

The God of Resurrection
Mark 16: 1-8; I Corinthians 15: 38, 20-22

Easter

April 4, 2021

Today we celebrate the keystone of the Christian faith: our God is a God of Resurrection. Crucifixion is not the last word, Resurrection is. Death is not the final word, life is. Hate has not the final word, love does!

Our Easter gospel this year is from Mark. It is a literary mystery—and it is the most wonderful invitation. Here it is: we can write the Resurrection chapter of our lives.

I

Mark's Easter gospel begins as the other gospels with women coming to the tomb bearing spices to anoint Jesus' body. The women were faithful to the end; the male disciples had scattered. The one constant in all four gospels as they tell the Easter story is that Mary

Magdalene was there. As we heard at the sunrise service, John's gospel emphasizes the role of Mary Magdalene. She is the first evangelist of the Easter gospel; thus she has been called from early years, "Apostle to the Apostles". In today's gospel she is there with two other women: Mary, mother of James and Salome.

Now here comes part A of the Easter story: the Empty Tomb. The women approached the tomb wondering how the large stone at the entrance would be moved. Love starts out even when there are obstacles ahead.

When they got there the stone had been moved away. As they entered the tomb they saw a young man in a white robe sitting there. They had to be startled. Then the young man said, "Don't be alarmed, the one you are looking for, Jesus of Nazareth, has been raised! He is not here. Look and see!"

Then the angel gave them an Easter commission: "Go! Tell the disciples and Peter, he is going ahead of you. You will see him there."

And now the puzzle. This is how the oldest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel end, with a startling verse 8:

So they went out and fled, for trembling and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing for they were afraid.

That's no way to end a gospel! How could something called gospel, good news, end like that, with terrified women fleeing and saying nothing.

There's a slight grammatical problem here too. It ends with a preposition, the word *gar* or "for", and any good grammar teacher would draw a red circle around that! Literally the gospel ends, "And they said nothing to anyone for..."

So should we call Mark "The Unfinished Gospel", like Schubert's 8th Symphony, famously named "The Unfinished Symphony?" Did Mark mean to end it like that, or was the original ending broken off and lost? In these ancient scrolls the beginnings and ends of the

scrolls were sometimes broken off because that's where the most stress was in scrolls. Any librarian will tell you that!

Well, many of your Bibles end Mark at verse 8. But some of your Bibles add second ending, verses 9-20. Evidently the second century church got nervous and added these verses which are a kind of Cliff Notes of other resurrection appearances which others had been telling about. Including those odd verses about handling snakes and not being harmed—which is the Biblical warrant for snake-handling Baptist Churches—in case you want to know.

II

So why am I going on and on about this literary mystery? Because it underlines that the full Easter gospel has two parts, a Part A and a Part B. Part A is the Empty Tomb. Part B is a collection of resurrection appearances of the Risen Christ to his disciples. Without Part B there would be no Easter and no Christianity.

So we have in Part B stories like the Risen Christ meeting Mary Magdalene in the garden; and that evening when the disciples were huddled in fear behind locked doors as the Risen Christ appeared to them, needing no door. And his appearance to two disciples trudging on the road to Emmaus saying those poignant words of sorrow, “We had hoped”, and suddenly Jesus was there walking beside them. And there was the appearance by the Sea of Galilee. Peter and the disciples had gone back to fishing for fish. He called out from the shore. “Caught any yet?”. Peter jumped overboard and thrashed to shore. Then Jesus cooked them breakfast with the fish they caught.

Years later Paul wrote about the Resurrection passing on to us what had been passed to him: that Jesus had been raised from the dead, then appeared to Peter and the disciples. (He managed to leave out the part about Mary Magdalene and the women!) Then he appeared to 500 at one time, then to his brother James, and last of all, Paul said, to him.

Jesus was appearing everywhere in his resurrection body, his spiritual body, a body not confined to our space/time continuum. In other words, his appearances were a mystery unable to be explained by our finite minds—though many have tried!

Easter was not Easter until Jesus began appearing to his disciples. He did not appear for the whole world to see in Cecil B. DeMille fashion. He did not appear to his enemies to confront them and prove them wrong. Rather he appeared to his disciples to encourage them with the good news of Easter—and to give them new life.

III

So now I come to the wonderful invitation mentioned above. Easter has not only a Part A, the Empty Tomb, not only a Part B, the Resurrection appearances, it has a Part C, and this is where you come in. You are invited to write the resurrection chapter on your life.

In I Corinthians, Paul said that Christ's resurrection was the sign of our resurrection to come. *We shall all be raised.* "For as in Adam all die, in Christ shall all be made alive." Alive! All!

But this resurrection that is ours today is not just for the world to come, it is for the living of our lives today. We can begin now the resurrection chapter of our lives—or our next resurrection chapter.

For Paul it happened a year or so after Easter. On his way to persecute and kill Christians the Risen Lord appeared in blinding light and Paul fell from his horse. Flannery O'Connor commented: "I reckon the Lord knew that the only way to make a Christian out of that one was to knock him off his horse!" Saul died, and Paul was born. Sometimes the resurrection chapter of our lives begins when we've been knocked off our horse.

God is a God of Resurrection, of second chances. When we reach the end of our ropes, God is at the end of the rope.

But love and beauty and joy can begin our chapters too. God has many ways to bring us alive.

In a poem by Stanley Kunitz called “Layers”, he looks back over his life with its joy and loss. Hear as here he ends the poem:

Though I lack the art
to decipher it
no doubt the next chapter
in my book of transformations
is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

God is not done with your changes either. God is by your side helping you write the next chapter of your life, a resurrection chapter.

There is newness of life ahead for you, an aliveness you may have wondered could ever be yours. Resurrection is for you too!

In Mark's Easter gospel he tells the women: "He is going ahead of you. You will see him there." He is going ahead of us too. Not backward, forward.

The resurrections may seem large or small, but they are yours to seize.

We could rightly say, "Wherever Christ is, There is resurrection", but we could also say: "Wherever resurrection is, there is Christ." Resurrection in all its forms, joy, hope, aliveness, beauty, and peace, blessed peace. There is Christ.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Jesuit poet, saw God, saw Christ everywhere. In one poem he exclaims:

For Christ plays in ten thousand places

Lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his

...Through the features of [men's] faces.

And women's! And children's, in all our dear faces.

So this Easter let's open our eyes, the eyes of our hearts to see some of those ten thousand places. One may be closer to you than you think. Christ may be closer to you than you think.

I close with another of his poems, some of my favorite words for Easter. It is my prayer for us all today.

Let him easter in us,
be a dayspring to the dimness of us,
be a crimson cressed east,
more brightening [us]
as his reign rolls.

Easter in us today, O Christ, and may your reign roll.

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1. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire", *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p.90.

2. *“The Wreck of the Deutschland” The Poems of Gerard Manley*

Hopkins, op. cit., p. 65.