

# Hope: He Goes Before You!

*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. (Mark 16:8)*

**Y**ou have to admit that it's a shabby way to end the Gospel. Any of us who know the other Resurrection stories could have done better. Imagine how Easter worshipers would respond if the service concluded with Mark's words and they were sent out too afraid to speak to anyone. You can't blame other early Christians for turning the sixteenth chapter of Mark into a patchwork quilt of endings, each one trying to improve on the one before it. But biblical scholars generally agree that this is where Mark left it. In Greek, it ends with a dangling preposition, a sort of a ragged nonending to the Gospel.

Thomas G. Long, who teaches preaching at Emory University's Candler School of Theology, tells the story of an actor who memorized the Gospel of Mark and presented it as a dramatic reading. At the end of the performance the audience was obviously waiting for some kind of grand finale that would bring them to their feet with the "Hallelujah" chorus. But the actor simply repeated Mark's words, stood there for an awkward moment of silence, turned, and walked off the stage. Long described "the discomfort and uncertainty within the audience" and said that the conversations in the lobby were dominated by what he called "the experience of the nonending" (*The Christian Century*, April 4, 2006; page 19). The ragged nonending of

Mark's Gospel is a little like a renovation project that is never completed; one of those home-repair projects that never seems to be done.

Sarah Winchester was the widow of William Wirt Winchester and the daughter-in-law of Oliver Winchester, the manufacturers of the Winchester Rifle, referred to as "the gun that won the West." After the death of her baby daughter and later her husband, Sarah turned to spiritualism. Legend has it that a medium convinced her that she could appease the spirits of all those who had been killed by her husband's guns as long as she continued construction on her Victorian mansion in San Jose, California. Sarah hired a construction team that worked nonstop, twenty-four hours a day for thirty-eight years. (It makes me wonder if the medium might have owned stock in the construction company!)

The 160-room mansion is full of bizarre architectural effects that, it is said, were designed to trick the spirit of death. There's a window built into the floor and another that opens into a wall. There are staircases that lead nowhere and doors that open into blank walls. All of it was an elaborate, nonstop construction project that attempted to outwit death.

We may not go to the lengths of Sarah Winchester, but most of us some of the time, and some of us most of the time, are tempted to find more subtle and less eccentric ways to live in denial of death. Have you noticed the euphemisms obituary writers often use to avoid saying that a person died? The person "entered into eternal rest," "began his eternal retirement," or, for baseball fans, "passed away into the 'Field of Dreams.'"

But Sarah Winchester found out that Death has a very good sense of direction. It finally found her, just the way it finds each of us. Her nonstop renovation project failed her, just the way our attempts to outwit death will fail us.

By contrast, Mark's nonending to the Gospel is a word of hope. I'm grateful for the way the other Gospel writers complete the story of the Resurrection, but I'm also grateful that the church included Mark in the canon with his dangling nonending, because it speaks to some of the inconclusive renovation projects in my life.

As hard as I try to put a reliable period at the end of every line, I keep ending up with a lot of dangling prepositions, too. As much as I try to bring closure, to tie things down, to make all the pieces fit, I

keep ending up with a lot of loose ends in my life. As hard as I work at completing every renovation project I begin, some of them never seem to be completed. There are broken relationships that don't get healed, fears that never seem to go away, problems that remain unsolved, doubts that defy simple answers, temptations that return with disturbing regularity, visions that I may not live to see accomplished, dreams that I may not see fulfilled, dramas that never reach the final curtain.

The good news from Mark's version of the Easter story is not that we are given conclusive evidence of resurrection or a closing argument that will nail down the verdict, but that we are given hope. Mark says that "a young man" dressed in white, sitting at the entrance of the tomb like an usher waiting for the audience to leave the theater, told those frightened women: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. . . . But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Mark 16:6-7).

The other Gospels offer us *evidence* for the Resurrection; all Mark has to offer is hope. Hope that the Risen Christ goes before us and that we will find him, not in the tomb, not in the place of death, not in the place of broken dreams and shattered expectations, not in the reminder of our past, but out there, ahead of us, in the ordinary places of our lives, along the road that leads to the future. We celebrate Easter not to remember a resurrection in the past, but to experience the presence of the Risen Christ in the present and to follow him into the future.

During Holy Week in 2006, I heard the news on National Public Radio that William Sloane Coffin, the Vietnam-era chaplain at Yale University and later pastor at the Riverside Church in New York, had died. Coffin was as controversial as he was courageous. His life and preaching were animated by the incorrigible gift of hope. NPR played a recorded interview in which he said,

Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world. If your heart is full of hope, you can be persistent when you can't be optimistic. You can keep your faith despite the evidence knowing that only in so doing does the evidence have any chance of changing. While I am not optimistic, I am always hopeful. ("NPR Morning Edition," April 13, 2006)

The good news that was given to the frightened and awestricken women at the empty tomb may be just the word we need today. We don't need to be afraid anymore. The Risen Christ goes before us into all of the incomplete, unfinished, confused, and often conflicted construction projects in our lives, and if our eyes are open, we will find him there.

Don't be afraid! The Risen Christ goes before us in life. He meets us in the ordinary, mundane, everyday places where we live and work, laugh and cry, suffer and rejoice, succeed and fail. And we can find him there. I have a preacher friend who likes to say that Easter means that tomorrow is never "just another day."

Don't be afraid! The Risen Christ goes before us in death, and we will find him there. Unlike Sarah Winchester, the "children of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36) don't need to hide from their own mortality. They confront the awful reality of death in the awesome assurance that Jesus has already gone before them through death, into eternal life. On Easter morning, congregations around the world celebrate that hope with Charles Wesley's words:

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!  
Following our exalted Head, Alleluia!  
Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!  
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies, Alleluia!

("Christ the Lord Is Risen Today"; 1739)

William Sloane Coffin's death reminded me of one of my all-time favorite Easter sermons. He preached it at Riverside Church.

Christ's resurrection promises our own resurrection, for Christ is risen *pro nobis*, for us, to put love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and a little more iron up our spines. Christ is risen to convert us, not from life to something more than life, but from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself.

I myself believe passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced Christ not as a memory, but as a presence. (*Living the Truth in a World of Illusions* [New York: Harper & Row, 1985], pages 70, 73)

During that same Holy Week, our congregation gathered together to celebrate the long, rich life of Bill Hopkins, a beloved physician who had birthed a major part of the population of our city. In my last visit with him, he was gravely ill, and we talked about his death and planned his memorial service. I told the congregation that the doctor had written the “prescription” for the service. Then I asked Bill the question I often ask folks in his condition: “What have you learned?” Bill’s answer was as quick as it was clear. He said, “Jesus is Lord.”

In his Easter sermon, William Sloane Coffin went on to tell his congregation that there is nothing sentimental about Easter. He said, “Easter represents a demand as well as a promise, a demand not that we sympathize with the crucified Christ, but that we pledge our loyalty to the risen one” (*Living the Truth in a World of Illusions*, pages 70–71).

Maybe that’s what frightened those women on that first Easter morning. They had been with Jesus; they had heard what he said. Maybe it was the *demand* that scared them. Maybe that’s what scares us, too. To experience the Resurrection is to discover that we, like them, are sent out to become the bearers of that good news to others. We are given the command, “Go, and tell everyone and anyone, that he is risen and he goes before you.” We are called to be construction workers in the ongoing renovation of this creation into a place where the Risen Christ can take up residence.

To know the presence of the Risen Christ is to know that we are sent into the very incomplete, broken, and ragged world to bear witness to the new life that Christ came to bring. We are sent to complete the Easter story with our story, just the way other writers tried to complete the ending of Mark’s Gospel by adding their own experience of the Risen Christ.

I don’t know much about opera, except that it ain’t over until a certain lady sings. I know enough to know that Giacomo Puccini was one of the great Italian composers, and to appreciate the story of his last work. Having gained international acclaim with *La Bohème*, *Tosca*, and *Madama Butterfly*, he began work on what would be his final creation, *Turandot*, in 1920. Before Puccini could complete the work, he was hospitalized with throat cancer. An unsubstantiated legend is that when he went into congestive heart failure, his last words were, “Remember *Turandot*.”

Another composer, Franco Alfano, was given the task of completing the opera based on Puccini's outlines. The first performance was seventeen months after the death of Puccini, at La Scala, in Milan, on April 25, 1926, with Arturo Toscanini, the greatest conductor of the time, holding the baton. When they reached the point in the opera where Puccini's own work had ended, Toscanini abruptly stopped the performance, laid down his baton, turned to the stunned audience, and said, "Here the opera ends, because at this point the maestro died." He turned, walked away from the podium, the curtain came down, and the astonished audience went home with the uncompleted opera haunting their minds. But one day later the orchestra and performers returned to the stage and completed Puccini's greatest work with Alfano's ending. And that's the way it typically has been performed ever since.

Mark's dangling nonending of the Gospel offers the invitation to each of us to complete the Resurrection story with our story, to allow our lives to become the living witness to the presence of the Risen Christ. We are sent, like the frightened women at the tomb, to carry the Easter word of hope to anyone and everyone who will hear. We are invited to share in God's radical renovation of the kingdoms of this earth into the kingdom of God and of his Christ. We are engaged in an extreme makeover of our lives, our relationships, and our world into "a place where God lives through his Spirit" (Ephesians 2:22 GNT). By the power of the resurrection, we continue to pray: "Narrow is the mansion of my soul, enlarge Thou it that Thou mayest enter in."

It is a shabby way to end the Gospel. But it's a wonderful way to live!

### *Questions for Reflection and Discussion*

1. How does the ending of Mark's Gospel strike you? Does it seem like "a shabby way to end the Gospel"? Why or why not?
2. What are some of the uncompleted projects in your life? Where are the dangling nonendings in your experience?
3. How have you, like Sarah Winchester, tried to deny the reality of death?
4. What is your personal definition of *hope*? How does the Resurrection story give hope for your life?
5. How will you complete the story of the Resurrection?

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## *Prayer*

O God, who for our redemption gave your only-begotten Son to the death of the cross, and by his glorious resurrection delivered us from the power of our enemy: Grant us so to die daily to sin, that we may evermore live with him in the joy of his resurrection; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (*Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, page 222)

## *Focus for the Week*

The Risen Christ goes before you to continue God's work of renovation in your life.