

# From Naked Despair to Full-bodied Hope

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**Mark 16:1-8; April 1, 2018**

This Easter, I find myself drawn to the young man who appears in Jesus' tomb in Mark's gospel, not because I who he is. But because that young man, dressed in white sitting nonchalantly on a rock shelf on the right side of the tomb is, who I long to be: someone clothed in the confidence and undimmed brilliance of Jesus' Easter triumph.

This is not the first appearance of this young man in Mark's gospel. We get a fleeting glimpse of him two chapters before when he along with the disciples abandon Jesus when Jesus is arrested in Gethsemane (Mark 14:51-52). When the high priests' thugs show up, armed with swords and clubs, Jesus' most intimate followers cut and run. This young man is one of those. With a stark, damning simplicity, Mark writes of him, "A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked."

Later, when Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels, drawing on Mark's witness, they left this little snippet of the story on the cutting room floor. Apparently, it wasn't important to them. But to Mark, this painful admission had to be made. Probably because it was a personal confession of

how he, an idealistic young man, forsook Jesus, when Jesus needed him most before running off buck naked into the night.

In all events, the “young man” fleeing into the night in Mark chapter 14 and the “young man” sitting in calm, radiant splendor in the tomb are almost certainly connected. Christian tradition says Mark, the author of this gospel, is the link between them. But whether Mark is meant to be or not, I do know who this young man is: this young man is me. For like him, if Jesus dies and stays dead, then I am striped of all my pretensions and left without a hope in the world.

When we come to Easter morning in Mark’s gospel, the only disciples in sight are the women who show up to do what brave, tender-hearted women always do: care for the sick and the dying while passing the Kleenex and the potato salad to grief-stricken souls, gathered round. But like the young man, stripped naked of his hope, the women think life as they have known it, is over. Jesus’ resurrection, much less their own, is the farthest thing from their mind. Their biggest worry is who will roll the stone away so they can perform their errand of mercy.

Truth be told, many of us come to Easter Sunday, much like the naked young man, deserting in the garden or the grief-stricken women, hobbling toward the tomb. It seems that on this day, more than any other, we miss those beloved friends and family members we have lost. As one dear woman confessed, just before entering our Good Friday service, “My son died 20 years ago. And I miss him more every year.” All these lilies bear silent witness to the pain of a loss that never goes away.

In his book about growing up poor in Alabama, *All Over but the Shouting*, Rick Bragg writes about the death of his baby brother. The brother was stillborn, and Bragg didn’t even know about the death until he was 8-years-old. After learning of it, he better understood the melancholy that sometimes overcame his mother: “She carried the memory around like a piece of broken glass,” Bragg later wrote, “stuck deep in her heart.”

Even when the loss of someone precious ceases to be acute, the loss becomes chronic, and never goes away. So let’s start our Easter celebration, not with our confident “Alleluias,” but

stripped bare to utter honesty at how bleak the world will be if Jesus yet lies stone-cold dead in that tomb.

And yet, as the women approach the tomb, there are signs of hope. Mark notes the sun's rays light the path before them like bright flower petals strewn on the aisle, bidding the bride toward the altar. Then to their surprise somebody has gotten there before them. The huge, round disk of stone that sealed the tomb's entrance, has been rolled back. The sunlight dances on the floor of the tomb, teasing them to enter. They do, only to discover a young man sitting on the rock shelf to the right where a body was supposed to be. The young man sits atop the ledge, arms hugging his knees, face radiant, his white robe shimmering in the sunlight.

Seeing the women's faces, tighten with fear, he is quick to reassure them. "Don't be afraid. I know why you're here. You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified."

Then breaking into a broad, toothy grin, he announces, "Well, he has been raised; he is not here." Then nodding at the empty shelf, stretching out before his bare feet, he says, "Look, there is the place they laid him."

"Now go tell Peter and the boys that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."

Not yet ready to trade in their fear for a newfound faith, the women cut and run as the young man and the disciples did before them. But soon, they will run smack dab into Easter, because had they not, we would never have heard their story.

So how can we, like the young man, naked with despair, be clothed anew with a radiant Easter hope? Perhaps by starting where he did, staring slack-jawed at that empty rock shelf in the tomb, where Jesus used to be. That empty shelf means Jesus was raised, by the power of God. And not as some shadowy, ghostlike, pale imitation of himself but as a vibrant, real, fully alive person clothed in the living tissues of immortality.

Jesus' resurrection is not to be confused with immortality of the soul; that tired old Greek notion that when we die, some airy, insubstantial part of us lives on forever. Resurrection means

the full person--complete with arms to hold us and tears to greet us--lives on in the nearer presence of God. Paul, fumbling for language to express the inexpressible, calls this new mode of existence a "spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44), meaning that the new me and the new you will still be me and still be you, only clothed in a transformed, resurrection body like Jesus' own.

One of the many saints we commended into God's nearer presence in the last year was Jimmy Robertson. In a eulogy about her grandfather, Meredith Bishop told of how as a child, she often spent the night at her grandparent's place. While there, she sometimes woke up in the middle of the night, or early the next morning, and crawled into the foot of their bed.

Her grandparents, Jimmy and Fleeta, were usually snuggled close together. So little Meredith would tap them on the feet and say, "Open the gate." Whereupon her grandparents would wake up, welcome her, and draw her up into a hug between them. Sometimes they'd all go back to sleep and sometimes, they'd visit and chat and laugh together. But in that safe space, in that embrace when Meredith's grandparents "opened the gate," she felt safer and more loved than anywhere else in the world.

Years later, as a grown-up Meredith shared this memory at her grandfather's funeral. She gave voice to her Easter hope. She spoke of her deep love for her granddaddy and her deep faith in God that made her grief bearable. Misty-eyed, she looked forward to that day, when by God's grace, she would see him again. Then she concluded her remarks by saying, "And so, (granddaddy, we'll part for now) until we meet again in heaven above when you and our precious Fleeta O, open the gate for me, one more time."

I don't know who you most want to see when you, clothed in Jesus' Easter triumph, enter God's nearer presence. For me, it is my father. I want to smell his Aqua-Velva, see the hint of grease on his hands the Borax left behind, and then disappear into his bear hug where I once felt safest and the most loved in all the world. Then death snatched him away and he was laid to rest in a cemetery where I sometimes go water the flowers with my tears.

But the great, glad news of Easter is that Jesus' resurrection sounds the death of death. For there, in that empty tomb in an April's Fool's joke of cosmic proportions God pulled a fast one on death and the devil: vanquishing our sins with God's costly, atoning love; and vanquishing our death with God's gift of eternal life. So today, because of Jesus, I don't have to be that young man, fleeing naked into the night. Now I can be the young man, sitting on the rocky ledge in Jesus' empty tomb, staring awestruck at Jesus' triumph. And I can be and you can be one of those brave, courageous women who in time, will right a fallen world with their witness, "The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed!"

And yet there is more! For not only has Jesus broken the bonds of death, Jesus promises to meet his disciples on the far side of death, arresting their fear with his risen presence and their flight with his steely resolve. "Go, tell his disciples and Peter," says the young man in the tomb, "that (Jesus) is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

That line, "and Peter," is full of pathos, for Peter had denied his Lord three times. But Easter means Peter's failures, and our own, are not the end of the story. The risen Christ is yet willing to risk loving and forgiving us, again and again, forever.

A chaplain called on a young man named Tim, dying of leukemia. After some chitchat, Tim opened up. "I've learned something," he said.

"What have you learned?" asked the chaplain.

"I've learned that life isn't like a VCR."

"How's that?"

Cringing as a wave of pain, washed over him, Tim paused, then continued. "Life isn't like a VCR. You can't fast forward the bad parts."

The chaplain nodded and Tim pressed on: "You know what else I learned?"

Bending low over this withering wisp of a man, the chaplain answered, "No, I really don't. Please tell me."

"I've learned that Jesus Christ is in every frame."

“Go; tell his disciples and Peter--and Billy and Joe and Sally and Sue--that the Risen One waits to meet them at their own place of dejection and despair and death. For no matter how great your failings, Christ’s love is greater still. And no matter how desperate or demanding your story, Jesus Christ is in every frame.

“For lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world” (Mt. 28:20), “until in my gracious love, what you thought was the end became yet another empty tomb, where Easter happened.”

Yes, I think I know who that young man is in the empty tomb. Dressed in white, like a candidate for baptism eager to die and rise with Jesus, he is who we are destined to be; the sons and daughters of God, reveling in Jesus’ glory and resting in his grace.

In a moving op-ed piece titled “Easter Is Calling Me Back to the Church,” Margaret Renkl writes of her love-hate relationship with the church. In fact, given her growing disillusionment with so many Christians who seem enamored with the politics of hate, she dropped out of church altogether and didn’t plan on going back. But something, or Someone, kept tugging at her frayed, tattered heart. Until finally, she decided, like those other distraught women on the first Easter, to show up in love and longing looking for the Lord she lost.

“So I will be at mass again on Easter morning,” Ms. Renkl writes, “as I have been on almost every Easter morning of my life. I will wear white and remember the ones I loved who sat beside me in the pew and whose participation in the eternal has found another form, whatever it turns out to be. I will lift my voice in song and give thanks for my life. I will pray for my church and my country, especially the people my church and my country are failing. And then I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection.”

Yes, the young man dressed in white in that empty tomb is there to tell us who we are: those who dare to believe that Jesus is risen. And, that there is nothing in life, or death that can separate us from His all-consuming love. As one sister in the journey here at Knollwood, gave voice to her Easter confession. “(Thank God) Easter is not just a once-a-year observance and

celebration, but a constant. Oh, for grace to permit his risen presence to permeate our everyday griefs that we too, rise again, and regain our true perspective.”

Abject despair cannot survive in a heart that knows Jesus is risen. As even now, just beyond that tomb where life as you knew it ended, he is calling your name.

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*O risen Christ, you gave everything you had that God, in gracious love, might give it back on Easter morning. Thank you for sweeping us, and all the world up, in the surging tide of your victory over sin and death. Now fill us with your Spirit that we might live fearless and free. In your name we ask it of the heavenly Abba, Amen.*