

“All will come again into its strength”

Easter Sunday, Passover, & Earth Day

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UNEDITED VERSION

Was it just me, or was that transition a few moments ago, particularly jarring?

The one between the gospel reading and the hymn.

I don't know about you,
but my heart wasn't quite ready to sing those hallelujahs
so soon after that strange scene of the women
fleeing from the tomb in fear.

But that uncomfortable image,
that scene of complete bewilderment,
is how the earliest known versions of the *Gospel of Mark*—
the first of the four official gospels to be written—actually ends.

In complete disarray.

The women “fled from the tomb,
for terror and amazement had seized them;
and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

It was a moment when unexpected chaos
completely overcame all their efforts
to find consolation for their grief.

That morning, the women's wonder
at what they had seen and been told
was mixed through and through
with such confusion and fear
that they fled the scene
and kept the confounding news to themselves.

They were stunned into a scared and confused silence.

To state the obvious, this wasn't exactly a promising start for a new and hopeful religious movement.

Not exactly an auspicious beginning.

Not when the three key witnesses ran away terrified, unable or unwilling even to describe what they had seen.

Now, obviously and thankfully, there is much more to the story.

After all, if there weren't, we arguably wouldn't be gathered here today.

Without a more fulsome ending, without an Easter, it's fair to wager that Christianity, let alone its little reform movement known as Unitarian Universalism, would never have come into being.

But, as I say, there was more to the story. A lot more.

Eventually, a different endings were tacked on to the *Gospel of Mark*, proclaiming the resurrection more emphatically, telling how the women later shared the news with the disciples, and giving accounts of Jesus himself appearing to his followers.

The revised versions of the text end, just before Jesus ascends into the heavens, with him telling his disciples to carry his good news out into the world.

The rest, as they say, is history.

There is something in us that longs for that last episode of the season that ties up all the loose ends.

But, I, for one, prefer the original ending,
the one with all of the messiness and confusion.

Though I don't believe in any sort of physical resurrection
and read most of what is in the gospels
as religious literature rather than literal history,
there is something about that original, unsettling ending in *Mark*
that has a ring of authenticity.

There's something in its candid details that feels real.

For its rough edges and raw emotions point
to a truth at the heart of the human experience:
that there are times when everything we hoped for unravels,
when what we dream, or even our sense of who we are,
is utterly upended by the harsh realities of life and death.

There are times when we simply don't know what to do next,
because we are stricken with grief, or heartsick,
or feeling lost and confused.

Remember that those three women—
the two Marys and Salome—
had, only two days before, seen the one
in whom they had invested such trust,
the person in whom they dared to hope,
be brutally executed by the state
in the most painful and humiliating of ways.

Not only had they lost someone they dearly loved.

They had lost the person who promised a path to a better world.
A leader who showed them the possibility of a life more abundant.
A prophet who tried to bring about a radical revolution of love.

And now he was dead.
And all was lost.

And at their first opportunity to bless his battered body,
and give it a proper burial, they find it missing—

and are told by some strange messenger
that they will see him again.

Of course they were bewildered.
Who wouldn't be?!

To watch hope die,
often brings with it more than we feel we can possibly bear.

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In the picture book *The Cello of Mr. O.*,
Jane Cutler makes this point in a powerful way.

In a summary by Publisher's Weekly,
the story of a young girl and a cellist in Sarajevo,
during a time of war, unfolds in this way:

“At night, from my window,
I can see the white trails of tracer fire
and the orange flash of mortars in the sky.

I pretend I am watching shooting stars and meteors.”

[So] says the nameless [young] girl [who is the]
protagonist of Cutler's moving...story
of the healing power of music in wartime.

With winter approaching, food scarce
and her father off fighting [in the war],
the high point of the girl's week is [every] Wednesday,
when the relief truck arrives and the community gathers
[for food and supplies].

Most days, she sits with the other children
under the stairs until their high energy levels
send them running through the halls [of their building],
where they taunt an unsociable musician named Mr. O.

As the girl stands outside his apartment,
she remembers how her father

described the [fine] craftsmanship of Mr. O's cello
and the command performances [he gave in his youth].

[One day,] when a rocket destroys the relief truck,
Mr. O surprises the children by courageously
[walking into the middle of the bombed-out square
with his cello to play music that lifted their spirits].

One of the most poignant scenes of the book takes place
when the girl and her mother are discussing
what her family and their community are suffering through.

“This is not the first time in history
that such a thing has happened,” the mother says.

And then the daughter replies,
“It may not be the first time it's happened.
But it is the first time it has happened to me.”

Such a loss of innocence is surely part of every life.

That moment when we are first made to reckon
with the hard bargain of being alive,
when we come to know that the death of hope
is more than our hearts seem made to handle.

Of course, this isn't a lesson
life tends to teach only once.

I was reminded of that, on Monday evening,
as I watched Notre Dame burn.
And as I witnessed the outpouring of emotion that followed
from various corners of the globe.

It was heart-wrenching to watch the flames
devour the roof and the spire—
and to seriously fear, at least for a time—
that the entire cathedral,
and the whole, complicated history it represents,
as well as the countless treasures it holds,

would be lost forever.

On a deeper level, it felt that
for many around the world,
seeing the cathedral burn and the great spire collapse
was symbolic of the many losses—
and the many losses of innocence—
we are living through in this difficult moment in time,
when the hope for a better world
can feel so far-fetched, if not altogether dead.

As many have pointed out this week—
there is, of course, so much else in our world today
going up in flames, literally and figuratively,
so much else calling out for our attention,
and for our response.

From the three Black churches torched by racist arsonists in Louisiana
to the ancient forests and ocean coral reefs—
the great natural cathedrals of the earth—
being devastated by human greed and indifference.

To say nothing of the broken state of global politics,
the endless barriers to true justice for all,
or the erosion of responsibility for the common welfare
of those with whom we share this planet,
not just today but for generations still to come.

Things can obviously feel quite bleak, at times.

We may be rightly seized with terror and despair,
and unable to find our voice,
when we are confronted
with so much that has been lost,
with so much that we, with each day, are losing.

And, yet.

The whole of this story has yet to be told.

There are verses still to be written.

And there is still reason for hope.

For though hope may die,
hope is also often resurrected.

There is a stubborn and sacred resilience that abounds in this life,
within you and me, and throughout the world around us.

It calls us to life.
And it is the force of life itself.

When its power is harnessed
it can be our sustenance, our strength, and our stay.

It is be found in both surprising and common places.

In its rising, the sun lifts up the promise of a new day.

Through the last patches of snow,
crocuses herald the start of spring.

As bombs threaten the world around him,
a cellist plays his heart out.

In their grief, a group of faithful friends finds,
in ways they can't quite explain,
that love has a power beyond the grave.

There is often a power to go on,
even when we think we can't,
that propels us forward,
that helps us to endure and overcome,
and sometimes, even to flourish beyond our imagining.

Whether we see it as the hand of the divine
or the strength of the human spirit,
it is alive and gives shape to our days.

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The Gospel of Mark, in its original form,
closes with absolute uncertainty.
The ultimate cliffhanger.

It's not at all clear what will happen next.

It is a place well known, on some level, by us all.

With so much beyond our control.
So much unfolding in ways we can't predict.
So much too complicated for us to solve or save on our own.

But there is always the invitation for us,
in life's great, improvisational dance, to act.

To make our next move.

To shape what comes next.

To determine,
with whatever measure of faith we can muster,
with whatever hint of hope we can find,
with whatever resilience stirs in our heart,
how we will respond to the circumstances we find ourselves in.

It's not always easy.

We aren't always able to bring to life
everything we wish we could.

Our available options aren't always great.

But resilience is that spirit within us—
that spirit of life—that keeps us trying.

The spirit so hauntingly captured in these
beautiful words of the poet Adrienne Rich, who writes:

My heart is moved by all I cannot save.
So much has been destroyed.

I have to cast my lot with those who,
age after age; perversely,
with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

Friends, we are called to be such people.

Those who from the tomb and from the ashes,
go on to fashion the future
out of the materials we have at hand:
nothing more and nothing less
than faith, hope, and love.

Amen