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# **A Story to Tell**

Dr. Jo Forrest

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Grace and peace to you, my friends.

I am grateful to celebrate my first Easter at Westminster. If you are visiting either online or in-person, please return, often. You too will receive a warm welcome.

The Gospel of Mark has a story to tell you. The writer of this gospel crafts terse sentences and layers stories into a larger arc of meaning.

Although its message sears with precision, it demands a questioning mind, and ends by provoking the reader. To read Mark from beginning to end takes about the same amount of time as to enjoy a *grande latte*.

The form this master storyteller employs is similar to the structure of classic myths and epics. Stories that tell the truth.

You may be familiar with such structures even if you did not study the classics. Each of the movies from Pixar Animation Studios traces this ancient plan.

Cast with complex characters who possess charm and fatal flaws, these movies teach moral character for all ages.

The Apple watch offers a watch face featuring Buzz, Woody, and Jessie from *Toy Story*, not because of kids, but for the adults. You might smile as you remember *Inside Out*, *Monsters*, or *Finding Dory*.

The simple six-point story structure goes as follows:

*Once upon a time there was a...*

*Each day*

*One day...*

*Because of*

*Because of*

*So that ...*

The endings are not expressed as “happily ever after,” pretending the tragedy did not exist but they do restore wholeness, pushing life forward.<sup>1</sup>

Pixar’s devotion to such clarity inspires us to examine the stories of our lives, and particularly Holy Scripture, to distill out what confuses us, and find the truth.

For example:

*Once upon a time*, God’s people lived in darkness.

*Each day* God sought to love them and bring them to love one another.

*One day* a young couple gave birth to God’s son.

*Because of him*, God’s love walked among us.

*Because of that* people changed their hearts and minds.

*So that* generations later we experience that same transforming love.

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<sup>1</sup> Tyler Daswick, “Pixar Has Become the Moral Teacher of a Generation,” *RELEVANT*, June 12, 2018, accessed March 3, 2021 <https://relevantmagazine.com/culture/film/pixar-has-become-the-moral-teacher-of-a-generation/>

Or this story,  
*Once upon a time*, fishermen toiled in the sun to feed their families.

*Each day* seemed more burdensome than the last; laws, rules, taxes, sins.

*One day*, Jesus called Peter to drop his nets, leave that life, and follow him.

*Because of him*, Peter learned to feed large crowds.

*Because of this*, Peter learned to trust in God's abundance.

*So that*, Peter called others to the same way of life.

Returning to the Gospel of Mark, indulge me with this synopsis,

*Once upon a time* God proclaimed at Jesus' baptism, "you are my son, the beloved."

*Each day* Jesus poured out God's love through healing and teaching and feeding.

*One day* the authorities decided enough of his revolution, arrested, and executed him.

*Because of this*, his body was sealed in a tomb.

*Because of this*, fear infected everyone's lives.  
*So that...*

Before I read, Mark's powerful ending, please pray with me,

*Loving God, we gather once again to hear your story of divine love. Clear away the clutter in our minds and the presumptions we have about your story, our story. Startle us, with the improbable truth of this day: Jesus is not dead but risen. Give us faith to trust and tell the good news. Amen.*

Listen to the original ending of the Gospel of Mark.

### **Mark 16:1-8**

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome 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 afraid; 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.

That’s how Mark’s gospel ends, with terror and amazement.

No glimpse of the risen Christ, no gardener in a bucolic field, no male disciples for protection, no tranquility.

Instead, the story seeps with **fear**.

While alive, Jesus told his followers three times in the clearest way possible, “I will be arrested, tortured, killed, and in raised again,” and yet the women planned to tend a dead body.

On the surface, they were afraid of an immovable stone. Perhaps they felt sore afraid from the foolishness of believing in him. To be associated with his failed ministry only increased the threats to their lives.



One fear after another evaporates like the morning dew: the tomb stands wide-open and an angel waits with the most consequential message.

“Do not be afraid.”

When an angel tells you “do not be afraid,” this clue implies God will bring you something better than you expected.

He states the obvious, “he has been raised,” and turns them to the task of Jesus’ resurrection; go and tell this story.

They fled in fear.

This cliffhanger asks, fear of what?

Mark created this story about 40 years after Jesus’ resurrection, proof that the women spread the good news, for a community living in the chaos after the Romans destroyed the beloved temple and all Jews, all, feared for their lives.

Fear is like a virus. Fear infects and debilitates. Too often the most anxious person in the room possesses the most power.

The writer’s original work ends with fear, but with a twist. Perhaps their greatest fear, the fear of death, also evaporated in sight of the truth, God raised Jesus and they will find him in Galilee.

Terror is a natural response to the unexpected. But it eases into amazement when the mix of belief and disbelief gives way to hope.

The Gospel of Mark's accents on the cross, tells the story of Jesus from baptism to crucifixion.

Perhaps for Mark, ending the story with a glorious resurrection would have reduced the cross to a stop on the way and have turned the tomb into a tunnel with light shining through.<sup>2</sup>

For Mark, to follow Jesus means to bear a cross in this world. It takes courage and can be bloody.

It begins when your fear of what you may lose is transformed by a fear of just how devastatingly spectacular it is to live with the conviction nothing or anyone will hold you captive, not even death.

Galilee, for those of us who missed the early pages of Mark's gospel is the place where Jesus gathered his sheep.

Where is Galilee?

It is the place where his ministry, takes hold, expanding to other regions. Galilee is no longer a specific place but the entirety of where we find Jesus'

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<sup>2</sup> Fred Craddock, "Above and Beyond," *The Christian Century*, April 2003, Fred Craddock <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2003-04/above-and-beyond?code=5nUS7FM5VibOLHgataLU>. Such ideas appear in multiple commentaries – perhaps evidence of Craddock's influence or the presence of the Holy Spirit as we wrestle with God's word.

work carried out: Israel, India, Haiti, and Upper St. Clair.

Generations after Mark's gospel circulated, proof that the good news continued to spread and Jesus' promised resurrection was a reality, scribes and editors copied and appended the gospel with several stories.

I imagine the writer of this gospel would seethe at editors attempting to explain the ending.

Each reader must wrestle his or her meaning from the text to be transformed by the message.

Nonetheless, our Bibles contain these additions.

The first, shorter ending, asserts Jesus himself sent them for "the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation."

Not sufficient for later scribes, another, longer ending documents the risen Christ walking with two disciples, and later with the eleven, and includes the command to proclaim the good news.

This story is not just another charming fable. It is told as a story to get under your skin, haunt your mind, and inhabit your heart.

As portions of John Updike's poem on the front of your bulletin commands, "let us not mock God with metaphor;" Jesus' death was as real as is his rising.

This story lives because Jesus was found in Galilee and in all the places where we keep the gospel alive in the way we live – confronting the worst of human behaviors with the best of divine love.

An undergraduate class required reading the *Wall Street Journal* and the habit remains.

Once I began to transition from my corporate career into ministry I noticed, each Saturday before Easter, this news outlet of all things capitalism and commerce, publishes a feature of Christianity's determined presence to proclaim Easter's resurrection.

Just yesterday, Robert Barron wrote,

The myth of the dying and rising god and the story of the hero's adventure might be intriguing and illuminating, but the one thing they are not is news. (The Apostle) Paul wasn't trading in abstractions or spiritual bromides; he wanted to take everyone by the shoulders and tell them that something had happened, something so stunning that it changed the world.”<sup>3</sup>

The story never ends, and it begins again in the way we leave the security of this sanctuary. We have so much we could fear. Virus. Violence. Instability. Fraught relationships.

We can be afraid of all the ways life can pull us down and then fight back, build walls to protect, keep out others.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Barron, “Recovering the Strangeness of Easter,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2021, C1.

Or we can be animated by the awe of what life might be if we give ourselves to believe all the things we fear in life, including death, were and will be overcome by following the way of Christ.

We can choose whether we are spectators or actors within God's grand drama.

Before we move to the table, indulge me with one more story.

*Once upon a time*, Jesus hosted a dinner for his closest friends.

*In every land* Christ's followers have remembered his saving grace at his table.

*Today* we gather to "do this."

*Because of Jesus* we are joined with those saints who have gone before us.

*Because of Jesus*, we are forgiven and reconciled to God.

*So that* we leave this table with the greatest gift, the grace of Jesus Christ.

He is risen. Alleluia. Amen.



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