

## AN EASTER PRAYER

Mark 16:1-8, 12-20

*A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This sermon was preached to those attending in-person under COVID-19 restrictions and livestreamed.*

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*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.*

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*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.*

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As I said in my Tuesday morning devotional this week, the 70 people we knew we would have in this sanctuary today would feel like the 700 we normally have on Easter. And it does. You all constitute the largest number of people who have been in this sanctuary since March 8, 2020. And it is great to see you, as well as to see and know that many more join online. Your presence in this Sanctuary is a harbinger of things to come as scientists, medical providers, public officials, and ordinary citizens around the world get vaccinated, keep wearing masks, and thereby prepare us all to expand from the good things we have experienced from *virtual* community to the blessings of *personal* community. It is great to see so many faces – not rendered unfamiliar by either masks or the thirteen months we have been absent from one another.

Let us pray: *God of all words and languages, on this Day of Resurrection, so guide the words of the sermon that they lead our faith to see “the light of rising and of setting suns...the flying cloud, the singing bird, and the breath of flowers.”*<sup>1</sup> *In the name of the Risen Son we pray. Amen.*

Several years ago, my wife Maggie, who is also a Presbyterian pastor, came across a prayer from someone who has influenced us both: the late Dr. Fred Craddock, a professor of preaching for many years at Emory’s Candler School of Theology. Craddock’s prayer is this:

*Lord, I thank you  
For a life that doesn’t depend  
On how I feel at any one moment.*

When Craddock said the prayer, I suspect he was speaking about both *life in general* and the *life of faith*. My sense is that the prayer gives thanks that God’s upholding of life and faith continue even when we are not able to feel it, acknowledge it, believe it, trust it, or live out of its power. Thus, when we are down, depressed, doubting, distant, disingenuous, dishonorable, or just plain disengaged, God’s commitment to sustaining us and all of creation does not waiver.

*Lord, I thank you  
For a life that doesn’t depend  
On how I feel at any one moment.*

## I.

Not knowing what they would find is the anxious condition in which Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb before sunrise on the Sabbath the third day after Jesus has been put to death.

- They go for the purpose of anointing his body, for which purpose they carry spices, presumably in a basket.
- Whatever grief they experience and anxiety they harbor about laying their spice-laden hands on the body of Christ, they express their *anxiety* over something of more *immediate* import. “Who will roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb?” they say.
- Like most people in the first days following a death, they *throw themselves* into the details of honoring the dead: arrangements to be made, people to be contacted, personal items and artifacts to go through and secure for a more thorough sorting to come.

Details. Details. Details. We throw ourselves into arrangements to avoid throwing ourselves on the floor. “Who will roll away the stone from the tomb?”

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But when the women look up, they see the stone has already been rolled away. In an act that defies anything I imagine I could do, they lower their heads and duck through the small, ground-level door into the tomb. Once inside, they see a young man dressed in white; and they are *alarmed*. The anxiety about who would roll away the stone *from* the entrance to the tomb is now subsumed by the *absence of a body* and the *presence of a young man* in the tomb, sitting, as Mark says, “on the right side.”

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<sup>1</sup> These phrases are from Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Things happen quickly, as they are wont to do in a crisis.

*Do not be alarmed [the young man says];  
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.  
<sup>7</sup>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.*

The women *do not speak* to the young man. Rather, they *flee* from the tomb, for *terror* and *amazement* have seized them, an acceleration of the *alarm* with which they had approached the tomb. And contrary to what the young man has said, they say *nothing* to *anyone*, for they are *afraid*.

## II.

Some of you may recall me saying that of scholars who study the Gospel of Mark in its original language and are fluent with the various manuscripts of Mark that exist in museums and libraries around the world believe that in its *original* version – from Mark’s hand – the Gospel ends here: “for they were afraid.” Grammarians among these scholars point out that this final sentence is not even complete.<sup>2</sup> In Greek, the words we translate “for they were afraid” is literally “afraid for...” It is a “dangling preposition,” a construction with which no self-respecting Gospel writer – nor seventh grade English teacher – would end a Gospel. Red circle. Paper returned to the student. Points off the final grade.

And yet for around 150 years this was the only version of Mark available to the church to read on Easter. A book that ends in fear and raises questions:

- Did the women ever stop running, or like Forest Gump,<sup>3</sup> did they just keep running?
- Did they ultimately find their way to the disciples?
- Did they ever overcome their fear, find their voices, say what they had seen and heard?

I have shared with before you a theory that this “dangling preposition” and cut-short ending is *intentional* on Mark’s part: that because Mark introduces his Gospel with the words “The *beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ...” and because he ends his Gospel in suspense – “Who shot J.R.?”<sup>4</sup> – Mark is inviting us, the readers, to *write* the ending ourselves, to *complete Mark’s* Gospel of “The Good News of Jesus Christ” with *our* lives.

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In a summer writing seminar I attended at the University of Iowa, the instructor handed out a short story of which the last few paragraphs were omitted. The assignment for each student was to read the story and write an ending to it. It is amazing how imaginative the students were, and how different the endings came out.

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 16:1-8n in *The HarperCollins Study Bible Revised Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006) and in *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> *Forest Gump*, written by Eric Roth, directed by Robert Zemeckis, produced by The Tisch Company, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> The final episode of the third series of *Dallas*, March 21, 1980. The series aired on CBS from 1978-1991.

After everyone read their ending to the group, the instructor handed out the ending the author had written. None of the students' endings were close, but it didn't matter, for our endings reflected the way we had heard the story and what we would do in light of it.

If the Gospel of Mark is "the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ," Mark may be inviting each of us to "finish the story" of that Good News with our lives. A compelling opportunity, a compelling story.

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But what if like the women:

- We struggle to find our voice.
- Our fear remains, like a recurring nightmare.
- We just keep running, silent, because we are afraid to stop, and we often feel better if we keep moving, stay busy, even if we don't know where we are going, why we are doing what we do.

Most of us crave Good News, happy endings, especially at Easter; but sometimes, even if we come upon a happy story, we have a nagging sense of danger ahead, for – spices in hand – we simply know too much.

- We scroll through Facebook and Instagram, smiling at pictures of happy families and happy children, but we cannot help but worry what these beautiful infants and children may face when they grow up in the world they inherit from us.
- We watch reruns of *The Andy Griffith Show* even though we know Google Maps will not take us to Mayberry because it doesn't exist anymore and may never have existed as depicted.<sup>5</sup>
- We want Lassie to come home every Sunday night, but that only means she will be lost again.<sup>6</sup>
- We try to "remember the days of September," but in truth we want to remember only certain days of certain Septembers.<sup>7</sup>
- We sing "Tomorrow, tomorrow, I love you tomorrow"; but deep down we know that tomorrow may be more than "a day away," and even if it arrives, we aren't entirely confident about what it will bring.<sup>8</sup>
- We want "all to end" so that it will "end well," but we are not sure that even if it "ends well" it will be as well as we think, or well in a way we think well.<sup>9</sup>

Sometimes the news we ingest we think of as good contains so much sugar our caloric intake skyrockets but our nourishment plunges.

### III.

After about 150 years, manuscripts of Mark's Gospel began appearing with two additional endings, one creatively labelled "The Shorter Ending of Mark" and the other "The Longer Ending of Mark."<sup>10</sup> (Don't tell me Biblical scholars lack imaginative section titles.) These endings sound like those of Matthew, Luke, and John. You are likely familiar with some of the elements:

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<sup>5</sup> *The Andy Griffith Show* ran on CBS from 1960-1968.

<sup>6</sup> *Lassie* ran on CBS from 1950-1971.

<sup>7</sup> "Time to Remember" is the opening and closing song to *The Fantastiks*, the longest-running show in history, which ran from 1960-2002. Music was by Harvey Schmidt and lyrics by Tom Jones.

<sup>8</sup> "Tomorrow" is the showtune from the musical *Annie* written in 1977 with music by Charles Strause and lyrics by Tom Charnin.

<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well* (1741).

<sup>10</sup> See *HarperCollins* and *New Interpreter's*, notes following Mark 16:9-20.

*After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country...*

*Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table...*

*And these signs will accompany those who believe...they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues...they will lay their hands on the sick...*

*After he had spoken to them, [he] was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God.*

*And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere...*

This is the way the manuscripts of Mark have concluded since late in the Fourth Century. Every element included in this “longer ending” is found other Gospels as well.

#### IV.

What does all this mean?

Listen to Fred Craddock’s prayer again:

*Lord, I thank you  
For a life that doesn’t depend  
On how I feel at any one moment.*

The Longer Ending of Mark serves as an Epilogue that reminds us readers and hearers that no matter how the women felt and no matter where their fleeing took them, God’s presence and providence followed them unabated.

- I surmise that the framers of the Bible appreciated Mark’s *original* ending, as challenging as it likely seemed to them.
- In their wise editing and redacting of Scripture, they let the original ending stand – in all the glory of its “dangling preposition” – to show that following Jesus Christ, being a Christian, affirming the resurrection, does *not* close the door to *questions* and *doubts* and *challenges* and *fears* we have about life or faith.
- Once we read the dangling preposition and move into the white space, we have permission to stop and spend time in the uncertainty and mystery of the dangle.

But by drawing from the other Gospels and composing an Epilogue, the framers of the Bible are pointing to an *even deeper* and *more grace-filled reality*: that the ending of the story is a *given*; that we don’t have to create it; that we don’t have to consider ourselves responsible for making sure it turns out well, for it is in the hands of God who oversees all.

- “The stone...has already been rolled back.”
- “He has been raised; he is not here.”

Passive voice. Statements that come from Somewhere Else. Actions enacted by Someone Else. Someone we can trust. An ending we don’t have to write because it is already written for us.

*Lord, I thank you  
For a life that doesn't depend  
On how I feel at any one moment.*

V.

We are all of us in some way or another going to be writing next paragraphs in the months ahead:

- In our return and renewal from the pandemic
- In how our nation reacts collectively and individually to the outcome of the Chauvin trial
- In developments the next few weeks in Pastor Whitney's physical and occupational therapy.

And we will be writing *next paragraphs* in our own personal lives:

- Our attempt to become pregnant
- Our experience of birth or adoption
- Our search for a home
- Our passageway through grief
- Our search for vocational clarity
- Our consideration of marriage
- Our seeking resolution of a marriage
- Our decision about surgery or treatment
- Our facing of an addiction
- Our struggle with mental health
- Our desire for deeper faith.

Many paragraphs – many endings – will be written by all of us over the months to come.

To overcome writer's block, Ernest Hemingway once advised:

*All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know...then go on from there.*<sup>11</sup>

“The stone has been rolled away. He has been raised from the dead.”

That's the truest sentence *I* know.

Pen in hand, fingers to key: can you write the truest sentence that *you* know, and then go on from there?

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<sup>11</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (1964). Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ernest-m-hemingway>.