

Finishing the Story of Easter

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In my last couple of columns, I wrote about Easter as a season to celebrate the gift of life. For me, Easter is an activity in which we learn to see instances of life amid all the death which surrounds us. We are called to be agents of life, people who “practice resurrection” in all that we do.

That seems tough to do in this time in which we live. The forces of death and destruction are all around us. Sandra Duguid, in a poem called “Road to Emmaus” paints the scene well: “There have been crucifixions, too, / in our town — innocents / gunned down in their doorways / or in school halls; or radiations / black outlines, three crosses / marked a sisters chest: no wonder / we walk in quiet rage, musing”

Crucifixions in our town. The war in Ukraine and the Sudan. Innocents gunned down. The growing angry rhetoric of politicians and people. The rise of prejudice against anyone who is different, whether it be the colour of skin, the practice of religion, the self-expression of gender identity, or anything else. It is so difficult to be an agent of life.

But this has been the calling of the followers of Jesus since the beginning. The first Easter was a time of fear, confusion, pain, and brokenness. There were no “alleluias” to be heard from the lips of the first disciples. Indeed, it took those early followers of Jesus some time to understand the depth of the renewal of life to which resurrection points.

All four gospels in the Bible tell stories about a community of disciples who are trying to make sense of what has happened.

There are some common threads in the stories. Women were the first people to come to the tomb, the first witnesses, the first to give testimony. They come to prepare the body of their friend for its final burial, but they discover that the stone sealing the tomb has been rolled away. The tomb is empty.

Beyond those common threads, the stories differ in marked ways.

The last gospel to be written was John. It was written some 65 years after the crucifixion, around 95–105. John tells a touching story about Mary, who sees the empty tomb and wanders in a daze of confusion. When the risen Jesus stands near her, she doesn’t recognize him—until he calls her by name. Then she runs back to tell the others, “I have seen the Lord.”

Luke and Matthew were written about a decade earlier. In Luke’s story, the angel reminds the women that Jesus had told them he would rise again. “They remembered his words” and ran back to tell “all this to the eleven and to all the rest.” The apostles didn’t believe them; “these words seemed to them an idle tale.” You can’t believe the women, after all.

Luke continues with a story of a couple of disciples (probably a husband and wife) who are returning home to Emmaus the same day. They encounter the risen Jesus on the road, but don’t recognize him until he breaks bread with them in their home. The guest becomes the host, and their eyes are opened.

Matthew tells a story about an earthquake to explain how the stone had rolled away from the mouth of the tomb. He mentions that Pilate had posted a guard—a story which was likely told to counter later rumours that the disciples had stolen the body and spread a lie that Jesus had been raised.

But I find Mark’s way of telling the story particularly compelling. This is the earliest gospel, written sometime around the year 70.

Mark's gospel ends very strangely. The women come to the tomb and find it empty. They see a "young man dressed in a white robe" who tells them that Jesus has risen. "He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you."

We expect the story to end with the women telling the disciples about this news. But the story ends, "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Full stop. They said nothing. They were afraid.

Later copyists thought this was such a strange way to end the story that a couple added their own endings. They thought that surely the ending had been lost or damaged. As a result, they added their own endings, telling stories about Jesus appearing to the disciples. Modern Bibles include these as a "shorter ending" and a "longer ending."

These two endings, however, only appear in very late manuscripts. The earliest manuscripts end with the fearful women who utter not a word.

I don't think this was a mistake, or an error, or a lost ending. I suspect that Mark knew exactly what he was doing, and that he ends the gospel this way deliberately. At the very beginning of his gospel, Mark tells us that his story is "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ." This whole story is the beginning of the good news. Mark's open-ended conclusion invites us into the story.

The resurrection of Jesus isn't a conclusion. It's an invitation. We are invited to continue the story of what God is doing in the world. The story which Mark begins continues in us, in all the generations who have come after him, in all those people who have been inspired to continue the story of God's healing love. To use a phrase from Wendell Berry, Mark is inviting us to complete the story by "practicing resurrection" in our own lives.

The story of Easter life continues in us as we reach out in love and compassion to the world. We practice resurrection as we live as agents of that gift of life.