

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! The long, Lenten journey fades like the darkness giving way to first light.

Mark's gospel account of the first Easter is surprising! Mark's gospel is the earliest or oldest gospel manuscript telling the stories of Jesus. Mark's perspective of redemption is rooted in the suffering of Jesus and the significance of the cross. Each time we come to the Easter story from Mark, I am tempted to pull the endings from all the other gospels (Matthew, Luke, and John) and neatly conflate them to a pretty ending filled with joy and hope. But Mark doesn't allow for such as we read the original telling in Mark 16:1-8. It's the third day after Jesus was crucified. Here is my summary, the Cliff Notes, if you will, or perhaps the cliffhanger notes:

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to anoint Jesus on the first day of the week at first light, worried and wondering, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" The large stone had already been rolled away. They went into the tomb, saw a young man dressed in a white robe, and they were confused, startled, and afraid. The guy in white said, "Do not be shocked and scared; you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He has been raised. Go, tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." So they bolted from the tomb... terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone... they were petrified. That's it! That's the end of the earliest manuscript of this story in verse 8.

It's unsettling. Verses 9-20 were redacted and added over time. The way I feel reading that first story that I read reminds me of how I react when I find an old journal in which I've written, and the story I logged is filled with pain, or despair, or uncertainty. My journal entry ends with a cliffhanger of uncertainty. And I am always a bit uncomfortable because I now know how things unfolded beyond that one day in my diary. Yet the journal entry captures with deep emotion, experience, and perspective, one moment in time.

Mark's original ending in Mark 16, verse 8, is likened to a movie's abrupt cliffhanger ending with no resolve, and the credits roll. On that first Easter morning, Mark's gospel tells a story of worried women arriving to an empty tomb, and leaving terrified, amazed, muted, and afraid. Is that where you are this Easter?

Life is not what you hoped.

You've received some news that has thrown everything off course.

Disappointment and despair are all you know.

Jesus' resurrection was a moment in time that changed all moments in time. Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. Jesus' emptying of himself, unbearable suffering, horrific death, and surprising resurrection demonstrate to what great lengths God goes to express love, life, and a future that has no end. Friends, Easter is about what Christ has done for us. It's not about what you have done. If you are at a moment in your story feeling worried and terrified, the surprise of resurrection is happening. Staring into an empty tomb does not clear up feelings of the impossibility of resurrection! The women saw the stone rolled away and entered an empty

tomb and still could not integrate the possibility of resurrection - they were terrified and amazed and silent and afraid!

The good news of Easter is Jesus' resurrection is unexpected and complete! The triune God's love for humanity is demonstrated in Christ's death and resurrection, while we were still sinners, while we are still afraid, while we don't understand the meaning of the empty tomb - resurrection is near. When you and I are worried and traumatized and silent and terrorized, the amazement of resurrection comes - whether we are aware or not. It's really OK to not have it all together on Easter. It's really OK to bolt from the empty tomb reeling from your own fears and terror.

And remember that the journal entry in your life today is not how it ends. The stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty. The resurrected Christ has overcome death, despair, destruction, and the chasm between us and God! The risen Christ is ahead, waiting for you. Don't be afraid. Your story isn't over, because you are part of God's unfolding story of resurrection power in the world.

And you know what? We need others to walk with us on this Easter journey. If you've been disconnected from a church community, this is a wonderful time to reconnect. Find a United Methodist Church and tell someone there that you are ready to quit doing life alone. I know that the church is filled with imperfect people and lots of brokenness...and that's the point. We need the resurrected Jesus to not leave us to ourselves. We need the risen Christ to keep us from harming each other. Those of you hearing my voice who are part of a congregation, remember that people in your path and in your broader community have been hurt by the church. Love well. If you've experienced Christ's resurrection in your life, be gentle in sharing your story. Give space for fear, terror, and amazement from others.

Mark's telling of the Easter story reminds us not to try to package Easter with fluff - it's not pretty dresses and colorful eggs. Easter is God doing the impossible through Jesus, for all of humanity forever and ever, and for you. Don't be afraid. The long, Lenten journey fades like the darkness giving way to first light. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Amen.