

**Threatened with Resurrection** (Mark 16. 1-8)

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And they fled, for terror and amazement had seized them ... and said nothing to anyone ...

Sometimes it's the very weirdness, the strangeness of a passage of Scripture that authenticates it as 'inspired', as being from elsewhere. Suddenly, 'we're not in Kansas anymore'. Our sense of orientation crumbles. We're no longer sure we know what's going on or what it means. This is my experience of our passage today.

These few verses are thought by many scholars to be the original ending of Mark's gospel. It's an ending that feels like no ending at all – so unfinished, pierced through by shock and confusion, pregnant with questions. It seems as though many early readers felt the same, and they didn't like it. Ancient manuscripts of the gospel offer a choice between two additional endings – the 'shorter' and the 'longer' – each set out as options in our bibles. But both of these seem to my ear even less satisfactory – perfunctory and forced, along the lines of: 'after this, Jesus did a bunch of other things, and it all ended happily ever after'.

So I prefer the view of those scholars and theologians who seek to discern, in the very strangeness and open-endedness of this text, not a mistake but something that's intrinsic to what is going on. What if resurrection is the kind of thing that needs to be communicated this way? What if this story of confusion, disorientation and fear is intrinsic to its witness? For me, a significant reason for believing so is found in the final words of our passage 'for they were afraid'. In Greek, the words are *ephobounto gar*.

Theologian James Alison has pointed out that these words occur in another biblical story of a frightened woman.<sup>1</sup> In the eighteenth chapter of Genesis, the patriarch Abraham receives a visit from three strangers. It's shortly after God has promised that he will be the father of a multitude of nations through a son, Isaac. Abraham, however, is ninety-nine years old; Sarah, his wife, is similarly aged and 'it had ceased to be with her after the manner of women' (Gen. 18. 11). The visitors, representing God, repeat to Abraham that they will return 'in due season' and that Sarah shall have a son. Sarah, who is listening from behind a flap in the tent, laughs out loud at the absurdity of the promise: 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' she mutters to herself. The visitors overhear, and ask why she laughs: 'is anything is too hard for the Lord?' they say. But Sarah denies that she *had* laughed because, says the text, 'she was afraid'. In the Greek of the Septuagint, it is written: '*ephobethe gar*'. Alison writes: 'Nothing in the phrasing of the texts of the New Testament is accidental, and it seems to me that in the story of Sarah we have the reference which gives the context for the Marcan account of the frightened women'.<sup>2</sup>

What is that context? It's to do with the eruption in our midst of what seemed impossible, and how that unsettles everything. Even when what comes should, we think, provoke joy it's often not that straightforward. The radically new is always challenging. Just think of the strange sense of disorientation or even upset that can accompany the birth of a child, the announcement of an engagement or a new promotion. Of Sarah, Alison writes: 'After all, when one reaches a certain age, one is accustomed to being sorry for oneself to some degree for things not realized ...'. There can be a kind of settledness and security about even our disappointments. They become part of us, part of our identity. Who are we without them? Something comes along and 'breaks that little security, thus threatening a future that is totally uncertain and quite different from anything one had imagined'.

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<sup>1</sup> Alison notes that he owes his insight into the parallel from the biblical scholar J.D.M. Derrett. James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), 160ff.

<sup>2</sup> Alison, *Raising Abel*, 161.

Could it be that the frightened women at Jesus' tomb are confronted with the same experience? The tomb is 'the definitive symbol of impossibility'. The women are on their way to perform an act of piety that is proper to 'the dominion of death: the anointing of a body'. And then – suddenly, without warning – they're in a different reality. 'He has been raised; he is not here' ... (Mark 16. 6)

Quoting Alison again: 'The stone put aside and the absence of the corpse were not in the first instance a motive for rejoicing, but for terror. Terror because what had happened was quite outside anything that could be expected ... Terror because now there was no security, no rules, nothing normal could be trusted in. And worse, terror because everything difficult and frightening which Jesus had taught them had to begin to come about: he went before them, as he had told them'.<sup>3</sup>

The truth is ... life can be more threatening than death. There's an apocryphal story about the apostle Peter who, after Jesus' resurrection and filled with power, sees a blind beggar crouched in the dust outside the city. Moved with compassion, Peter places his hands over the blind man's eyes and, in the name of the risen Christ, heals him. 'The beggar leaps to his feet, eyes wide open and clearly healed. But with his face full of rage he screams at Peter, "You fool! You have destroyed my way of making a living!" and in one swift and violent motion the beggar gouges out his eyes with his own thumbs ...'. Parker Palmer, who tells this story, says: 'Here is a powerful metaphor ... We sometimes know how to "make a living" from our figurative blindness, but are afraid that we would starve to death if our sight were restored'.<sup>4</sup>

So often, we resist or refuse our healing. We have got used to death. Resurrection means giving up the undisturbedness of the tomb for the uncertainty and responsibility of an open future. It means being stripped of the consolations of cynicism and resignation, catapulted into the pain of continued involvement and growth.

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<sup>3</sup> Alison, *Raising Abel*, 160-161.

<sup>4</sup> Parker Palmer, 'Threatened with Resurrection' in *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 141.

And this isn't just true for us as individuals. We live in a world and we tolerate leadership that (like the blind beggar) is in thrall to death and what deals death. The arms trade, fossil fuels, gross exploitation of the creation and the poor – all (so we are told) sadly necessary, impossible to imagine otherwise. And so we don't. And where does that get us? There's so much invested in death. No wonder it makes resurrection, a glimpse of life not run by death, deeply threatening.

It's obvious Caiaphas and Pilate wouldn't want to hear that God had raised Jesus? Their power was based entirely on the power to wield death. But even for the disciples it was a stretch. There's something so reassuring about business as usual; something comforting about the status quo – even when we don't particularly like it. Resurrection asks something of us. To discover that that it's only we – not God – who are in thrall to death, that our acquiescence to the death-story is only about *our* limited horizons, is threatening. Now there's no excuse, no good reason for holding back from risking life (as Jesus did) no matter the forces arrayed against us. But that renders us truly vulnerable. Resurrection does not make death and suffering magically go away. Rather, it erupts in the midst – a radical new possibility – and calls each of us, in the words of poet Julia Esquivel, to participate in a 'marathon of Hope'.<sup>5</sup> Our imaginations transformed, refusing to collude any longer in the illusion that death is the final truth, that death has dominion over us.

At first, the frightened women recoiled from the invitation. They fled the tomb and said nothing to anyone. As it happens though, Mark's final sentence can't have been the end of the story. At some point, these women stopped fleeing and began telling what they knew. They started risking ridicule and disbelief instead of being silenced by death-invested power, and the enervating discourse of 'impossibility'. They risked becoming witnesses of resurrection, of God's inextinguishable life – before anyone wanted to hear it and despite a good idea of its cost. And maybe it's time we risked it too.

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<sup>5</sup> Esquivel's poem, 'They Have Threatened Us with Resurrection' forms the basis of Palmer's reflections in the essay I have already cited: 'Threatened With Resurrection'.