

*The Unending Cross*

[The women] 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

For several years now, I have been asking how the church might more effectively minister to people who live through an event of overwhelming violence and continue to suffer from its emotional, cognitive effects. I have been particularly intrigued with the challenge of preaching about the cross to such people. Not only is there a question as to which story of the cross we might tell, but another important issue is also at stake: How can ministers craft sermons that speak to the plight of trauma survivors without retraumatizing them? How do we make theological sense of what happened on the cross in a way that speaks to the experience of traumatized victims without glorifying violence?

How might one put an end to the story of trauma by offering an answer to those seeking relief? In the final section of this three-part reflection on the cross, I turn to Mark's Gospel to respond to these questions. Ironically, Mark's Gospel is a story of the cross that ends without a proper ending. Recall that Mark concludes his story of Jesus' crucifixion not with a grand resurrection scene but with a group of horrified women running away from the tomb, pledging to say nothing about it to anyone. Mark leaves the story of the crucifixion hanging in

a kind of suspended animation; we readers are left wondering what happens next, and we receive no clear answers.

Mark's Gospel thus disappoints our expectation of receiving an ending to the story. But perhaps it is worth reflecting here on the very concept of an ending. For most of us, when we hear the word "ending," we imagine something like the last chapter of a murder mystery in which we learn who perpetrated the crime and in which all the heretofore mysterious clues and inexplicable events are revealed to be part of a single logical narrative. The "end" is the final installment in a chronological narrative. While this is a useful way of thinking about "ending" (and one I will sometimes use in my own reflections), there is another way to understand what an "end" is. In classical Greek philosophy, *the "end" (telos) of something is described as being the ideal form that a given entity is designed to take.* The "end" of a piece of wood designed to be a table is the form of tableness.

This notion of "end" can also be applied to the human life. As a person of faith, I believe that the form or end of our lives is to flourish as the creatures that God created us to be, and for our lives to bear witness to the grace that God has bestowed upon us. Our end is the form of God's glory. For Christians, this end is not just something we strive to reach in the last chapter of our lives. Rather, it is a possibility that breaks in upon us every day: it is the shape of faithful living; it is the form of a beautiful life. Accordingly, to ask about the relation of endings to trauma is not only to ask how we might write the last chapter to a story of violence but also to ask how we might tell stories about violence that in their very *form or genre*—throughout their narration—bear witness to God's forming grace and mercy. This means that endings are as much about aesthetic substance as they are about chronological conclusions. They are as much about the graced possibilities of imagination that preaching can open up for people in every minute of their lives—they are as much about this as they are about writing satisfying and conclusive endings to stories concerning the completion of our lives.

Turning to Mark's Gospel, then, allows us to consider the relation between these two senses or meanings of the term "ending": the end as a lived Christian life, and the end as narrative conclusion. Of all the events narrated to us in the Gospels, the original ending of Mark's story is perhaps one of the most pastorally confusing. Recall the well-known scene. It begins with three women coming to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, a task that is not very surprising; at the time it is what women did as a matter of course for those they loved. They prepared them in death. But in this scene, Mark lets us know right away that the situation is not as self-explanatory as it initially appears to be.

First, Mark indirectly lets us know that they are quite pious women; he tells us that they waited to anoint Jesus until the Sabbath had passed. Imagine waiting to care for the body of one so beloved until the "proper" time arrived: it must have required incredible strength of faith, and a good deal of managed frustration and grief, to sit and wait until the right moment came.

Second, we are told that the women are up and wandering around the countryside in the early morning, likely leaving home before sunrise, moving through the gloom of early dawn. Maybe they are trying to keep their journey a secret; maybe they are afraid of being seen; we are not sure. Whatever the case may be, with this detail, Mark casts an ominous air over the scene. There is little light to see by, no map to follow.

Third, he tells us that the women are talking about who will roll the stone away. We find out that it is a very large stone, a fact that makes their journey seem quite irrational. From the start they were ready to undertake a task they knew might be thwarted. With this small detail, Mark makes the women appear weak in muscle and mind. They may not have thought things through, but this detail adds an element of suspense. Will these pious, ill-prepared women, creeping about a cemetery at dawn, accomplish their mission?

As a good storyteller, Mark immediately resolves some of the tension for us while at the same time creating more. They arrive and discover, to their amazement, that the stone has already been moved: a small miracle. But then another

possibility must be crossing their minds: thieves or their beloved's enemies could be lurking and could seek to harm them as well. Such a threat is real. At the very moment that Mark throws the women into the world of these inexplicable events, he casts upon the story shadows wherein violence haunts the possibility of miracles.

The women do not linger long in this indeterminate space, however; they immediately enter the tomb. Is this a bold move or the foolish act of hysterical women caught in the grip of the unknowable? Whatever their reason, the next events are so startling that this question no longer matters. Sitting before them is a young man. He is sitting on the *right side*, and he is wearing *a white robe*. These are strange details for Mark to give us: it is as if Mark wants us to really grasp this odd occurrence, to ensure that we vividly hold this unbelievable part of the story in our imaginations, this moment in which we discover that the body of Jesus is gone and an unexpected herald has appeared in its place. At the instant we encounter a mysterious absence, we confront an equally unexpected presence.

The startling man in white then speaks. Mark lets us hear his speech, but it is not what one might expect. He delivers his message in a rather straightforward, matter-of-fact manner. He does not speak in the elegant prose one might expect from an angel given a role as important as this. The young man simply tells them that Jesus is not there because he has risen; they are to leave, tell the good news to the other disciples, and then go to Galilee, where Jesus will be waiting. It is as if he is reporting the nightly news: the Nazarene is "going ahead of you," he says, "just as he told you." Into the midst of the bizarre and unbelievable thus come words that feel unusually solid, earthen, commonsensical, and self-evident, even though the events they narrate reflect a reality that reaches far beyond the ordinary. As readers, we can begin to feel the ending drawing near, and as Mark pulls us into the young man's words, we are allowed to believe that what happens next will be not only surprising but also satisfying. If Mark continues in this vein, our ending could well be as delightful as it is amazing and as down to earth as it is

heavenly. The tension in the narrative could not rise any higher nor expectations of resolution become any stronger.

What we next discover, however, is far from satisfying or amazing. Mark does not offer any of the things we are waiting for. Rather, he gives us a brief and disappointing description of the women's pitiful response. They turn, in fear and astonishment, and flee. They run out of the tomb. They scatter *in silence*. Complete silence! Why? Mark answers this question for us directly, hiding nothing. They are *afraid*, he tells us. The Greek makes it clear that this is not the kind of theological "afraidness" that we think of as "awestruck" or "full of wonder." It is the kind of "afraidness" we usually think of as "scared"—the terror that comes after a violent, overwhelming event, a traumatic fear. They are frightened speechless. And in their terror, they fall mute and run. As they do, the Gospel message itself seems to dart away from the tomb, off down the road, and out into the space of oblivion.

And then Mark stops the story. At the very moment when we, as readers of the Gospel, are in need of the greatest relief; at the moment in which we are supposed to witness the event of proclamation that launches Christianity into its future and hear about how the first people of faith really experienced the resurrection—Mark does not give it to us. Instead, he depicts a group of weak, irrational women who fall silent and run away. In doing so he allows the Gospel story to run away from us. Instead of pulling it together, he leaves us peering into the gaping space of an ending that never comes.

Mark's nonending is unnerving. Indeed, it is so unnerving that in the early days of the story's circulation, other Gospel-tellers decided to add a nicer, more appropriate ending to the tale. We find that ending in the canon we now read. It begins right after this "unending" and is written in a voice that is completely different from Mark's, but it gives you everything one might want in an ending. Jesus does all the things expected of a risen Lord; he appears to his followers, plans out their future, and allows them to see him ascending in glory to heaven. It is not hard to imagine the relief that a first-century Gospel

audience must have felt when someone finally got it right. Jesus rises, we see his risen body, we hear his resurrected voice telling us what to do, we watch him go up to heaven, we see him sitting next to God, and feeling empowered, we go forth and do as directed.

It is easy to understand why other writers added this ending. Then and now, *we like our stories to have satisfying conclusions*. In the midst of life's many uncertainties, tragedies, horrors, and chaos, we want the Gospel stories—like all important stories—to provide a narrative that brings a sense of transcendent order, direction, and meaning to our daily actions and to our understanding of God. We want stories that allow us to get on with things, as if there is an ultimate point to it all, a conclusion to the tale of human life that makes it worthy of living. *As any seasoned pastor knows, the task of preaching consists of precisely this: of inviting people into the stories, which, if proclaimed with passion and wisdom, provide them with just such ordering frames of reference.* This task is even more essential in the case of pastoral care for people suffering from trauma. Helping people of faith find a tale of compassion and grace in the stories of God's good news, a story capable of giving manageable shape to their many griefs and angers—this is central to the pastor's more intimate role as counselor and guide to the broken and the searching.

Given our penchant for good endings, what then are we as pastors, theologians, pastoral care providers, and people of faith to make of Mark's original ending, the ending that never really comes? How are we to preach it? How are we to make it pastorally alive? In recent years, biblical scholars and theologians have offered a variety of answers to this question, suggesting different pastoral solutions for the minister who grapples with this uncomfortable text. The most common interpretation is that the women's faith was eventually strong enough to override their fears: they ended up telling people that Jesus had risen. How else would the church have gotten started? Therefore, as people of faith, we are allowed to be startled, afraid, and grief stricken to the point of silence, but if we persist, our voice will eventually return, and we will be able to find our

faith again. The practical message embedded in this interpretation is a message of Christian *perseverance*.

Another common interpretation of Mark's abrupt ending argues that Mark wanted to leave the ending open so that we, the readers, would feel that we are responsible for making sure the Word is lived and proclaimed anew in our own voices, as our own story. As such, this interpretation offers a pastoral message of *hope* and *empowerment*. The empty space at the end is not the space of fear but the space of welcome. The Gospel message is ours to hear, ours to proclaim, and most important, ours to live, each generation in its own way.

A third common interpretive answer to the problem of the ending holds that for Mark, the cross, not the resurrection, is the theological center of Jesus' story. The meaning of the story was displayed on Golgotha, where salvation was made possible. The resurrection confirmed that it *was* God who died on the cross, and it should be proof enough that an angel appeared to proclaim this; we do not need to directly see the risen Lord, as we needed to witness his crucifixion. From a pastoral perspective, the message here is that fear can become awe when we realize that Jesus died for us. Whatever befalls us, we are called to express *gratitude* and *humble prayer* for all that has been done through Christ's atoning death.

All these are powerful examples of how to make theological meaning out of a seemingly inconclusive narrative ending. When viewed from the perspective of pastoral theology, there is much to commend in these readings. But should we only preach interpretations that smooth out the roughness of the women's silence and fear? Will the text support these readings, or does it ask for something more difficult? Might there be times in the life of ministry when the truest meaning of Mark's Gospel is discovered not by smoothing it over but by actually engaging its absent ending, its ruptured narrative, its lack of final order? Could it be that this "unending" is part of what this text has to teach us?

In order to see what Mark's lesson in unendings might be able to teach us about proclaiming the gospel to the traumatized imagination, consider the preacher's distinctive role in

shaping imagination. In classically Protestant terms, preaching is most centrally an activity aimed at expanding and deepening the congregation's imagination of grace such that we might be better equipped to live in and move through a world understood as a place of God's continued, unfolding grace. Here, grace is understood as the unmerited love of a God who desires that we flourish and who gives us the power to seek such goodness. In this regard, preaching is an embodied, incarnational activity, a lively example of the "Word-made-flesh" in order that the glory of God's grace might be vitally experienced and known.

Understood in these terms, preaching assumes particular importance in relation to the traumatized individual for whom the narrative of grace has disappeared or withdrawn from the world of their lived experience. Violence has a traumatizing affect on one's capacity to imagine grace, particularly in relation to language. Trauma can fracture our speech, and speech without the right tone or attitude, language without gesture, hampers our capacity to think expansively about life in general because it puts us in spaces marked by fear and constructed for protection. As such, fractured speech can profoundly hamper our capacity to imagine a reality that runs counter to the logic of traumatizing violence, the logic of a grace that opens, that secures, that invites one to wholeness.

There are two specific features of this fracturing that I want to highlight here because of their pertinence to preaching. First, traumatic violence often leaves holes in the stories we tell about our lives. There are places in those stories where endings are abrupt and ragged, other places where stories are unfinished; in this way, violence creates open-ended narrative spaces filled with fear, silence, and uncertainty. As we have seen in earlier chapters, one of the principal features of a traumatized memory is that it keeps reliving the trauma and often cannot find an ending to the story. When this happens, one can get stuck in time, a place that trauma theorists refer to as an "eternal present," a place with no past and, even more tragically, no future, no direction toward which life unfolds. In this regard,

violence cuts off thought midstream and leaves one stranded in midstory.

The second feature of the traumatized imagination relevant to understanding the role of preaching is the loss of a person's sense of agency and, along with it, a sense that one can positively affect the world through the intentional acts of speaking, gesturing, and moving. For people who have found themselves helpless in the face of overwhelming violence, there often continues to be—long after the events of violence have passed—a feeling that one does not have the power to make decisions and carry out desired plans. At the very moment one's sense of time gets frozen midstream, so too one's sense of meaningful action comes unraveled.

Viewed in the light of these two features, the task of preaching takes on new dimensions. We like endings to our stories, particularly when those stories are of Gospel proportion. What is the task of preaching if not to tell the Gospel story in a manner that makes its ending particularly vivid and powerful? Moreover, the power of the story's ending gives order to its beginning and its middle. Jesus' life and death make sense to us—they have an understandable order to them—because in his resurrection we find an ending that pulls it all together. In this view of preaching, however, how does one take into account the "unending reality" of traumatic experience? How do you preach comforting endings to people who live in the pain of an eternal present? How do you preach resurrection to an imagination traumatized by the terrible finality of violent death?

Similarly, the task of preaching, at its best, is often aimed at empowering people to make better constructive decisions about their lives, decisions that more accurately reflect God's will for the flourishing of creation, decisions that flow from a recognition of the abundance of grace in their lives and the lives of others. What does it mean to preach with an expectation of influencing decisions and actions in a context where the capacity to speak and act has been disabled? How does one proclaim the call to follow Christ to people who cannot even imagine following their own most simple desires?

Mark's uncomfortable ending—his unending—gives us a clue to this mystery in the very silence it provokes. In this story we find a script that calls, not for oratory and powerful rhetoric, but for silence. In that space of silence there is room for a deeper kind of speech: the language of gesture, of embodied communication, of the pouring out of soul in flesh that transcends the power of language to capture or define it. In Mark's unending we have a script for *performance* that gives us new insight into the grace of preaching to the traumatized imagination.

"When we say 'performance,'" writes David Rhoads, "we mean the whole event of a performance in the ancient world. The text, the experience of the performer, the context or situation, the social location of the performer and audience, and the experience of the audience"—all these are taken into account.<sup>1</sup> Part of our difficulty with Mark's text is due to the fact that we have not paid adequate attention to the rhetorical and performance conventions that surround the formation of Gospel traditions. The intended ending of Mark's Gospel may not be the Greek preposition *gar* (for). Mark may very well have intended that the ending be a *gesture*. The ending of Mark's Gospel takes us to the very limits of language, where we cross the threshold into silence. Why? To show us, by means of a gesture, an embodied image of fear. To see what fear looks like, one need only look into the faces of those who have been traumatized by violence for an image more haunting and eloquent than words can convey.

The ancient performer,<sup>2</sup> looking at the abrupt ending of Mark's text, may have understood Mark to mean, "Gesture here." "Gesture" meant a wide range of things: a stance, a posture, or a facial expression to convey thought and attitude. "Ellipses" like those in Mark's ending were commonplace in the literature of Mark's day and signaled to the text's performer that interpretive gestures were called for.

To turn to the clues and hints by which a reader can detect the author's intended performer reading aloud and gesticulating, what are they? They are absences or gaps. What the words seem to say is incomplete or contrary, syntax is irregular, and at the same time, there is no evidence that words are missing

because of physical damage or copyist's error. In such cases, a reader can often make better sense by adding in thought the import of a nod or a wave of the hand.<sup>3</sup>

So what do we imagine might be a gesture appropriate to this text? And how does this insight inform our interpretation and our preaching? Whatever the ancient performers did with this text is of course irretrievable. But one can certainly interpret the text through the performance conventions available to us. To do so, the interpreter takes on the persona of the narrator by speaking the words of the text and by suggesting through embodied, expressive speech the actions, attitudes, and points of view represented there. In this way the interpreter and the audience experiences the text in the same way that people first experienced it—as performed utterance.

A student gave a performed interpretation of this text in class as part of her preparation to preach from it. She worked closely with the Greek text to develop her performance, and for the last verse, she used a literal translation of the Greek: "They said nothing to anyone. They were afraid, for." When she filled the silence after the preposition with a *gesture*, the rendering had evocative meaning. She had shrugged her shoulders as she reached with her arms out to her audience, almost as if she were pleading with them. Through her performance the class *experienced* the story as unfinished and incomplete. In that place, her face, her stance, her gestures were images of fear, puzzlement, *terror*, reflecting the reaction of the traumatized women in the story, but also displaying in bold relief the human anguish of the question that became the spine of her sermon: *What does all this mean?*<sup>4</sup>

The discussion that followed her performance was rich and compelling and offered fresh insights on this text. The familiar text became unsettling again as students wrestled with some basic questions: *Why were the women afraid? What is it about the news of a "resurrection from the dead" that is terrifying? We know how to live in a world where death has the final word; it is the only "absolute" we can be sure of. We know how to order our lives and go about our business. What happens when*

life has the final word? To admit to what this text claims—that there is “resurrection”—is *traumatic!* “What if death is not a reliable absolute?” asks Tom Troeger in a sermon on this passage. “Then the comfort of knowing that life is a fixed and closed system is called into question. If death is overcome, if the one indestructible certitude that marks existence is shattered, then reality is wide open!”<sup>5</sup>

For victims of violence, life has become a “fixed and closed system” that the *language* of the gospel of Jesus Christ may not be able to penetrate. (Mark’s ending teaches us a lesson: when sacred rhetoric meets the embedded realities of traumatic images, perhaps silence, accompanied by *gesture*, is the only appropriate response.) What *gestures* might be called for to “finish” the sermon on this text? What gesticulations can we use from our ritual and liturgical traditions to enact our expression of fear, anxiety, or hope?

Preaching the ending of Mark’s Gospel brings us to the limits of language and leaves us on the threshold of silence. Scripture does not fear the descent of silence after language fails. Judeo-Christian faith teaches that it was within a silent void that the Creator began the drama of creation, fall, and redemption, not unlike the silence at the end of Mark’s Gospel. Who is to say that anxiety was not within the Creator as the volatile uncertainties of time and space were set in motion? Faith teaches that creation began with a spoken word, and yet “word” cannot be extracted from “gesture” or “performance.” As Dominic Crossan puts it: “In the beginning was the performance; not the word alone, not the deed alone, but both, each indelibly marked with the other forever.”<sup>6</sup> What God performs in the silence before creation is the subject of the gospel. It is a gesture toward redemption and restoration that renders the Creator vulnerable to the contingencies and chaos of the unfolding human story.



In a darkening church lit by one faint, flickering candle, women sit weeping in the deepening shadows of the cross.

Silence speaks to silence as the story gives way to gesture; the scattered, terrified women at the tomb are present with us in the sobs of other women who have known terror, who have felt the shattering power of violence. This liturgical gesture connects the women, and it also transforms their stories. One story opens the space for the other; because of the silence in the unending of Mark’s story, there is room for the embodied experience of the women from the self-defense class. (In this space there is no need for a well-formulated Christology packaged in a singular ending.) Sitting in the darkening space of the candlelit church, perhaps the women from the self-defense class experienced the power of gesture and performance to speak to the silences in their own stories. The shadow cast by the cross becomes a dark womb that holds their brokenness and envelops their pain. In this space there is no divine justification for suffering, but there is the outstretched gesture of understanding, of solidarity, and of welcoming embrace. When Joanne turned to me, to tell me what the passion play meant to her, she shrugged—without words, but with an embodied understanding of the story of trauma.

Learning from Mark’s Gospel, preaching the Gospel, especially the passion, to those traumatized by violence becomes an act of performing an imagined space where the power of embodied emotion is acknowledged. Such preaching moves, as the women did, toward the tomb—with fear and uncertainty—and acknowledges what Mark does, that God’s gospel cannot ever be finished. Its edge is unsettling and unnerving. It brings us to the voids and chasms in our experience where gestures of grace are imagined and at long last embodied. In these voids and silences we find we are not alone: we are in a vast landscape of grace, broad and beautiful enough to hold all the fracturing of our lives, and in so holding us, to give us back ourselves made whole.