“Why?” - Stephanie Sorge, 3/31/24

Is it just me, or do you feel like you just realized you’re in the wrong movie theater? We didn’t get all Easter fancy just to end with terror and dread! Can’t Mark help a preacher out?

I don’t mean to complain, but writing an Easter sermon year after year is not easy. On this most important of Christian holy days, on this Sunday that is more likely to draw to worship those who haven’t been to church in months, or years, or ever (and, no guilt - really), the stakes feel high. Proclaiming Good News when there is so much bad news is hard. And trying to wrest it from Mark’s gospel and its original ending? Maybe next year we can just go with a cantata.

Mark keeps it real. It’s hard to imagine the experiences of those who were close to Jesus during his final days. Think of all they witnessed, including the roller coaster of emotional events. It was so much that, by the time Jesus was on the cross, he had been betrayed, deserted, and denied by his disciples. By most of them, at least. The women were there. All of the gospel writers attest to that fact. They are the only disciples who witnessed his crucifixion, burial, and now, the empty tomb.

Though Jesus had significant encounters with women in the gospels, there aren’t so many of those stories found in Mark. In fact, today’s passage and the verses that precede it are the first and only time we see any of these women in Mark’s gospel. They must have been there all along, and they were there until the very end. They also must have overcome their fear and broken their silence, because here we are, today.

I’m sure they were exhausted, but women have been working through exhaustion for all of history. Even so, they were up early, going to the tomb, and ready to face the impossible. Not that Jesus wouldn’t be there, but that there was an impossibly large stone that they would need to move, somehow. They didn’t have a plan, but they would do what needed to be done, just as they always had. Just as women always have.

We hear about mothers suddenly experiencing superhuman bursts of strength to save the ones they love, like lifting cars to save children. But many others seem to have superhuman stamina and resilience. Countless women have lived on fumes and broken sleep cycles for years, and still take care of all the people and all the things. Just like like these women, making their way to the tomb.

Betty Allen saw me as a mother and a pastor - bless Betty, she *saw* me - and she would say, “I don’t know how you do it.” Honestly, that still leaves me speechless, because I’m no Betty Allen, who raised four daughters as a Pastor’s wife, with all that *that* entailed… I’m no Pat Churchman, another mother of four, who endured more hardships than most can imagine with love and tenderness, generosity and compassion. To quote Catherine, when Pat was asked “how she coped with various challenges, she said, ‘you handle what you’re given, or you go into a catatonic state, and that’s not helpful for anyone.’ She also used to say, 'We couldn't go around it and we couldn't go over it, so we just had to go through it.' And she did - with love.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So when I read Mark’s gospel, I see Betty Allen and Pat Churchman and so many saints. Who do you see? *They* would have stayed through the worst of it, to the end. *They* would have risen early to do what was needed, and if that stone had still been in place, they would have moved it, one way or another.

Would they have been terrified by this scene and encounter? Would they have been struck silent? Who wouldn’t have been, at least momentarily? Then they would have been on the road to Galilee, too - sandwiches packed, directions in hand.

Women have often been expected to be the caregivers, to put the needs of everyone else first, and not to let the work of caregiving keep all the other things from getting done, too. I know - it’s not just mothers. It’s not just women. People of all genders, regardless of family status, have filled those roles. And it’s not only women who make it into Mark’s account.

According to Mark, the first person to speak after Jesus died was the Roman centurion guarding him - a Gentile representing the forces that killed Jesus. Mark writes: “The curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion, who stood facing Jesus, saw how he died, he said, “This man was certainly God’s Son.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Even before the resurrection, this outsider recognized Jesus for who he really was.

The curtain was torn apart at Jesus’ death, just as, at the beginning of this Gospel, the heavens were torn open at his baptism. The separation between humanity and God was obliterated. God was and is on the loose, and the next handful of verses feature a converted centurion, a respected member of the Jewish council, and the women who hadn’t even been mentioned by Mark until then, all doing their part to worship and honor Jesus Christ. God is on the loose, and none of our human boundaries and binaries can change that.

The other disciples aren’t forgotten, either. The young man in the tomb tells the women to go and tell the disciples - especially Peter - to meet Jesus in Galilee. Why especially Peter? Have you ever hurt someone you love, to the point where you weren’t sure they would ever forgive you? And you might not even blame them if they didn’t?

Peter probably thought he was irredeemable. Jesus had told him that Peter would deny him. Peter said, “No way, never, not me!” but within hours, he did. When things got really difficult, he failed Jesus. Peter needed to hear the good news. Jesus still loved him, and still wanted to be in relationship with him, even after Peter’s denial. Here, at the end of the gospel, the message remains: Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ. Nothing.

So the women went to the tomb, worried about the impossible task that awaited them. Who would roll away the stone? But God had already accomplished the impossible. Not out of power or might, but from the same force that brings about the impossible in our lives today: love. The power of God’s love removed every boundary between God and humanity. It does still.

One thing we learn from this impossible, foundational story is that we have no business gatekeeping God’s love. God will tear those boundaries and binaries apart, once and for all, to reach out in love to those we or others would exclude. It’s especially appropriate to affirm that truth today, on International Transgender Day of Visibility.

And for those who exclude themselves because they feel like irredeemable screwups unworthy of God’s love? They are named, too. Yes, even you. If crucifixion, death, and burial can’t stop God’s love from reaching out to us, nothing will. We aren’t that powerful, to keep God’s love from ourselves and others.

Our theme this season is “Questions of Discipleship.” Through Lent, we covered who, what, when, and where. Today we get to the why. Seasonal teams cover a lot of ground in a relatively short amount of time, and in the haste of the planning meeting, my thought was, “Easter - that’s the why! That’s what explains all of this!” As if anything is explained.

Mark leaves us with terror and dread and silence. Why? One of my favorite memes advises, “Tell people you love them, because life is short. But shout it in German, because life is also terrifying and confusing.” Mark tells the story, because it is arguably the most important story of our faith. But this is where he leaves it. Why? Maybe because it’s true to life - which is, at times, terrifying and confusing and dreadful. Which sometimes leaves us without words at all. Mark leaves us with this ending because it isn’t an ending. It’s an invitation. Here’s the story. Where are we going to go with it now? No pressure, right?

Then again, at the end of this gospel, we’re left with an empty tomb but no resurrection sightings, disciples missing in action, and a few women who are terrified and silent, but here we are today. God wasn’t done then, and God’s still not done now. When we are at our lowest - when we are utterly physically, emotionally, and spiritually exhausted - and things seem like they couldn’t get any worse, God is with us, and nothing is impossible for God.

Nothing is impossible for God. Easter reminds us that there is no situation so hopeless that it is beyond God’s loving embrace. That hope can give us the strength and courage to continue the story, and to work for transformation in a world that needs it. In relationships that need it. Where things are broken and seem hopeless, when we feel like there is nothing left, Easter comes in and reminds us that with God, all things are possible. God’s love makes all things possible.

Why this ending? Because it’s not the end. Now it is ours to continue. How will we keep writing the story? I don’t have the answers. But this I believe: the story keeps going, because God’s love will not stop until all are gathered in. Now and in the end, nothing can or will separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Alleluia! Amen.

1. From Catherine Carrier Churchman’s eulogy [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 15:38-39 CEB [↑](#footnote-ref-2)