

Fear is a powerful motivator. We don't want ourselves or our children to live in fear, at least, I hope we don't, and yet, a great many of our decisions, great and small, are driven by fear. Fear of loss, fear of scarcity, fear of failure, fear of pain, whether physical or emotional. Just for starters. Not to mention our more existential fears of death and hell. Some of our most vivid memories are from times when we were most afraid, and sometimes even old or unlikely fears keep us up at night.

One timeless way of facing our fears is to take courage from the examples of heroic bravery that we know about. And we are fortunate to have the story of Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, for they were brave indeed. Expressing support for Jesus, even after he died, was dangerous, especially there in Jerusalem, where both the powerful and the masses had decided that Jesus and his movement were so dangerous that Jesus had to be killed in the most degrading, agonizing way. The powerful wanted to make an example of Jesus so that no one would want to follow him. And indeed, his male disciples ran away, one in such panic that he abandoned not only Jesus but even his only clothing, a white garment.

But these women were profoundly devoted to Jesus; their love drove them to visit the tomb and honor Jesus regardless of the logistics and regardless of the danger. So if they could transcend all that, what in the world could they have seen or heard that they would be amazed and terrified into silence?

Was it the angel? Often in scripture, the sight of an angel is amazing and terrifying, which is why they often begin by saying, "do not be afraid." And this one basically says that. But he has taken on the form of a young man, not the terrifying appearance of an undisguised angel. His appearance, speech, and posture indicated to Mark's original audience that he is a divine being. Ancient people believed that heavenly beings had bodies, but were made of something other than flesh as we know it. The angel's statement, "He has been raised; he is not here," strongly implies that Jesus's flesh has been transformed into the incorruptible matter of a heavenly being. The angel's message also isn't particularly terrifying. He implicitly confirms that the women are in the right place, and explicitly confirms that Jesus has risen and will meet them in Galilee, just as Jesus had said he would. The angel is, in a sense, the opposite of the disciple who ran away, and he is even wearing a white garment. But a white garment is also a symbol of divinity, as Jesus had appeared wearing one in his transfiguration. And it makes sense; God has nothing to be afraid of.

So why were these brave women afraid? Mark's Gospel often portrays human wonder at divine activity, but Jesus's healings, feedings, exorcisms, and demonstrations of power of nature were mere indications of his divinity; they didn't fundamentally upend the basic, widely-shared understanding of life, death, and reality itself the way the news of his resurrection did. Many Jews of the time believed that there would be a general resurrection of the dead at the end of the world, so did this mean the end of the world was coming? What other elements comprising what they had considered fundamental,

unshakable reality would next be pulled out from under them? What would happen next?

St. Mark doesn't say. This is the end of his Gospel. From ancient times, many have struggled with its abruptness, and found it unsatisfying, particularly in comparison with the resurrection appearances in the other Gospels. Some Bible scholars have argued that Mark must have intended to write more, or that he did but the ending was lost, but most scholars are confident that this is the true, original, and intentional ending of Mark's Gospel. It's provocative, and a brave choice in itself, and practically demands that the reader return to the beginning of the story and reread with this scene in mind. Leaving out a resurrection appearance confirms the experience of Mark's audience, an increasing number of whom never met Jesus, and invites the audience to identify with the women, and imitate their faithfulness, devotion, and courage. Ending the story in this way also follows a common convention of ancient literature. Adela Yarbro Collins wrote, "It was standard literary practice in ancient writings to allude to well-known events that occurred *after* those being narrated in the text, without actually narrating those later events."*

Ending the story like this would not have disappointed Mark's original audience. If anything, it respected them by assuming they knew the famous conclusion, the resurrection appearances the angel indicates. The other Gospels hadn't been written yet, so Mark's couldn't pale in comparison to them. And, apparently, the very first Christians were at first more focused on Jesus's exaltation and glorification after his resurrection. They found their joy and reassurance in Jesus's vindication, and found their hope in their belief that Jesus would judge the living and the dead with the same grace, mercy, and forgiveness that he demonstrated in his public ministry.

The first Christians *later* became focused on the nature of Jesus's risen body. This was especially important because St. Paul pointed out that we would be raised like Jesus and would therefore have bodies like his — that is, bodies that are no longer susceptible to death or degradation. As he says quite eloquently later in 1 Corinthians, "Christ is risen from the dead, and become the first fruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

I would phrase it less eloquently, but perhaps in terms more suitable for our analytical age: Since God is far more powerful than humanity, divine grace must be far more powerful than human sin. If the consequence of human sin is death, the consequence of divine grace is life. Specifically, life far stronger than death; life everlasting. And the means by which this grace is available to us is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome must have realized at least some of this, for they did not refuse the angel's request to proclaim the Good News forever. We can be certain of this because if they had remained silent and

afraid, this story never would have been written! And it does ring true. Even the best of our humanity is not sufficient to answer everything we might encounter, certainly not our ultimate need for justification and righteousness. And while we'll never encounter the situation those women encountered, if anything, the world has more things for us to be afraid of now than 2,000 years ago.

We can never be strong enough in ourselves to face them all. But, by the grace of God, we don't have to be. The hope of Easter, the hope that the goodness and power of God will give us all we need and more, this is more than enough to overcome our fears; our Easter encounter with God's grace and love drives out fear and motivates us to live as God means for us to live. We should certainly keep Jesus's commandments to love God and to love our neighbors, especially those neighbors who are most difficult to love. Yes, we should be concerned for ourselves and for the state of the world around us; we should respond gracefully to the needs we can meet, but not because we are afraid; grace and love engender confidence, for they are the opposite of fear. And we do not need to fear, because thanks to a few brave women, we know that God wins in the end, and offers all of us a place in the victory.

**Mark* in the Hermeneia series, p. 797, emphasis added.