

### The Last Word and The Final One

-Would you stand for the reading of the gospel? [from Mark 16.1-8]

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salómē bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But 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.’ <sup>8</sup>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*.

This is the Word of the Lord! **Thanks be to God!** Amen. Please be seated.

-So did you hear that last word? *Afraid*. ‘[T]error and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were *afraid*.’

I’ve been thinking a lot about that word this week. About that surging, electric prediction of danger, pain, and threat to our wellbeing.

And I’ve been thinking about *my* fears in particular. Fears which began so young: Fear of Texas tornadoes. Fear of nuclear attack. Fear of a short, skinny body that wouldn’t keep growing and a face at war with acne. Fear of not playing football. Fear of getting a B in anything. Or having to fight. Of getting rejected. Fear of a world too shallow for my soul. Fear of looking foolish.

And, of course, adulthood has only added dimensions to my anxiety: Fear of breaking my resume. Fear of being alone. Fear of injury to those I love. Fear of ruining my reputation. Fear of not being enough. Fear of loss. Fear of grief. Fear of missing out on what means the most.

-Kate Bowler is a Duke professor of Christianity. She’s a podcaster and author, who after years of being told she was incurable, has now been finally declared cancer-free. Still, she says, she has been (quote) ‘forever changed by what [she] discovered: life is so *beautiful* and life is so *hard*. For *everyone*’ (from [katebowler.com](http://katebowler.com), emphasis mine). Kate Bowler’s ‘single mission,’ she says, ‘is to give [everyone] *permission* to feel more human.’ I sat with a prayer she wrote this last week that gives that permission. I prayed it for myself. And I prayed it for you, too. It begins:

God, I am paralyzed by fear.  
Afraid my past might creep back to haunt me.  
Afraid of what might happen next.  
Afraid of what might not.

For my loved ones, my kids, my friends,  
my parents, my job, my nation, and my world...  
afraid, afraid, afraid...

-They come for Jesus in the night on Thursday. Judas collects his cash. Peter spits out his denials as curses. The rest of Jesus' friends scatter in the dark, leaving him to suffer alone. And so he's spiked unceremoniously to a pair of posts on a busy roadway while a few of the women who supported him look on in terror from a distance. There's no time for them to do what is customary for Jesus' burial before the Sabbath begins at sundown on Friday.

Who can even imagine the sickening sleepless trauma they've endured over the last 56 hours? Somehow in their haze of hurt they manage to get embalming spices Saturday evening. And they go early Sunday to prepare Jesus' body. To be as near to a dead man as they can be. It's the first day of the workweek at sunrise.

These friends of Jesus have been anxious about the weight of the stone. But when they arrive, they're even more apprehensive to find it rolled back. They rush to enter the tomb. But before their eyes can even adjust, their hearts catch in their throats. There's someone there. And Jesus' body is missing.

It must have been like coming home in the night to find your home broken into - the ruined door hanging open, feeling the nausea of violation, only to discover that someone is still inside.

Adrenaline. They step back. The blood runs away from their hearts. Who is this stranger? He says something about Jesus going to Galilee. Is he one of the men who dragged Jesus away? Part of the angry crowd? The stranger quotes Jesus with a kind of fearsome intimacy. It's like a member of the secret police reading passages from your diary aloud to you. 'Go tell the disciples and Peter that he's risen, that he'll gather you in Galilee just as he said.' Is it a trap? A new offense in this vicious trauma they're suffering? Worse. This stranger, seemingly so warm and radiant, dares to invite hope that Jesus is alive. And anyone who's suffered catastrophic loss knows how cruel it can feel to have the salt of uncertain *hope* poured into a lacerated heart.

Fear is a biochemical, animal response. Fight? Flight? Freeze?

Mark says the women 'fled from the tomb, seized with terror and amazement; and they said nothing to anyone, because they were *afraid*.'//

That word again. The best scholarship tells us that the oldest and best texts of Mark's Gospel end right there at verse 8. That the last word is 'afraid.' Is that what you expected on Easter morning?

-But strangely. Wonderfully. And here is the truth. It is actually the women's grief and alarm that draw me to them and so to the warmth of hope so gently announced by the young man in white.

What I have always craved most is authenticity. I never find someone fully believable until they've shown me their scars. As Nadia Bolz-Weber has written, 'I may be *inspired* by the

virtues and accomplishments of others, but I only feel *less alone* when someone shares their [weakness and fear] with me' (she uses the word 'failures').

So what I treasure about these women and so treasure about this narrative is how real it is. Jesus suggested to his companions over and over again that the Messiah must suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. But no one had any idea what a man who spoke in parables *meant* by that. And here we find no pious fiction. No characters skip to the grave happily anticipating a resurrection. Far from it. How unflinching Mark's story is to suggest their real brokenness. And how I resonate – here, at the very gateway of the good news – to encounter persons *weak with fear*. It's so human. So humanizing. I identify with how their injury and panic send them running from the very peace and healing they've been given to proclaim. I guess I identify with how much they *need* the Risen Jesus to redeem their fear. How much *we* do.

-Kate Bowler's prayer continues: "Blessed are we who admit: 'God, I'm afraid.' You know our anxious minds. You fill our restless hearts. You promise us your presence – the quiet of your love.'

-The last word of Mark's gospel begs the question. How can he conclude *the* vindicating narrative of the Christian faith with silence and fear?

One theory proposed by biblical scholars is that Mark's gospel has a lost ending. That, just as in Matthew, Luke, and John, there had to be more. That, in the lost original, as in the other gospels, the women overcome their shock and silence to share the proclamation of the messenger in white. That the disciples come running to inspect the tomb. That they go trembling to Galilee – there to encounter the risen Jesus. And that from the mouth of Grace Alive they're commissioned to surprise still others with resurrection faith in Jesus' life and teaching and love.

A second theory proposed by biblical scholars is that Mark's gospel has an intentionally open ending. That Mark purposefully left his readers at this cliff hanger, left us to ponder what may have happened next, for sure, but more importantly, left us to wrestle with what Christ's empty tomb means for *us* – left us to consider just how we ourselves will choose to respond. After all, the first words of Mark's gospel are 'The *beginning* of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God.' What if the next chapter of the good news will have to do with how *we* respond and with what the risen Jesus will do in *us*?

I wonder what you'll find more plausible. But get this. *Either way*, what Mark is passionate to proclaim is the good news we've come to celebrate today. Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed!** And the **Resurrection of Jesus Christ means that even when fear may be the last word of our narrative, fear will never have the final word in God's Story with us.** Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4).

-Last Sunday I finished my Palm Sunday sermon with a gnawing anxiety in my gut. I had talked too long. I had yammered on bringing so much information that the heart of what I hoped to convey got drowned out. I had made people squirm to be finished in a way that left me metabolizing my embarrassment. This thing where I stand up in front of people I respect, where

everyone is watching me at work, sometimes feels like having an ugly dog that, like it or not on any given week, I have to walk proudly. It can feel like playing the fool. Brené Brown calls it a 'vulnerability hangover.' It's hard to make my head overrule my stomach (even though I know that God's Spirit can and often does make filet mignon out of chopped meat). Fear, fear, fear...

And then. Later in the afternoon. My son Caz texted me. It reminded me of another message I had gotten from Colter. 'I love you. Proud of you for working so hard. Thanks for doing the *desafios*.' That word, *desafios* – in Spanish it means 'challenges.' That message: 'I love you. Proud of you for working so hard. Thanks for taking on the challenges.' And I felt my anxiety melt away in tears. My son's graciousness. The Lord Alive to heal.

'You promise us your presence –' goes the prayer, 'the quiet of your love.'

What if the **Resurrection of Jesus** is not an *erasure* of all that makes us anxious, but **the promise, the assurance, of Christ alive to melt our fears with love?**

-Because Tracey and I have a sixteen-year-old so rapidly becoming his own man and an eighteen-year-old so soon to graduate from high school, I've also been thinking this week about what I really want my boys to hear on Easter Sunday. About the heart of what I hope they might carry with them. Which, I assume, has everything to do with what I myself need to hear over and over, and, perhaps, with what may be central for all of you as well.

In my grasp of the great mystery, the celebration of Easter must always find its way back to God's *grace*, must always give you and everyone permission to be more human. One of my favorite writers is Frederich Buchner. He puts it this way, (quote):

A crucial eccentricity [let's say 'the crucial heart'] of the Christian faith is the assertion that people are saved by grace. There's nothing *you* have to do. There's nothing you *have* to do. There's nothing you have to *do*.

The grace of God means something like: 'Here is your life. You might never have been, but you *are*, because the party wouldn't have been complete without you.

Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid. I am with you. Nothing can ever separate us. It's for you I created the universe. I love you.' //

Boys, I believe it's true. Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things are happening. But if God has raised Jesus from the dead – and your mother and I are staking our lives on it, falteringly as you know – but **if God has raised Jesus from the dead, then the unconditional love of Christ, and not your fear, will always live, with you and in you, to have the final word.**

Easter means that this One who touched the leper; that this One who sat at table with tax collectors and sinners and outcasts; that this One who showed us the way to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us; that this One who invited us not to worry about our lives, who promised us that it is the Father's good pleasure to give us everything good; that this same

One who made water into the wine of celebration; who washed the feet of friends who would betray, deny and abandon him; that this One who called out from his suffering on the cross ‘father forgive them for they know now what they do’ and met his broken companions in Galilee to reassure them that his grace was forever – Easter, sons; Easter, friends; Easter means that this same Lord is alive today and forever...

To be *with* you.  
To *love* you.  
To *meet* you in the panic of your hearts.  
And *heal* your fear.

For *He* is risen! **He is risen Indeed!**  
For He *is* risen! **He is risen Indeed!**  
For He is *risen*! **He is risen indeed!**

Alleluia! / Amen. /

Let us stand and sing our praise!