

Mark 16:1-20

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, '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 they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

THE SECOND ENDING OF MARK

[[And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.]]

THE THIRD & LONGER ENDING OF MARK

[[Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.'

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.]]

Our journey through the passion narrative of Mark's gospel ends today with chapter 16. The only question, answered differently by different ancient sources, is where exactly does the Easter account in Mark's gospel end. A wonderful opportunity is set before us as we consider the various conclusions to Mark's gospel found in the various sources upon which Mark is based. Compilers of our bibles must make choices about these things and I appreciate the little foot notes in most study bibles which alert readers to the discussion. This is all interesting stuff at a purely intellectual level and I have promised the worship team for today that I would not dwell long upon the technicalities. I will, though, highlight the best summary I have found of the reasons for these various endings, and I share it because the options point me to Easter hope.

- a) "The evangelist intended to close his Gospel at [v. 8]; or
- b) The Gospel was never finished; or, as seems most probable,
- c) The Gospel accidentally lost its last leaf before it was multiplied by transcriptions".¹

For those who wish to explore further the debate I can loan out the book from which this summary; it is the gold standard for all textual variants of the New Testament.

The Easter angle I will explore in light of this tension between the ancient sources is that maybe the Gospel story is never finished. Maybe Jesus sightings continue well after any one of us completes our account. Maybe Divine revelation continues. Additional stories of God's ministry keep rolling in. And sometimes the resurrection stories which are a part of God's larger story accidentally get lost.

We are in a COVID-19 season, which is a tussle between life and death, and God continues inspiring chapters to the Gospel story. I consider the movement of supporting health care workers at shift change to be one such account. If you are not familiar with what I mention, I quote now from an eye witness to these events in Vancouver. "There's less traffic noise, no fireworks shows, no roaring crowds at sporting events in Vancouver these days thanks to the COVID-19 crisis. But every night there's a new tradition that's making soundwaves through the city. At 7 p.m. Vancouver residents are stepping outside - on their own balconies, patios, roofs, or sidewalks - to erupt in cheers and applause to salute the city's hard-working health care workers on the frontlines."²

¹ Bruce Metzger on behalf and in cooperation with the Editorial Committee of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Federal Republic of German (Bible Society, 1975), p. 126.

²Lindsay William-Ross (March 22, 2020) quoted at: <https://www.vancouverisawesome.com/vancouver-news/cheering-outside-nightly-health-care-workers-vancouver-video-2188691>

I can not fathom the stress upon these brave souls who daily enter once more into the tomb of the medical facilities seeking life amidst death for their patients while also facing their own mortality. I can imagine some days, like the woman in 16:1-5, they approach their shifts, the tomb, with trepidation. I can imagine some days, like the women of 16:8 they flee from their shifts filled more with terror than awe. The self-isolating residents around the hospital, blessings be upon them, have chosen to be a source of encouragement. It is amazing how support from a community can sustain and inspire. Listen to a short audio recording.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnnwdSNDHF0> which hopefully can also be posted on the web-site).³

Would these cheering residents self identify as Christians or God fearing people? Some might and others not. What is clear to me is that such acts of encouragement and compassion have their ultimate source in the God of encouragement and compassion. Would the health workers and care home staff and fire department personnel in these days self identify as Christians or God fearers? Some might and others not. What is clear to me is that such acts which confront death with self sacrifice and the healing arts have their ultimate source in the Christ who challenged death with his own self sacrifice and who is our Great Physician. The stories of Easter continue long after Mark 16 verse 8 in which we flee in terror, and thanks be to God for that.

Humour, or at least a positive disposition, I think opens us to the new paragraphs of the Gospel story which God is writing. I suggest this because there is a certain ironic humour lacing its way through Mark 16 which brings a smile if not a laugh. A demon racked Mary Magdalene (16:9) becomes the first evangelist to the disciples; a great reversal I might say which causes those of us racked by our own demons to sigh with relief and maybe even laugh. Those who have been with Jesus, who we might expect some openness to the idea of resurrection, resoundingly reject the women's report; a word of hope for we disciples still struggling to get our heads and hearts around big topics like incarnation and resurrection. And this rag tag group will eventually speak in tongues; they will handle snakes and other toxins; they will bring healing. This transformation, too, brings a lightness to my heart and joy; it makes me almost laugh at what God might have in store for any of us. And consider the fact the women that Easter morning sought the tomb of the deceased Jesus to anoint him with spices, but it is the Living Christ who seeks us out in the tombs we make of ourselves and our world to anoint us with his Spirit. It is serious stuff laced with ironic humour.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnnwdSNDHF0>

An example of Easter humour in these days which permits a broader perspective of the situation comes from former Edmonton Journal editorialist Stephen Berg who now blogs the “Grow Mercy” web site. He is a Benedictine Oblate. In a parody of COVID-19 he writes:

[C]onsider *Compassion-20* the gentle virus: In Northern Italy, there’s been an outbreak of mercy, Cardinals of The Treasury fear it might reach the Vatican. In China, The People’s kindness can’t be contained, Xi and the Central Military Commission watch helplessly as it crosses the border into Tibet. The first carrier in Sweden has sent a handwritten card of gratitude to his elementary school teacher. There’s been a run on ballpoint pens; experts warn teachers around the globe, there’s up to a 70% chance they’ll be receiving mail. In Lybia and Mali the armies are burying their UB-32 rockets and 106mm rifles and digging wells. In Paris, the CEO of AXA Insurance has opened a shelter and is giving away Blondo boots and Teva sandals...Sean Hannity, who appears to have robust immunity, blames the WHO for “weaponizing happiness.” “Good night and good luck,” says Carole MacNeil...“we’re heading off-air. In the meantime, wave your hands frequently and don’t touch your Facebook.”⁴

Or consider that lovely font of satire called *The Daily Bonnet*. Prior to the cap on group gatherings, but in the COVID-19 era, a kind soul forwarded me a report with Swift Current listed as the location from which the report came:

Given the circumstances, even the strictest Mennonite churches have decided to relax the rules when it comes to dancing. Pastor Tom has decreed that since everyone has to keep six feet apart these days anyway, they might as well allow a little rhythmic movement. “As long as I can shove two crokinole boards between you, it shouldn’t be a problem,” said Pastor Tom. “You can twist and twerk all you want at that distance.” Pastor Tom is even planning Swift Current’s first ever church dance this Saturday in the large faspas room downstairs. “We’ll crank up the Boney M and let ‘er rip,” said Pastor Tom. “I think it’ll be our most popular...event since the jam making last fall”.⁵

I recognize that a bit of humour will not change the circumstances in which we are and are not celebrating Easter this year. There will be no large tables filled with family. There will be no guests from other Provinces or Countries. Goodness, there is not even a worship service where we can all join together in singing beloved hymns. Even more serious is that people are getting sick and dying at an

⁴ <http://growmercy.org>

⁵ [The Daily Bonnet.com](http://TheDailyBonnet.com)

alarming rate. With this in mind I conclude this sermon with a profound Easter observation drawn to my attention by Barbara Brown Taylor. She writes,

The cave in which he rose from the dead is long gone, covered over by the huge Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem....By all accounts, a stone blocked the entrance to the cave so that there were no witnesses to the resurrection. Everyone who saw the risen Jesus saw him *after*. Whatever happened in the cave happened in the dark.

As many years as I have been listening to Easter sermons, I have never heard anyone talk about that part. Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened, in complete silence, in absolute darkness, with the smell of damp stone and dug earth in the air...new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark.⁶

God does the most amazing things in the dark. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and **darkness** covered the face of the deep” (Gen 1:1-2)-- creation begins in the dark. In the **dark** God comes to Abram, appears to him in a dream, and makes a covenant with him—a people is formed in the **dark** (Gen 15:17). When needing reassurance God leads Abram outside in the **dark** to count the stars of the sky-- God reassures us in the dark (Gen 15:5). In the **night** Jacob wrestles an Angel—wrestling in the **dark** sometimes leads to a new identity (Gen 32:28). Magi are guided towards Bethlehem through a star in the **night** sky—sometimes we need the **dark** to behold signs and guide our way. As Barbara Brown Taylor has noted, the resurrection happened in the **dark**. The biblical examples could go on.

And my point is this: Cancelled Easter celebrations, furloughs, child care concerns, financial pressures, domestic tensions, suspended church services all cast a pale over this year’s Easter season. According to our Biblical testimony, however, it is precisely in these dark moments that God brings forth a new creation, a new people, resurrection. This is all God’s doing, not anything we can contrive and manufacture. And it often times happens in the dark. With this in mind let us not be too dour. Let us not permit pessimism to poison our relationships. Let us remember that God works miracles in the dark that exceed our comprehension or understanding. Let us remember that resurrection happened in the dark. Let us remember that the Gospel story continues with new chapters unfolding in our midst. Amen.

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

⁶ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2014), p. 129.

Children's Time

THE EASTER EGG TRADITION

For millennia and across the world, the egg has been a powerful symbol, representing the earth, fertility and resurrection. Little surprise that eggs also figure widely in folkloric beliefs; such fragile packages of embryonic avian life have a magical quality that appeals to us all.

To early humans, a shell cracking to reveal new life in a way so different from mammalian reproduction must have seemed both alien and miraculous. Yet, as birds populate every continent, it was also a ubiquitous phenomenon, which may partly explain why eggs became universal symbols of life and resurrection.

Ancient peoples linked the magic of this parcel of new life to creation itself, believing that the world was formed from a cosmic egg. Such an egg features in the ancient beliefs of India, Egypt, Greece and Phoenicia. In one account, Brahma, the Hindu creator, appeared from a golden egg that floated in universal waters while Chronos, the Greek personification of Time, produced an egg from which the world's creator emerged.

In Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime the egg was a symbol of light. When Dinewan the Emu quarrelled with Broлга the dancing bird, Broлга angrily grabbed an egg from Dinewan's nest and launched it into the sky. The yolk struck wood, caught fire and was transformed into a dazzling sun that illuminated a hitherto dark world.

Ancient rites and rituals

The Greeks and Romans of the ancient world placed eggs in tombs or left nests of eggs beside them – a sign of life after death – while Maori people buried their dead with an egg of a now-extinct moa in one hand. Still today, Jewish mourners traditionally eat eggs after a funeral to signify loss and the circle of life.

More than 2,500 years ago, eggshells were decorated as part of spring rituals in Africa and elsewhere to symbolise new growth and life. Undoubtedly influenced by such traditions, Christianity adopted the egg to denote the Easter Resurrection of Christ. The decorative painted eggs of Eastern European countries, such as the *pysanka* of Ukraine, were used in Christian rituals from the 10th century AD. By the late 13th century ostrich eggs, which had first hung in mosques to symbolise light and life, began to appear in churches, too, and featured in Easter ceremonies.

Well before the advent of Christianity, eggs were also used ritually to encourage human and agricultural fecundity. Such practices continued so that, for instance, in 17th-century France, a bride would break an egg to ensure fertility when she entered her new home, while German farmers smeared eggs, bread and flour on their ploughs in spring as they sowed their fields.

Women of the indigenous Japanese Ainu people had to take eggs from the nests of certain birds and present them to their husbands or fathers. The women would then mix the eggs with seeds to be planted that year, while the men prayed for good crops and made *inao* (talismans) to place in the nests.

Simply magic

Native Americans of the Central United States also practised 'egg curing', a traditional treatment that probably originated in Europe. To diagnose an illness, the egg was broken and rubbed over the bare skin of a patient, the 'curer' diagnosing the malady from any usual form or colour of the yolk and albumen. Alternatively, often to relieve a fever, an unbroken egg was rubbed on the skin to absorb the heat and then buried in a stream.

Eggs today

Today in China, red and other brightly coloured eggs continue to figure in traditional naming ceremonies; [they are a symbol of luck and wealth]. In Eastern Europe, decorating Easter eggs remains a widespread tradition and in Orthodox churches, priests still bless the eggs as a Resurrection symbol. Elsewhere, Easter egg hunts, egg rolling and other decorated egg traditions persist beyond the more widespread chocolate egg commercialism.

While the modern world with its practical, scientific knowledge of biological forms could perhaps never view eggs with the wonder they aroused in our ancestors, we can understand their powerful symbolism. Their magic is also in some ways inseparable from the beauty and mystery of the birds that produce them – creatures that soar to the heavens and were once widely viewed as instruments and even personifications of the gods.⁷

⁷ <https://folklorethursday.com/myths/folklore-eggs-mystical-powerful-symbolism/>