

Afraid of Easter  
Mark 16:1-8  
April 5, 2026  
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Wait...that's it? Did someone tear the last page of Mark out of this Bible? There's no way the story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection ends with the words, "For they were afraid..." There's nothing to be afraid of on Easter, except for maybe the green jello mold Aunt Agnes brought to the family potluck. We can't let the story end here.

We're not the only ones we feel that way. While Mark's original gospel ends with the women being afraid, the Bible contains two additional endings that were added later by people who just weren't comfortable with fear being the dominant Easter emotion. The first ending, sometimes called the intermediate ending, says, "And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen." Seriously, did ChatGPT write that? I went to seminary and I have no idea what that means.

We're not the only ones who don't like THAT ending either, because someone added ANOTHER ending to Mark, this one much longer and containing things like the resurrected Jesus making public appearances, meeting with his disciples, and ascending into heaven. In his meeting with the disciples, it says, "Jesus upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness" – wow, resurrected Jesus was feisty! – and then tells them they can handle snakes and not get bit. We Kentuckians know how that has worked out.

So, we have the intermediate ending and the longer ending, but neither are the true ending. They are simply add-ons to cover up the embarrassment of the original, like someone wrapping a bath towel around the statue of David to cover up the parts that little kiddos shouldn't see. Mark was the first gospel written, so by the time Matthew, Luke, and John write their versions, they add extensive resurrection appearances to flesh out what happens after Jesus walks out of the tomb. But not Mark. Mark leaves us with, "For they were afraid."

Actually, the original Greek is even more disturbing. A literal word-for-word translation would read, "And they said nothing to anyone, because they were scared, you see, for..." It literally ends mid-sentence with the statement about their fear but no explanation. What kind of ending is that? It would be like "The Empire Strikes Back" ending with Darth Vader saying, "Luke, I am your..." I am your what? Roommate? Uber driver? If you have seen the ending to "The Sopranos," you know the frustration of an open-ended conclusion, one that leaves the rest of the story up to the imagination of the readers.

To be fair, the women had a lot to be afraid of in that moment. They came to the tomb to anoint a dead body, only to find a rolled-away stone, and empty tomb, and an angel sharing the unbelievable news that Jesus was no longer dead. Those kinds of things just don't happen. Unless you're Frankenstein or a zombie or possibly Elvis, dead bodies stay dead. How would you feel if you showed up to place flowers on a grave and found the dirt displaced and the casket empty? Fear seems pretty rational at that point.

But I wonder if their fear goes deeper. You see, they had placed all their bets on Jesus. I'd say they put all their eggs in his basket, but there are enough eggs and baskets invading the sacredness of this weekend. They truly believed he was the Messiah, the anointed one, the one who would deliver them from the iron fist of Roman rule and re-establish David's kingdom in Jerusalem. He was the one who was going to set things right, heal the broken, lift up the poor,

bring peace. They had put all their hope in him. And then he died. And so did their hope. In the show “Ted Lasso,” as the soccer team is preparing for a big game against a much better team, Ted tries to encourage a group of pessimistic fans to have hope, and one of them says, “It’s the hope that kills you.”

Maybe the women are feeling the same way as they approach the tomb with their spices to anoint the dead body of Jesus. They shouldn’t have gotten their hopes up. But then, they find the empty tomb and hear the news that Jesus actually did what he said he was going to do, he actually rose from the dead. Maybe that is what truly scared them. Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “We are more familiar with suffering and death than we are with resurrection.” If the body stays in the tomb, I’m sad but at least I know what to expect. But if I get to the funeral home and the casket is empty, I don’t know what to do with that.

“And they said nothing to anyone, because they were scared, you see, for…” For what? For they knew how to behave in the face of death, but not resurrection. For now they had to be the people Jesus had inspired them to be. For death had lost its grip on them and they had no reason not to be bold, no reason not to be the people Jesus had inspired them to be, no reason not to live out their faith in life-changing and culture-shifting ways, no reason not to stand up to the evil and greed and corruption in the world. Honestly, I’m more afraid of resurrection than I am of death.

You see, if Jesus stays dead, life is easier. You’d have more control over your life, right? No more mental tug-of-war about how whether or not to get up for church on Sunday. If you believe Jesus stayed dead, you can just live your life unencumbered by the pesky call to love your neighbor, completely free from the guilt of living life for yourself, the life, Thoreau said, “of quiet desperation.” If Jesus is dead, we don’t have to be bold, to be generous, to have hope. We can just let life happen and resign ourselves to whatever fate the universe deals us, to keep our heads down and our voices quiet when other people perpetrate injustice or hatred in the name of Jesus. If he stays dead, we can mind our own business.

But if Jesus actually was resurrected, that’s scary, because it means our hope is still alive, as well. And so is our call to live out our faith, no matter how shaky and imperfect it is. If Jesus is alive, then his business is our business. If Jesus is still alive, that means we have the responsibility of carrying on his work in this world. Us? Really? Yes. Us. Really.

Remember, Jesus cried out from the cross, “It is finished,” not “I am finished.” In other words, it’s not over yet. He still had work to do, and through his resurrection we are reminded that God can bring new beginnings out of painful endings. It happens every single day. Someone picks up the phone and says, “I’m sorry.” Resurrection. Someone shares a cup of coffee with a potential soulmate. Resurrection. A job opportunity opens up that you never expected. Resurrection. Jesus’s resurrection 2000 years ago means that resurrection is a possibility every single day, even in the midst of the most unbearable, hopeless situations. Resurrection isn’t just something that happens after we die. Because of what Christ has done for us, it can happen every single day.

I’m glad Mark ended his gospel the way he did, right in the middle of a sentence, leaving us with terror and amazement and fear. I’m glad he didn’t put a bow on his story, give us a nice little Hallmark-movie ending. Because that means we are left to continue the story, to go to Galilee, to look for the risen Jesus among us. Author Mark Galli says of the resurrection, “We are sane to be afraid but we would be fools not to draw closer.”

Today, I want to encourage to draw closer. In all your fear, in all your doubt, in all your skepticism, draw closer. Give Jesus the opportunity to show you that resurrection is real and is

possible in your own life. I know, it can be scary, and there's already enough fear in this world to keep your distance. But the Bible's message is so clear it states it hundreds of times throughout its pages: "Do not be afraid." In our lives, in our community, in our country, in our world, there are plenty of reasons to believe that Jesus stayed in the tomb, that hope is dead, that there's nothing we can do about it. But today, we proclaim the good news that what we thought was dead lives on. Though wounded, peace lives; though killed, justice rises; though crucified, hope persists; though buried, love goes ahead of us. Today we say with our lips and our lives the incontrovertible truth of the empty tomb...it's not over yet.