

“He has been raised; he is not here.” Imagine the astonishment, the shock. Mark’s version of the resurrection is unique among the Gospels, and it is the version that has unsettled Christians for centuries. Mark’s story begins sensibly enough: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, the three women who saw where Jesus’ body was laid, go to the tomb with spices for anointing. The three deeply devoted women, already worried about how to roll away the stone sealing the tomb, find that it has been moved. When they enter the tomb, they find, not the body, but a young man in a white robe—a celestial being. The young man tells them not to be alarmed, which angels in scripture do, but then goes on to tell them where the Risen Jesus is. “Look,” he tells the three, “there is the place they laid him,” confirming that the death was genuine. He then tells them to go back to Galilee because that is where they’ll find him, back where it all started, back where they all live.

And then the story takes a turn.

Mark tells us that the women are so seized with terror and amazement that they flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone. For centuries, interpreters have been so disturbed by this abrupt ending that they have reflexively filled in what feels like an unsatisfactory gap. But scholars from ancient days to the most current researchers bring Mark’s Gospel to a close here. Two sentences come after these in most Bibles [and in your bulletin] that are a later addition intended to show that the women finally came to their senses and shared what they had experienced with others. A still longer epilogue was added sometime in the second century. We just seem to want neat bows to wrap up a disturbing story—a story that defies neat and tidy.

A story that pulses with life and life is not neat and tidy.

“He has been raised; he is not here.” Imagine the astonishment. Three grief-stricken women picking their way through the dangerous darkness until they reach the tomb, just as the sun is beginning to rise. Three women already on high alert as they travel through Rome-occupied territory at great risk. Others who might have provided some semblance of safety are missing: Simon and Andrew, the apostles that Jesus called first, have fled. Simon Peter, who declared Jesus to be the Messiah, has denied even knowing Jesus. James and John, who thought that they could drink the cup that Jesus drank, are nowhere to be found. Everyone else has washed up and gone home. They are alone, these three women, but they are accustomed to tending to necessities of daily life; the unspectacular work of cooking and cleaning, of bearing and raising children. They are accustomed to the tasks of grieving that include perfuming the bodies of dead loved ones.

And so they have come looking for the body, seeking that which still has hold of their hearts and minds. Seeing that the stone has been moved gave them cause for concern because Caesar has decreed that no stones shall be moved nor bodies removed from tombs under penalty of death, a threat that they have seen carried out all too often.

These fears are only confirmed when they enter the tomb. The body is gone. There sits a man who might be a Roman soldier or a tomb raider. Before they can even open their mouths, he speaks and says: “He has been raised; he is not here.” Imagine.

The women are understandably alarmed, but there is something dawning on them. Jesus lived. They experienced life with him. Jesus died. They witnessed this just a day and half earlier. The body of Jesus was placed in a tomb. They saw where his body was laid. And now, they encounter overwhelming evidence that the Only Begotten has been raised from the dead. “The time is fulfilled and kingdom of God has truly come

near.” The path of discipleship ahead of them is made real, and they are seized with terror and amazement, reduced to silence. In their silence, the three deeply devoted women now also essentially flee. The challenge of spreading the good news remains. The story stops there and leaves us hanging.

Mark doesn't give us a story of perfect, heroic people who never fail. Mark's Gospel is a deeply human story about people who get upset when experiences put them in touch with the God who disrupts certainty. People like you and me. Mark's Gospel is a deeply human story about the God who resurrects—the God that raises up that which has been cast down, the God that makes new things out of that which has grown old, the God who recreates our lives in ways that we cannot anticipate or prepare for.

Mark's story ends in a way that leaves us, like the three women, a little unsettled, unnerved or perhaps even alarmed. How is that good news? Where is the resolution, the closure that we crave? The celestial being in the tomb provides a clue.

To make sense of Mark's ending, go back where it all started, back to the very first words of Mark's Gospel that say: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The *beginning* of the good news. You see, the end of Mark's Gospel is not the end of the story. No, the end of Mark's Gospel is only the *end of the beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The stirring in our hearts for Mark to end the story, the desire for completion, for wholeness, is the stirring of the Risen Christ within each of our hearts. The Risen Christ prompting us to take up the story, to live the next chapter of the story in our hearts, in our homes and in our neighborhoods. To go to where the Risen Christ promised to be found. The story will continue with the Risen Christ already waiting for us at work or at school or where we volunteer or play or relax.

We gather here at St Elizabeth to learn how to live the next chapter of the story surrounded by other sinners and saints who are in awe of what God has done. But the Risen Christ is always already present to us wherever we are, even when we flee or go silent. God abides in our alleluias and our rejoicing, and God abides in our mourning and our confusion. God's grace abounds, and just like the three women at the end of Mark, our challenge lies before us. The Risen Christ has left the tomb and gone on ahead of us, leaving only a celestial messenger urging us to go and tell. "He has been raised; he is not here."

Go then, to be the living and enacted word that the terrified, speechless women could not yet be. Go to do what they could not do, at least as far as Mark's story went. But live out the good news with the Risen Christ in the way that is *yours* to do because *yours* is the next chapter waiting to be written. Faith is often the result of having our worlds traumatized, our perspectives unbalanced, our expectations challenged—faith is often the result because God uses our flight, our loss of control, our speechless confusion as *starting* points. These never have to be the end of the story, but even now, they can be the end of the beginning of the next chapter of life. The ultimate completion of the story does not rely on our faithfulness, but on God's. And *that* is the good news we proclaim when we say: "Alleluia, Christ is Risen. The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia."