

“Shocking, Laughable, and Transformative”

Mark 16:1–8

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I have shared with some of you before an experience I had at an Easter Sunrise Service when I was working on my undergraduate degree at the University of Kentucky. I was not at the Sunrise Service on the Capitol grounds earlier this morning. Warren represented us, quite well and joyfully I trust, though if he nods off in this service, you will know why. But I have participated in that service numerous years, even preached one year, and it is always a moving experience.

The service I attended while in college was in a stadium on the campus of Morehead State University, a little over an hour east of Lexington, Kentucky. I went for the weekend with some friends, and it was a brisk morning that Easter. It was well below freezing, and when we went to sit down on the bleachers, we realized they were covered in a thick coat of frost. It was quite startling, a shock to the senses, but eventually we each warmed a place that was more comfortable.

Of course, as soon as we did, some older folks arrived, and they made us feel uncomfortable again. They asked us if we could move down... We felt guilty, but we said, “No,” explaining why. They would have to warm up their own seats. I’m sure it was a moving service, but this is what I remember most, feeling a bit guilty but not enough to move, and being shocked at just how cold frosted bleachers can feel.

But perhaps this is the right way to begin Easter because those who discover an empty tomb on that sacred morning we remember, especially in Mark’s telling of the story, begin in shock. In all four canonical Gospels, some faithful women go to the tomb at dawn to anoint Jesus’ body. Jesus has died, and the men have done what men usually do when it comes time for suffering and death, when there is nothing they can do to fix things — they have disappeared. The women remain at the cross, and now they go to carry out the rituals of grief.

This happens in all four Gospels, but in the other three Gospels, these first witnesses to the resurrection find two forms of evidence that Jesus is alive — an empty tomb and an encounter with the Risen Christ. In Mark, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, only see an empty tomb. Where our story ends, which is most likely the original ending of Mark, there are no resurrection appearances.

A young man dressed in a white robe, an angelic figure, a messenger, tells the women Jesus has been raised, but the focus is on how these first followers of Jesus respond to the possibility that he is no longer dead. Mark says they are alarmed, and when the young man tells them to tell the others and go to Galilee where Jesus has gone ahead of them, Mark says they flee from the tomb. Terror and amazement have seized them, so much so that they say nothing to anyone! They are afraid, scared out of their wits! And this is where the story ends.

Like my friends and I on a brisk Kentucky morning, the first witnesses to the resurrection are shocked by the experience, and why shouldn't they be? The large stone has been rolled away. There is an angelic figure on the scene. Most of all, a man they have watched die is alive. No matter how many times he talked about this, no one believed him. Dead people do not come back to life! This is impossible! It is laughable, like the news Abraham and Sarah receive from God about having a child in their nineties. They laugh because it is ridiculous!

Of course, ridiculous or not, Abraham and Sarah have that child, and Jesus has been raised from the dead. This latter reality will radically alter the lives of these first believers and all who follow Jesus to this day. Yet the shocking nature of this story and the transformative power of it are inextricably linked. If we embrace this Good News too quickly, like some positive weather report or basketball score, we haven't gotten it.

This is why I appreciate Mark's telling of the story. The other Gospels note the element of fear, but in a way we can skim over hurriedly. Mark lingers over the element of shock which calls attention to just how jarring and magnificent the act of resurrection is.

In the process, this telling of the story encourages us to linger over the element of shock, to realize how laughable it is that a dead man

could come back to life. This is not just a resuscitation, like what happens to Lazarus. Nor is this some sleight of hand performed by a divine magician. It is a radical claim of something absurd — Jesus who has died and been buried for three days has been raised to new life!

Some of us are familiar with sleight of hand moves around death and dying. I remember waiting with a good friend in the last church I served while one of his brothers was dying. His mother and his other brother were there too, and as often happens, they were remembering family stories. When the youngest brother was little, he had a hamster that he loved. One morning, when his mother walked into his bedroom, she noticed that the hamster was not moving.

“I’m so sorry your hamster has died,” she told him, knowing how difficult this would be but realizing it was a learning opportunity. Our pets teach us many things, including how to deal with death. But to her surprise, he said, “Oh, no, Mom, he’s not dead. I heard about this. Bears hibernate in the winter. They eat a lot of food and go to sleep for a long time. Look at his mouth. It is full of food. He’s just hibernating.”

She had a decision to make, but she went with this theory. She bought another hamster who looked like this one, and when her son was asleep, she replaced the hamster who had died with the new one. When the boy woke up in the morning, he went to the cage, saw the hamster moving about, and said, “See, I was right, he was just hibernating!”

We go to great extremes to avoid facing death. And there are those who think something like this is going on with the stories of Jesus’ resurrection. Maybe he isn’t really dead or maybe someone makes up this story to appease his friends and attract more followers. This is possible, and for those who have decided upfront that this could not have happened, there has to be some sleight of hand explanation.

But what could transform terrified disciples into courageous followers willing to die for their faith other than some experience that convinces them Jesus is alive? And who is to say what God can or cannot do? In the reading from 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul says the Risen Christ appears to more than five hundred people. He is providing the best evidence he has that the impossible has happened, and he is doing this because he knows the claim is laughable.

The fact that the women who arrive at the empty tomb first respond with shock and fear confirms this story's authenticity. The fact that they leave the scene speechless makes perfect sense. They cannot speak of what they do not yet understand. Something this earthshaking will take time to process and absorb.

But once they take this time, everything will change for them, as it will for us. The news of this day is not just jarring; it is magnificent. This isn't some nice little insight to make for a better life; it is utterly transforming. For all our efforts to deny and avoid death, it is the one certainty we all have. All living things die, including us, and this is a gift and a curse — the brevity of life can make it more precious, but it can also strip it of meaning, and death separates us from people we love.

In his book *The Tragic Sense of Life* Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno said this. "If consciousness is, as some inhuman thinker has said, nothing more than a flash of light between two extremities of darkness, then there is nothing more execrable than existence." A great existentialist thinker once said he did not believe in any kind of afterlife, but living with this conviction was like peering into a bottomless well. So, he chose to live as if there is an afterlife.

The story of Jesus' resurrection offers more than such mental gymnastics. It offers a basis for hope for something more than this life, something that has already been accomplished, and not just for Jesus but for all of us. According to Colossians 1:18, Jesus is the firstborn from the dead, the first of many. It is a shocking event, one that turns the world upside down, yet God achieves it, and through it, gives us hope.

And it's not just hope for something beyond death; this one reality changes everything in this life. It may seem like evil prevails when Jesus is put to death, but the resurrection means that good ultimately triumphs. It may seem like injustice rules the day when the embodiment of compassion is crucified, but the resurrection means that justice will win out in the end. It may seem like love dies with Jesus, but the resurrection proclaims otherwise. Resurrection changes everything.

Thus, we have all we need to keep laboring for good even amidst the struggles we face. As 1 Corinthians 15:58 puts it, "Therefore, my

beloved (in light of the resurrection), be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” Jesus’ resurrection overcomes all the forces at work in his crucifixion, all the forces that hinder life to this day. It frees us not just from death but from all that holds us captive.

African-American biblical scholar Esau McCaulley wrote an op-ed piece entitled “Why I Am Still a Christian” in which he engaged numerous questions, including those about why a black man embraces a white man’s religion (*New York Times*, October 1, 2023). During slavery, white preachers converted black slaves while teaching that slavery is part of God’s plan. Why would they embrace this faith?

MacCauley argues that while his ancestors wrestled with this distortion, they still found good in Christian faith. They placed their trust in a God more powerful than the enslavers, One who bends history not to make chains but to break them. God is a liberator, he says, not an enslaver. He closes his essay with a story about his mother who recently bought an acre of land on the former plantation where many of his ancestors lived and died. This purchase is a sign of Easter hope, he says.

Their bodies...never finding rest on land owned by others, now repose on land purchased by their descendants. We hold it in trust for them as their due. If the hope of Christians is true and there is indeed a resurrection of the dead, they will emerge from those graves as free people, and their last moments on this side of the new creation will be spent on their own soil. That is a hope worthy of my allegiance. (Tom Long, *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2024)

It’s like Jeremiah buying a field at Anathoth, investing in land at the very time the Babylonians are about to take everything (Jer. 32). He trusts that one day his people will dwell in the land again. McCaulley’s mother trusts in the hope of resurrection not just to extend life but to make things right. God in Christ frees us from all that holds us captive. And this is not just a future event. We are already free from death, from the bonds of injustice, from every insult and injury that diminishes life. This is shocking, laughable, and transformative, thanks be to God!