

EXPERIENCING EASTER WHEN THERE'S NO HAPPY ENDING

Mark 16: 1-8

I was in my early 20s, with a degree in my hands and lots of confidence. I hadn't experience serious failure, loss or grief in my life. Like many a young person I thought I knew a lot more about life and the world than I actually did. I had also become aflame with the idea of making a difference in the world through the church. I had a strong faith and few doubts. I was headed to seminary and to the ministry.

But then, I met my teacher of theology: Prof Douglas Hall. He told us straight out that if our faith has not passed through any season of doubt, it was inadequate. That intrigued me. It attracted me somehow. But I didn't know what that meant. What did it feel like to have serious doubts, doubts that made you question fundamental certitudes in your life that held you together?

Well, alongside textbooks on theology, Prof. Hall made us read literature. We read novels by Elie Wiesel, a Jewish survivor of the holocaust. We read existentialist writers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Friedrich Nietzsche, both protest atheists, meaning that they questioned how God can be real and prayer to God of any use when there is so much suffering and injustice in the world. We read the Canadian Rudy Wiebe who wrote about the struggles of his Mennonite forbears who suffered as persecuted refugees and the intergenerational trauma suffered by the children and grandchildren. Our assignments were not to provide answers to the real questions these writers were raising, but to sit with the questions and let them dig into us. Our assignments were more descriptive about what was going on inside us as we absorbed all this real-life data. What were our questions, our fears, our doubts? Did we believe in God enough to linger at the foot of the cross with Jesus and ponder his words: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," and not explain them away?

I was mesmerized. I knew this was profoundly real, profoundly important and it was the best preparation for ministry I could ever have. But still, I couldn't help succumbing to the temptation that ministry was about providing answers. How could I respond to Wiesel, Becket, Bernanos, Sartre, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and many congregants I would encounter in the churches I would minister? I needed to study past my master's degree. But I also needed a job. And so, in my mid-twenties I received a call to a multi-

point charge in small-town Quebec. This was actually a team ministry with my older brother Nick, also called to ministry. By doing it as a team and getting the congregations' buy in, we could do full-time ministry and pursue our doctoral studies at the same time. I also felt I would be getting real-life experience in the parish engaging people with the learning I was doing reading and writing.

But here's the thing. Within the first few years of ministry there, it became clear to me that even more important than learning about the Trinity of God, Christ and the Spirit, there was a trinity of three women who would be looking over my shoulder every week I wrote a sermon and every Sunday I would preach and pray. These women would shape my theology more than anything I would learn reading books alone. How so? Let me tell you briefly about them.

First there was Margaret. Margaret was a leader among the women, in charge of hospitality. But one day when I was over visiting, Margaret told me about one son, the youngest, who had died in his mid-twenties. Somehow, I reminded her of him. He was a hydro worker, and one day, high up, cutting away branches from the powerlines, something happened, and a massive jolt of electricity struck him. He fell and was killed instantly. She grieved his death so deeply, she said, that she had lost her faith. She was angry with God and couldn't forgive God for letting this happen. He was such a good young man, engaged to be married, hard-working and all. Believing in God and in some good order to things no longer made any sense. She loved the church community, but her spirit was bitter and broken. Could it ever be resurrected again?

Second, there was Evelyn. Evelyn was a regular at the church and involved in many activities. One day I got a call that Evelyn had been taken to hospital by ambulance. When I got to the hospital I asked her to tell me what happened. She had an ongoing heart condition and sometimes it could get so bad she needed emergency medical care. But she also told me that her doctor told her that stress was an even bigger factor in her poor health. I asked her to tell me about that if she was willing. She was. She told me her husband had left her and an only son some years ago. Late in his teens, her son developed severe mental health illness. Now in his middle years, she didn't know where and how he lived. He would break into her home, often at night, and accuse her of ruining his life, of being evil, of hiring people to beat him up and worse. Had she ever called the police? I asked. No she had not. Even though she was

tormented by her son she also felt guilty and responsible somehow. Had she been a bad mother? Maybe her suffering was some kind of punishment for her son's pain. What could I say in response? We certainly went through a journey over the next few years, and eventually, her son was placed in a facility where he received supervised care. But the questions continued to afflict Evelyn.

Finally, there was Beverley. Beverley was connected nominally to the church. The first time I met her was after a terrible tragedy. Her youngest son had been a star athlete, just graduating from high school and headed off to college on a scholarship. On graduation night, however, a group of boys got into a car after a party and there was an accident. Her son was in that car. Everyone in the car was killed. She wanted to meet with me to plan a funeral. My goodness! As she tried to explain things in my office, she couldn't stop crying! And the funeral... what a funeral it was! The whole town came out. We had to connect speakers into the hall and onto the main street outside. I had young people in the choir pews behind me. Every seat was taken, and the aisles were jam packed.

I can't remember much about the service or what I said. But one thing that happened was that Beverley started coming to church. She came with a friend. Each Sunday, once we started singing the first hymn, she began to weep, and she wept silently through most of the service. This happened for months.

And so, I had Beverley, Evelyn and Margaret there most every Sunday. I was so mindful of them each and every week I prepared a sermon and prayers. How would they hear what I said? Could I speak of faith, hope and love with any credibility? How would anything of Easter hope and new life speak to them in a way that honoured fully the darkness of their Good Fridays?

Well, our scripture reading this morning is all about that, believe it or not. Here, too, we encounter three women. Their names are not Margaret, Evelyn and Beverley, but Mary, Mary and Salome. They have been there with Jesus all the way through Good Friday. What hope could there be of any newness of life past that?

Well, why were they there early Sunday morning? Because even if they couldn't do anything to stop Jesus being tortured and killed, they could still love his tortured body by caring for it the way they cared for Jesus when he

was alive. And who were these women, anyway? What were their stories? Well, we don't know anything specific about two of them. But we do know bits and pieces about Mary Magdalene. Evidently, Mary had suffered serious mental health trauma and distress at some point in her past. We're told Jesus had exorcised not one but seven demons out of her. The language of the demonic is the language of mental health illness, trauma and distress. Jesus had healed Mary and she had awakened to Jesus' powerful love. Jesus had somehow journeyed with her through her darkness and had brought her into the light. Now, she would offer whatever love was in her to her Lord and saviour, ministering at his tomb the way she had waited and watched with profound horror and grief his crucifixion.

So what was it that Mary and the other two had to offer? They had love to offer. But it wasn't just any kind of love. We read that they brought spices so that they might go and anoint him. This process is not just a small act of kindness. It requires a lot of time, expense, effort, and tender care. Throughout the gospel story as Mark tells it, the one motive that drives Jesus, we're told, is "compassion." Compassion is the kind of love that walks with another and is ready to suffer with another if the other is suffering. Compassion doesn't control the situation or give a timeline of how much is needed and for how long. It goes all the way, it stays, and it demands nothing but an openness from the other to receive loving presence alongside them. Even as the three women had been recipients of Jesus' compassionate healing love, they were now sharing compassionate presence with Jesus in return, even if it were now just his body.

But here's the thing. Mark's account of resurrection is super low key and open ended. It requires that much more faith to believe it. How would loving compassion resurrect faith for the women and for readers of this story? Here's what we're told. When the women arrive, they find the tomb opened up and the body of Jesus missing. They also see a young man. Who is he? In later gospel accounts we're told he's an angel, but here, we're simply told he is a young man. And he tells the women that Jesus "has been raised." They must tell the other disciples and head back to Galilee where they will see him. Wow! What are they supposed to make of all this?

Can they believe what they're hearing from this man they've never seen before? Can they believe what Jesus told them before the hell of Good Friday came to be, namely, that he would be raised on the third day? Hard to say. It's hard to say because the story ends without us being told. What we are told is

that the women flee the scene in terror. They say nothing to no one because they are paralyzed by fear.

But we are also told something else. They are not only terrified but “amazed.” Amazed is code in Mark’s gospel account for that space between a fear that resists, rejects and shuts down, to an opening of the heart where faith may come to be. Amazement is not yet faith, but it can be. How does fear and terror, grief and loss turn into faith and a faith that opens to healing and new life? Jesus already revealed this to them: compassion, and a compassion that sticks it out, a compassion that goes all the way, a compassion that walks alongside, listens, lingers and waits for resurrection to come. Only compassion-love can resurrect new life. Only those who truly love Jesus after he has died and broken down all their false expectations that somehow they are protected from the Good Fridays of life and everything will turn out happy in the end... past all that, if love remains, or awakens anew and keeps pouring itself out... faith, new life, resurrection can happen.

They will see Jesus. They will build connection and community around faith in him. Their love will form rich new networks of meaning and wholeness even as they carry the trauma of Jesus’ tortured body in their souls. His suffering will resurrect a deeper quality in their compassion for others who are also tortured and forsaken in some way. Only a love that has passed through Good Friday and has invested in walking with others through their Good Fridays can become a resurrection love that continues to journey until terror, anger, grief and amazement, turn into faith.

So, what about my trinity of three women? Even as Margaret never told me her anger at God had left her, I could see how a greater warmth was growing in her toward other people, especially those who were grieving their losses. Walking with someone else in grief is a powerful way of finding meaning, healing and new life through your own. Love was working through Margaret.

Evelyn would visit her son regularly and sometimes I would accompany her. Even as she continued to struggle with dark feelings, she was experiencing greater peace and a greater letting go and letting be, recognizing that so many cards in life are dealt us and we can only best play them when we open our hearts to love others and let others love us too.

Beverley continued to come to church. She didn’t cry as often, and she got more involved in activities. She opened her heart to wider connections. The

amazing thing for me is that they were always there Easter Sunday morning, fully immersed in it all. They sang the hymns, took in the prayers, readings and sermon. They expressed appreciation for the service and how meaningful and impactful it was for them. It wasn't always in words. Sometimes words are insufficient to reveal what happens in the heart. But I certainly felt their presence and affirmation. What they taught me is that the resurrection was not some spectacular triumph, some magical transformation, or even something reserved for after you die. No. Resurrection begins here and now when compassion creates healing communion between and within people past the worst assaults of life. As we receive love we give love and as we give love we experience resurrection in our hearts and spirits. New directions, new sensitivities, new ways of seeing and new capacities of living and loving are opened up. We carry our losses, disappointments and perplexities into new ways of compassionate presence. And we find new meaning and purpose we never knew before.

At least this is what's possible. The question is: will fear and terror, anger and grief become amazement, and will amazement become faith? Where do you need to encounter the risen Christ in your life, your heart and your soul? Let us pray: resurrect new life in us, O God... Fill us with your steadfast love... Amen.