

Happily Ever After?

Mark 16:1-8

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It will not surprise you to hear me say that Easter is the most hopeful news we have. That is why we are all here today. But it is also our most terrifying news.

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Early on a Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome made their way to a tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus. The gospel writer Mark tells us that these women had watched the crucifixion of Jesus "from a distance." When it was all over they saw Joseph of Arimathea pull the dead body off the cross, wrap it in a linen cloth, lay it in a tomb hewn out of a rock, and then roll the stone over the door of the tomb. They watched it all from a distance.

Maybe that is your favorite perspective on death as well. Most of us do all we can to keep a little distance between us and death. We try to stay healthy, work out, and watch what we eat. We're careful. So careful. It is all a way of keeping death over there. But occasionally it catches up to someone you love, and then you know, like these women, that you have to go and see death up close.

The grief of these women must have been overwhelming. They had been with Jesus since Galilee. Ah, Galilee. How far that delightful place must have seemed from this place of death. In Galilee Jesus had been so full of life and was constantly restoring and healing the lives of others. Before Mary Magdalene met him, her soul had been torn apart by seven demons. This man was their Savior! But as they walked down the road toward the tomb, someone may have mentioned that the world has always been hard on saviors. Or like most people in deep grief, maybe they said nothing at all as they quietly closed the distance between them and the tomb of death.

Their only dilemma, which Mark tells us they did discuss along the way, was how they would get that huge stone rolled back? We also know about pushing against a huge stone. We have all been pushing against something for a long time. Maybe this Easter finds you pushing against an employer or supervisor who is hard to satisfy. Or maybe you are pushing against a marriage that seems destined for the ditch. Or pushing against a disease, depression, loneliness, or some obstacle that is between you and your dreams. You think that if you can just get this thing rolled back, you'll be fine. But as the story goes, even if you get rid of the stone, all that is waiting on the other side is death.

It is one of the worst ironies of life. When we work so hard to save our lives, we are actually doing little more than anointing the dead. Even if we use up life achieving our dreams, we have still only closed the distance between us and death. As Jesus kept trying to explain, those who try to save their lives will lose them. Eventually you will lose your job, your relationships, your health, and everything you are pushing to save. The story always ends in loss. Every wonderful thing in life comes to an end. We know that. No one has ever come into my office for pastoral counseling because they are having a crisis of faith in death and loss. We find that easy to believe. That's why we push so hard. We want to get in as much life out of our jobs, relationships, or health before we lose them.

So this Easter morning, let us remember that this is not some ancient story. Let us each take our place beside these three women wondering what it will take to push against the stone. How much hard work, money, love and sacrifice do our dreams require of us? And then, let us also have the courage to remember that with all this effort, we are still only pushing our way into a tomb.

When the women arrived at the tomb, they were startled to discover that the stone was already rolled back. So they walked inside where they saw an angel in white sitting. And they became "alarmed." The angel said, "Don't be alarmed." Isn't that wonderful? Angels always say that in the Bible. They do the most terrifying things, like show up, and tell us not to be alarmed. How can it not be alarming to see a messenger from God? Well, as the women soon discovered, the messenger wasn't nearly as alarming as the message.

"Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Then we are told, "The women fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them."

This is the element of Easter that is so often missing from our celebrations. We think of Easter as a time for bunnies and little chickens, colorful eggs, and little girls in cute new dresses. But we ought to be thinking about grown women, with their dresses hiked up to their knees, running with terror out of a cemetery. Easter was not a happily-ever-after ending pasted onto the otherwise frightening ending of Jesus on the cross. The way Mark tells the story, Easter is the frightening part. Along with Joseph of Arimathea, we had put Jesus into a tomb - wrapped, signed, sealed, and delivered. But when we got a good look into the tomb this morning, everything was unwrapped. Nothing was as we expected. Nothing is as it should be. Now, we cannot even count on death. Right. Easter claims that you had better have your doubts about death, for it is not the last thing.

No wonder the women fled the tomb in fear. We may not care much for death, but we understand it. Again, that is what has set the agenda for the rest of life. That is why we were pushing so hard at life. But if death is not waiting at the end, then everything in life has to change. We have to start over. We have to discover a whole new purpose to life. That's the frightening part. According to Easter, the point of life isn't to collect as many things as possible before it is too late, or to hold your loved ones as tightly as possible before you have to give them back, or to waste the precious few years of life trying to prevent death. Never confuse preventing death with living. According to Easter, the point is to discover a new life in Christ today.

Easter is not about renewal, new beginnings, the perseverance of the human spirit, or crocuses in the spring- time. Long ago, I lost count of how many times I have stood in front of a congregation at a funeral. When I look out at the tear-stained faces of the broken-hearted family and friends of the deceased, I have to know what to say. Do you think that if I tell them any of that sentimental drivel about spring-time it is going to help at all? But how about if instead I say, "Christ has been raised from the dead. . . as all die in Adam so will all be made alive in Christ. . . Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Risen Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." (1 Corinthians 15:20, 22, 58)

Two things happen to people at funerals when the pastors of the church use those verses. First, they are reminded of a joyful hope for a future beyond their comprehension. Secondly, if they are really paying attention, they start to wonder about the life they are living right now. You cannot stare at a casket in a church and not ask yourself some ultimate questions. You wonder if it really makes sense to push so hard at work. You wonder if you are missing the point. Death always comes too soon. Rather than trying to push against it, work for something you will never have to lose. Work for things that make an eternity of difference in this world.

In the original text, Mark's gospel probably ended in verse eight with this conversation between the angel and the women. But that seems so unfinished. He tells us nothing about the Road to Emmaus, the struggle of Thomas to believe, the tender conversation by the fire with Peter. In fact, if verse eight is the end of the gospel, then Mark hasn't given us any indication of an appearance of the risen Christ. That is why subsequently the church added a couple of different endings that include the material found in the other gospels. But if Mark meant for his gospel to end right here with the angel giving the women the terrifying news that death is not the end and that Jesus is waiting for them back in Galilee, then he would have purposefully left the Easter story unfinished.

So how does the story get finished? Back in Galilee, where the women and the disciples lived. Back in the ordinary places where you and I spend most of our time. Back where we work, and live, and make our homes. The Easter story gets finished when ordinary people do the most extraordinary things with their lives, because they gave up pushing against stones.

The Easter story gets finished when the hungry are fed and the homeless are given shelter, when the sinner is forgiven and broken relationships are mended. The Easter story gets finished when the lonely are made part of a church family, when the sick and the prisoner are visited, and those in grief are comforted. It gets finished when parents find time to raise their children, when business people do what is right regardless of the cost, when leaders have the courage to lead.

The Easter story get finished every time someone makes the terrifying realization that it is in giving life away that we find it. This life, eternal life, can be found today. But you can only receive it. And you will never be able to receive life, if you are busy pushing your way into a tomb.

All across the world today, in churches speaking every language under the sun, the frightening call is issued to think again about the eternal purpose of your life, to walk away from your private tomb, and to walk instead toward the hope of the risen Savior Jesus Christ.

He is waiting for you, as he said, in the ordinary places. And wherever a risen Savior is found, well, that place is anything but ordinary. Wonderful things can happen there. You can even finish the Easter story. Amen.