

I remember one Sunday when a new lay preacher was in the pulpit for the first time in our church in Baltimore. It wasn't Easter—it must have been the summer because it was super hot in that non-air conditioned gothic sanctuary. The stained glass windows barely opened enough to let in any air, and the huge industrial fans at either side of the altar area mostly made sure that the hot air up there got equally distributed. Mr. Aubrey was no more than a third of the way into his sermon when and usher, hoping to let in some fresh air, opened the door just as the fan was turned directly at the pulpit. Whoosh! All the pages of Mr. Aubrey's sermon were blown into the air and then floated to the floor in front of the first pew. He watched them drift down until the last one came to rest—and then he just shrugged his shoulders and said, “Amen?”

I thought of this story as I read the Easter story from Mark's gospel. Is there a page missing from Mark's gospel? Did it also blow away as Mark was reading it for the first time? Does the gospel really end there? Is this *really* the end of the story?

Now I don't know if any of you thought I had inadvertently ended the story early—or maybe you wondered why the lectionary writers in their infinite wisdom had chosen to stop the reading *before* the risen Jesus appears to anyone. But that's just it—there are no resurrection appearances in the gospel of Mark. Despite later attempts to sort of correct this Mark actually does end the Easter story and indeed his gospel with these words: “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Wait? Where are the familiar parts to the Easter story? Peter and John in a full on footrace to the tomb? Mary mistaking the risen Jesus for the gardener? Thomas demanding to see Jesus' wounds? The disciples going fishing, Jesus grilling fish on shore, and Peter diving in the water to swim to him? None of that is in the gospel of Mark. The passage, the story, the entire gospel according to Mark ends with these words: The women said nothing to anyone, because fear had overcome them. Is there a page missing? Is the LAST page missing from Mark's gospel? Is this—can this *really* be—the end of the story?

First of all, let's think about the great irony revealed in that last line: that in their fear they told nothing to anyone. If that were true at the moment—and it certainly must have been—it cannot have remained true for much longer. If they told nothing to anyone, then how did Mark ever hear their story in order to write it down? If they told nothing to anyone we'd never know any of this—not even that they were so afraid that they told nothing to anyone.

But their fear was real. A real, honest, true reaction to the stunning events they had witnessed, that they had experienced. They were afraid already that what they saw the previous Friday—Jesus' cruel execution on the cross—was how the story ends. But we know differently. We, sitting on the other side of that first Easter, we know that this is not how the story ends. This story of self-giving love, of sacrifice, of pain

and grief and loss, of denial and betrayal, of shattered dreams and crushed hope and unmet expectations—this is *our* story. And this is **not** how the story ends.

The three women head to the gravesite to complete the job they began in haste just a couple of days ago. I'm guessing we know that feeling all too well, don't we? That sincere if somewhat helpless question we hear or even *hear ourselves ask* at times of great loss, times of great grief: "What can I do to help? Is there anything I can I do?" Whether the pain or the grief or the loss is our own or someone close to us or even a friend of a friend, we try to imagine ways to be useful, something we can do.

Then of course, the bigger question hits these three women, these disciples of Jesus on the way to his grave: Who will roll away the stone for us? Again, maybe we can hear echoes of this in our own lives, can't we, at these times of pain, grief and loss? Who will step in to *fix* this situation for us, who step up will solve this problem for us? Who can make this all better, who will remove these burdens we face? Who will roll away the stone for us?

But as we read on in Mark's gospel, we see that when they looked again, when they looked back a second time, they saw that the stone—this great big, enormous, seemingly immovable stone—it had *already* been moved. Turns out, at these times of great loss and even greater need, God does the heavy lifting for us. When we look again, we see that God has already rolled away the stone, already done for us what we knew we could not do for ourselves. Having rolled away the stone, God can also announce to us even greater news—the Jesus we seek is not in the tomb, not among the dead, but among the living. He is not here; he has gone on ahead of us, again. He is risen.

So maybe there isn't a page missing. Maybe Mark knew what he was doing ending here—drawing attention to what we know now: that this is not how the story ends. In some ways, the absence of resurrection appearances in this telling of the story lets us finish the story in our own way. Rather than putting the emphasis on those lucky few who physically encountered the risen Jesus, it focuses instead on the life Jesus lived and the life he calls **us** to live. Jesus, who preached good news, who served others, who confronted oppression, who was executed in the service of the rule of God—this is the life to which God calls us. This is the kind of service Jesus goes ahead of us to put into motion again—this is the kind of ministry to which we are called to follow again. This is the work of Jesus we are called to continue with our hands, our feet, our lives. This continuation of the life and work of Jesus—this is how the story ends. Or better yet, this is how the never-ending story of Jesus' life and work continues.

So, with the attack on Garrissa University fresh in our minds, as we share in the pain of our Kenyan sisters and brothers and so many others who grieve injustice and bloodshed worldwide, we also profess that this is **not** how the story ends. The rolled-away stone and the empty tomb of Jesus assures us that death—even violent, senseless and tragic death does not have the last word—and that nothing can

separate them or us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

So even though we experience our own pain, grief, loss, and even tragic deaths we have encountered in our lives, in our families, among our church community, we boldly proclaim that this is not how the story ends. The story ends not with any sort of pain, death, or loss, but with tears being wiped from all eyes, with death being destroyed forever by Jesus' death on the cross, and with new life springing up all over. We get to experience new life as we care for one another in ways we never thought possible, as people find strength to start living beyond their grief.

So even as we hear continually about the decline of the mainline church, or as we experience a bit of that decline first-hand as we face change and feel loss, pain and grief in our own communities of faith; even as we accept that things are not as they used to be, we also know, friends, that **this is not** how the story ends. We experience a sense of resurrection everytime the baton is passed to new generations of the faithful—youth who lead us in worship and service, taking their place alongside elders who have mentored them in the faith. We see new life in the ways that our unchanging witness to the good news of Jesus Christ is re-formed and re-shaped for a new audience—for generations yet unborn and for those all around us who long to hear God's word of grace that we bear. We encounter the risen Christ as we feel emboldened to be God's hands, God's feet, as we proclaim God's forgiveness, God's acceptance.

The word the women heard that first Easter morning we also hear today: We are *not* to live in fear, since Jesus is *not* in that grave where we left him, nor has he abandoned us—not individually nor as a community. He is risen, just as he said. He is going on ahead of us, leading us in new ways of being his people, of bearing his word, of completing his work.

Today is not about how the story ends—it is about how the never-ending story continues. We can see the risen Christ, we can proclaim the resurrection, we can experience the new life he brings—that is how the story continues. Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen Indeed. Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen Indeed. Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen Indeed. Alleluia. Amen.