

“Yes, Christ is Risen!...And???”

First sermon in the Eastertide “Yes, And...” series: Preparing + Improv-ing

Yes, you can stick to a plan...and you can improv(e) along the way.

Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV)

*“So Mary Magdalene, and
Mary the mother of James, and
Salome went out and fled from
the tomb, for terror and
amazement had seized them...”*
(Mark 16:8)

Yes...

...And...???

...And there was a ground
shaking earthquake and as
Mary Magdalene and the other
Mary ran from the tomb to tell
the other disciples Jesus popped
up out of nowhere on the road
like a hidden jack and the box
and said “Greetings!” (Matthew
28:1-10)

No, no sorry – that’s what
Matthew’s Gospel says.

Let’s try again. “...*for terror
and amazement had seized
them...*”

Yes...

...And... the women
remembered the words Jesus
had told them, that he would

rise on the third day and they
went and told the other
disciples that it was true but the
other disciples said it seemed
like an “idle tale” (just
women’s gossip) and didn’t
believe them. But at least Peter
was curious and so he ran to the
tomb to see for himself and he
was amazed. (Luke 24:1-12)

Nope – that’s what Luke’s
Gospel says.

Third time’s the charm? “...*for
terror and amazement had
seized them...*”

Yes...

...And... Mary stood weeping
outside of the tomb because
Jesus was gone and a nice
gardener started to comfort her
in her grief and he calls her by
name, “Mary,” and she
instantly recognizes him as
Jesus and they have this
dramatic embrace and Mary
runs off to her friends and
becomes the first woman
preacher exclaiming “*I have
seen the Lord!*” (John 20:1-18)

Yes. That definitely sounds right!

Alas, if only – that’s what John’s Gospel says. (I have always loved John’s Gospel. Now there’s a guy who knows how to tell a story...)

Oh, Mark, Mark, Mark. (sigh)
It’s kind of the worst Easter ending ever, isn’t it? *“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,”*
(Mark 16:8)

Come on, Mark! That’s all you’ve got? You couldn’t have done a little more research, found a few other folks to talk with, or embellished the ending a bit? What were you worried about being accused of spreading fake news? Don’t you know that this is THE biggest event in the Bible?! Do you really think this is gonna sell? Who’s your editor?

Well, actually, Mark had a couple of editors...way after he was done with this book. One editor, who was clearly inclined to tie things up in a neat little bow, tacked on an extra two sentences, the first saying that the women told Peter and his buddies about the empty

tomb...and the second that the message of Jesus was spread through all of the to the world. This is called the “shorter ending of Mark.” (Mark 16: between verse 8 and 9).

A second editor, more narrative and investigator-reporter in style, thought he could one-up the first guy, and added about *ten* more verses to the story. In this version, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, and she told the others but of course – they didn’t believe her. So then Jesus appeared to two folks walking along the road and they told the others – but no one believed them. Finally, Jesus appears to all eleven disciples at once and kind of chastises them for their unbelief a bit but then gives them the charge to carry his message to the ends of the earth anyway. (Mark 16:9-19) That’s called the “longer ending of Mark.”

You see, at least two people didn’t like the way Mark ended the story. But maybe Mark was just telling it as it really was...way back then...that first morning. Before all the post-resurrection appearances started happening and stories started flying around. Maybe like a good cold case detective Mark was just going back to the original source material before

all this other information started popping up. And he leave us standing beside the women, as if we are holding spices in our hand beside a tomb, instead of sitting here in a beautifully adorned sanctuary with Easter Orders of Worship in our hands. It's kind of eery, isn't it? More like Good Friday than Easter Sunday.

Let's put a modern-day twist on this to see if we can relate a bit more.

Or think of it this way: Imagine if you showed up to church today thinking it was yesterday...Saturday...and you were in your comfortable clothes you wear to run errands or your yard clothes (certainly not your Easter best), thinking you'll just stop by the Foot of the Cross Courtyard for a few minutes to pay your respects to a loved one...expecting to see no one, and to just sit with your grief and weep. A dear friend has recently died and you missed their interment service and you want to come by on your own and see where he is laid to rest.

You do wonder as you drive to the church if the doors will be unlocked and if you'll be able to get in, but you just figure you'll figure that out when you

get there. But when you pull up to the church, the parking lot is full of cars and when you walk in all the lights are on and you hear the barss and organ and choir rehearsing and people are in Fellowship Hall celebrating and breaking a piñata of all things...what is going on? Suddenly you feel out of place and have to switch gears quickly. It's shocking.

And then as you think about it, maybe you realize – oh my gosh, it's Sunday...I didn't even realize it...I thought it was Saturday. Your whole world is rocked. You've been so preoccupied with grief lately – you have been forgetting things and mixing things up. In any case, you sit down, still kind of bewildered, but you listen to the story and some preacher tells you that your friend has Risen, that Life has Defeated Death, that Hope Abounds and all is well. Except...you turn around and look at the pew where your friend normally sits and he's not there. You don't see him. None of it makes sense.

And wait a second, does that mean, your friend's cremains are not in the Foot of the Cross Courtyard anymore? You hurry to the Courtyard so confused. And there's a nice

messenger/gardener there – probably Corry Doty or one of her crew – and she tells you that all is okay. That you can go on home and tell your friends that this friend you came to pay your respects to, well he’s actually alive. In face that are removing his name plate and you can see his niche is empty. And then she says, in fact you can just drive on up to Boulder and meet him there where he’s waiting for you...he said to meet him at the place where you always used to hang out.

How would you react to such a whiplash of emotions and experiences? Would you know how to sort fact from fiction? Wouldn’t you be kind of terrified and amazed too? Would you think you were dreaming? Would you talk to anyone? Probably not. You’d probably just be confused and afraid and amazed. And confused, right? I would be.

Mark’s ending is starting to look and sound more and more realistic, isn’t it? Putting ourselves in the position of these women – we see just how unexpected this news is.

Yet people didn’t want to leave Mark’s story ending as it did...with silence, with fear. They wanted to finish the story.

Leaving the uncertainty unresolved just didn’t sit well.

Scholars can tell by the writing that Mark didn’t write either of those alternate endings. Not to mention the fact that in all of the earliest manuscripts of Mark – his gospel ends at verse 8. Those other endings appear years later. And it is true, this abrupt ending does feel anticlimactic.

Yes, that is true, and yet Mark’s version of the story is the resurrection good news too. It’s just not scripted for us in the same ways as the others...so we have to find it for ourselves. But it is there. For sure.

We’ve been playing off of the theme of improv comedy all year – and the first principal in improv comedy is “Yes, And...” – which is to say “Yes” to whatever your fellow actor does on stage and to build upon that action with your “And.” That’s how you keep the action going...the story unfolding. If you don’t say “Yes” to what another actor says, and decide you want to take it in a whole new direction, it kills the scene. If you say “Yes” to what they say but then don’t add anything onto it yourself, it also kills the scene – putting the ball back in

their court making them do all the work.

The beauty of the “Yes, And...” principal – on stage, and in life – is that it is constantly adapting to whatever is presented and whatever is presented is seen as something that you can in fact, adapt to, no matter how improbable or incredible it is. Even if you are left hanging for a bit, something will happen or someone will show up, and the scene will move forward. “Yes, And...” keeps us from getting stuck in life and it reminds us that the only way we can stay unstuck in life is by living it with other people and being open to whatever may come. No matter how unbelievable or inexplicable. It teaches us to roll with the punches and see where something takes us rather than assuming we already know how something will go down.

If anybody’s gospel lends itself to an improv model, it’s Mark. Mark’s Gospel has always been a fast paced story. He’s the gospel writer who always says “immediately Jesus did this,” then “immediately this happened,” then “immediately they went there, etc.” He likes to keep the action moving and not dwell in one place too long.

And he sets up a great improv scene for us here.

If our three women were on an improv stage talking about anointing Jesus’ body with spices and going to the tomb, and wondering aloud how they’d be able to remove the big stone – they are probably thinking in the back of their heads that their fellow actor on stage is going to follow their cue and jump in and help them move the stone when they get to the tomb. He’ll just be a helpful passerby. But when they get to the “tomb” on the stage – their fellow actor throws them for a complete loop. He jumps into the tomb and starts talking...he’s not the random guy who helps them move a stone; he decides he’s going to change things up a bit and turn the story on its head. And he starts talking saying everything he does about *“Don’t be afraid, you’re looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is not here...”*

The women must not say anything in the scene because he continues, *“He has been raised...look, there is the place they laid him.”*

We assume the women look in and see. They are still speechless.

He continues to carry the scene, *“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.”*

What the heck? This is not how the women imagined this scene playing out in their heads...and they are so thrown off...the scene really is one sided.

The women finally move, but still remain silent. They flee the tomb in terror and amazement and all we know is that, at least for that immediate moment, they didn't say a word to anyone. They seemingly just walked off stage. Just leaving their fear and bafflement to settle in with us, the audience.

The scene did not unfold as they expected. Not at all. And they froze. They may have eventually come up with an “And...” but for that moment – they had no clue what to do.

This is what happens to us in life when something unexpected happens, right? We freeze. Often in fear. In terror. In amazement. It's what the world did as the Cathedral of Notre Dame began to blaze in

front of our eyes. People froze and watched – in disbelief. They pulled out their phones, recording the blaze, unable to leave the scene...just not able to believe what was happening. Or we, who were halfway around the world, kept checking our phone for updates to see what was happening...was there any more information on the fire. We were in awe.

Rita and Brad Berglund were in Paris the day of the fire. Yesterday, after the Holy Saturday service, Brad was showing us pictures of the Cathedral that he had taken that morning...spire and all...they were beautiful. And then he showed us pictures from a river cruise where you could see the Cathedral burning in the background. Totally unexpected. Shock and awe. A very surreal feeling, I'm sure.

Sometimes we are going about our life, and something happens that we never thought would happen. Who would have thought the Cathedral, after surviving two world wars, would ever burn during a restoration project? No one thought that. The same way many people living in Paris never thought they'd be homeless or living paycheck to

paycheck – their lives continually crumbling around them and seemingly no one around to hear them or help them. The same way that none of us thinks we’re going to be the ones whose blood work comes back with concerning results. The same way that none of us thinks that we’re going to get that phone call or that knock on the door in the middle of the night that delivers unthinkable news. The same way that none of us thinks that we should be feeling depressed...after all, our life’s not that bad, right? The same way that none of us thinks that our partner would ever lie to us. The same way that none of us thinks that we would ever be the one to have trouble conceiving. The same way that none of us thinks that we would not get that promotion or that we would lose our job or struggle to pay bills. The same way that none of us thinks that we would ever be a victim of the crime. The same way that none of us thinks that our kids would make *that* choice. The same way that none of us thinks that that (fill in the blank) could ever happen to us.

But it does happen to us, doesn’t it? Whatever “it” is. And when it does and our world seems to be crashing and

burning before our eyes – whether it’s a beloved building burning or beloved children of God dying – we are often captivated by fear and uncertainty. We don’t know what comes next or what foot to put in front of the other. For a while we just watch stunned. And maybe we run. We flee in terror...literally or emotionally or spiritually.

It seems that this is what Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome might have done...even in the face of what we call “good news” now...it was still shocking to them then. News, for sure, but not yet *good* news. We don’t know what follows once their fear wears off. We can assume they eventually told someone – because Mark found out about it somehow and so did the rest of the gospel writers and the rest of the world. Their fear and silence may have been the last words on the page – but it wasn’t the last word of their witness...and it wasn’t the last word of the gospel.

Fear is never the last word. Our silence may feel like it’s the last word in the midst of a crumbling and chaotic world and life. But it is not.

Why? Because Jesus is already ahead of us. Jesus has been raised. He is not here, still locked up in the fear; he has conquered death, overcome despair, and overturned the very power that tried to destroy him. And what is he doing now? He's not throwing himself a resurrection party. He's not marching up to Pilate's place to rub it in his face that his little crucifixion plot didn't work. Oh it killed Jesus all right. It worked in that sense. But it did not kill the gospel. Because nothing can kill the good news of God's *kin-dom*...that's what Jesus came to proclaim in his life and that is what his death and resurrection proclaim as well. That God's love is the heartbeat that will keep beating and keeping this world alive even when we are beating the world and all the people in it, including ourselves, to death.

Nothing can stop God's heart. Nothing can stop that love. Not even death...or all the things that lead to it.

And now – Jesus is up from the grave and already back at it again. The man in the white robe says, *“Tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him...”* (Mark 16:7)

Galilee. The place where Jesus spent the bulk of his ministry – healing and teaching and praying and miracle-ing. How does Jesus celebrate his resurrection? By getting right back to work doing what he came to earth to do...to love and to teach us how to love. By restoring life and dignity to those who feel like they are crashing and burning. By assuring them their lives will be rebuilt...maybe not looking the same as before...but stronger nonetheless.

You see, resurrection is the improv act of all improv acts. Jesus is killed by the political and religious powers of the day who were threatened by his message. God says, *“Yes, that is true. That happened. It breaks my heart.”* *“...And...”* God says... *“Christ is Risen!”* And in the rising comes the rebuilding, the reclaiming, the renaming, the restoring.

The Resurrection is God's biggest “And” ever! And it shouldn't have been a complete surprise, after all, Jesus told his disciples this was coming...but really, who of us believed him?

We still wonder if it's really true today. We still wonder

given the rubble we feel our lives are in, if we can rebuild, time and time again. We wonder if where hate and harm has damaged us, if we can reclaim our name as beloved. We wonder if where violence and exclusion has hurt others, if we can restore and repair relationships. We wonder if where we have failed to be the hands and feet of Christ for the immigrant, the outcast, the slandered, the hungry, the hurting – if through the resurrection – God can reform and refashion us to be a new body of Christ in the world today. The answer is Yes. Yes. Yes. Phillips Brooks said it best, “*Let us not say merely Christ has risen, but I shall rise...*” We shall rise! And we must.

You know, the word that Mark uses in this resurrection story for “he has been raised” is *egerthe* from the Greek root, *ἐγείρω*,^v \{eg-i’-ro\}, which means to arouse, to cause to rise, to awake, even from the sleep of death; to cause to rise up from a seat or bed [or from a place of inaction].¹ Mark uses that word six other times before this final time in chapter 16 referring to Jesus’ resurrection, and all six times are social

resurrections for people who were sick, hurting, outcast, ostracized, or simply in need of hope.

In Mark, when Jesus raises someone, it is from a state of being socially dead, not able to participate in the life of the community. As Travis Meier writes, “Jesus raises people to new life in this world. This is the power of God at work. Resurrection, while an eternal promise, is also a social reality in our midst.”²

Mark uses this word “to be raised or has risen”:

In Mark 1:29-31, when he heals Simon’s mother-in-law from the fever that had bedridden her so that she could take part in the community again.

In Mark 2:1-12, when a man who was paralyzed was brought to Jesus by his friends; they lowered him through a roof and Jesus healed him asking him to take up his mat and walk home while also forgiving him of his sins.

In Mark 3:1-6, when Jesus healed a man who had been outcast from the temple for years because of a shriveled

¹ Travis Meier, “Mark 16,” *The Bartimaeus Effect* (Sept. 15, 2014), accessed on April 21, 2019 at

<https://www.thebartimaeuseffect.com/the-gospel-of-mark/mark-16>

² Meier, *ibid.*

hand...and he did so on the sabbath in a very public way, revealing that human healing and restoration was the most important thing to him, beyond any other rules or social norms.

In Mark 5:35-43, when Jesus said *Talitha Cum*, “Little girl get up,” to the 12 year old daughter of a powerful synagogue leader, Jairus, proving the strength of faith if you believe.

In Mark 9:20-29, when Jesus cast out the spirits from a young boy, his father was pleading on his behalf, and when the spirits came out the little boy looked lifeless and Jesus restored his mental and physical health by standing him up and he rose in their midst, possessed no more.

In Mark 10:46-52, when Jesus healed the blind man Bartimaeus in Jericho, restoring physical sight to him, as well as community acceptance, as he no longer had to beg on the streets.³

“While the resurrection of Jesus has universal [and eternal] implications, the power of his resurrection always happens in our own contexts. The

resurrection unfolds where we live, where we work, where we play, [where we protest, where we learn, where we fellowship]. where our lives as families and friends, neighbors and strangers, takes shape. The good news announced at the tomb is directional in nature. It points us back to where God is already at work in our midst, turning death into life. [And it’s point us forward too]...the call at the tomb is that same one Jesus offers over and over again - follow!”⁴

That’s why Jesus goes back to Galilee. “This is the power of the message at tomb. Mark does not narrate post-resurrection stories. There is something else going on here. The promise of the new social reality called the kingdom of God is not halted with the death of Jesus. The story goes on. The radical equality and abundance taught, demonstrated, and nurtured by Jesus goes on. And it all comes in Galilee, where it all started.”⁵ Galilee...where ‘the disciples and Peter’ were first called, named, sent on mission, and taught by Jesus. In other words, the disciple/reader is being told that the narrative, which appeared to have ended, is

³ Meier, *ibid.*
⁴ Meier, *ibid.*

⁵ Meier, *ibid.*

beginning again. The story is circular!”⁶

Go back to Galilee.

Begin again.

Rise up.

Follow me.

“Mark’s story invites us to stand where those first trembling witnesses stood. Those three women didn’t see Jesus. Neither do we. They didn’t hear Jesus call their names. Neither have we. They weren’t invited to touch his wounded hands. We haven’t touched Jesus’ hands either. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome are our silent sisters. The narrative is left for us, the readers, to complete.”⁷

Their silence, fear, and amazement bring us, the readers and hearers, to our own thresholds of faith, to the limit of our own words to speak the unspeakable ... and to the limit of our own human experience to trust Who or What is beyond death...“ In our foremothers’ silence, the narrative still calls us, who are the disciples of the next generation, to speak for

ourselves, and bring the gospel into dialogue with our lives.”

(Joan L. Mitchell, “*Beyond Fear and Silence*,” p. 115)⁸

It’s not our job to put words in these women’s mouths. It’s our job to speak our own words...our own story of how the resurrection is true for us today.

“The story of new life and relationship with God is a story that is lived out over and over again in my life, in your life, in the lives of people all over this world who believe so much that death is not the end, that there is more to this story, and that it is our job to gather our wits about us, our hopes and dreams, our fears and failures, and turn from this incredible sight to live out the ending . . . that death is not the final word and that we have new life in Christ.”⁹

“He has risen. He is not here,” the man said, but that was only the beginning of the story.

Now it’s our turn to turn from the empty tomb, maybe fearful and maybe unsure, and allow the power of the resurrected

⁶ Meier, *ibid*.

⁷ Barbara Kay Lundblad, “Mark 16:1-8: Beyond Fear and Silence,” *The Huffington Post* (April 4, 2012), accessed on April 21, 2019 at https://www.huffpost.com/entry/mark-16-1-8-beyond-fear-and-silence_b_1402710.

⁸ Lundblad, *ibid*.

⁹ Rev. Amy Butler, “The Rest of the Story,” The Riverside Church NYC YouTube Channel (April 5, 2015) accessed on April 21, 2019 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSXDcpuq8Q>.

Christ to enter our lives and transform them, until we are absolutely, positively compelled to finish the story...we can't rest until the message of Jesus changes us and changes our world."¹⁰

Jesus didn't. He went straight back to Galilee.

How do we find the good news when it's not scripted for us? When life is more mystery than certainty?

We stand at the empty tomb and we listen to these words: "Christ is Risen!"

We've heard the proclamation...

"Yes, Christ is Risen!"...

...And...

The story is ours to finish. What will your ending be?

Amen.

¹⁰ Butler, *ibid.*