dressed in a long white robe. The Gospel of Mark never calls him an angel, though that is our assumption. Without a doubt it would have been terribly frightening. Had they walked into a trap? Would they be the next ones nailed to a cross? Had the body been stolen and held for ransom? Had they somehow stumbled into the wrong tomb?

The angel speaks to them saying, "Don't be afraid; you're looking for Jesus, who was crucified. Well he's been raised; he's not here." Pointing to the other side of the tomb the angel says, "Look right there, that is the place they laid him." After this short explanation, the angel gives simple, yet shocking instructions. "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he's going ahead of you to Galilee; there you'll see him, just like he told you."

I love this next part, because it reminds us that people are people, regardless of whether their lives are written up in the Bible, or whether they're sitting in our sanctuary today. You see Mark doesn't give us some idealized version of their reaction, glossing over the truth to make the story nice. He tells us point blank that the women ran from the tomb in fear, and fully ignored their instructions. They kept their mouths shut. That's the end of Mark's Easter story. Bam! It's a wrap, cut to credits. Huh?

It seems strange, to say the least, to end the Easter story at this point, but that is exactly what Mark does. He leaves us hanging. In your pew Bibles, you will find a space between verses 8 and 9. The footnote explains that the most ancient manuscripts end the book with verse 8, where we ended this morning. It appears to many scholars that verses 9-20 were added later, apparently because Mark's abrupt ending leaves too much unresolved.

It's tempting to look at these silent and fearful women and wonder what's wrong with them? Why don't they listen to the angel and remember Jesus' promises of resurrection? Of course, that's easy for us to say. We know the end of the story. And because it's so familiar, we may forget just how miraculous and extraordinary this claim of the resurrection really was.

In truth, the women deserve credit for showing up at all. We don't read about any of the male disciples showing up. No, the ones who were closest to Jesus, who witnessed his miracles and heard his teachings, scattered like leaves in the wind at Jesus' arrest. Peter, the one disciple who did hang around a little bit longer than the rest, ended up denying he even knew Jesus. Only the women bore witness to Jesus' death and were faithful enough to do what had to be done afterwards.

But what about their silence? Were the women paralyzed by their shock? Did they fear being labeled fools? Mark leaves us wondering what the women will do, and more importantly, leaves us with the mystery of the empty tomb unsolved.

Thankfully, the Easter accounts we find in Matthew, Luke, and John settle Mark's cliffhanger ending once and for all. The women did eventually tell the news. And though no one believed them at first, the disciples, the two travelers on the road to Emmaus, and many others did eventually encounter the risen Christ.

This divine act, the resurrection of Jesus, is a unique Christian claim. Virtually every other major religion reveres Jesus as a prophet, sage or holy man, but only Christianity makes the claim that he is God incarnate who died and rose again. The apostle Paul wrote to the early church that, "if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain" (I Corinthians 15:14 RSV). In other words, if we deny the resurrection, Jesus becomes just another prophet who died a violent death in a string of prophets whose lives ended similarly.

But we believe that Jesus' death was more than that of a martyr. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann declares that, "God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with [God]." I understand Moltmann to say that in and through Christ, God experienced our pain in order that we may one day stand in the presence of God and

experience no pain, only joy. Christ himself experienced humanity's hate and violence that God might intimately know our pain and suffering. Thus no obstacle or estrangement exists between God and us. Christ's death accomplished something different from the deaths of other righteous people. His death changed the relationship between God and humanity.

The resurrection of Christ is a sacred belief, but it is also a sacred promise. The resurrection of Christ promises us that our lives don't end when our bodies stop functioning. That nothing is so far gone that God cannot retrieve it. That God can pull us out of those places that entrap us. That in times of deep joy and times of darkest pain, God is with us.

The resurrection of Christ promises us that death is not final, that it is just another of life's cliffhangers. Unlike those western serials, our questions won't be resolved by next Saturday. But through faith, stay tuned to what God will do next. And as a preview we remember the story of Jesus, whose cliffhanger lasted less than three days, from that tragic Good Friday to that blessed Easter morning. Hallelujah. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal God, we greet the dawning brightness of this special day with hopes renewed. We have known grief and sorrow, loss and tears, fear and failure. Meet us here for we need this time of resurrection. We need your healing presence. We need to sense your Spirit in our community of faith. God of empty tombs and abundant surprises, who announces new life in the face of death, bring us new life today. You know where our lives have become dead and lifeless. By the power of the risen Christ give us renewed spirits, deep faith, abiding courage, and hearts full of kindness and love.

Through Jesus Christ our Risen Savior we pray. AMEN.