

### **The Rest of the Story**

One of my favorite novels is *A Prayer for Owen Meany* by John Irving. It tells the story of two friends, Johnny Wheelwright and Owen Meany. Early in the story Johnny loses his mother in a tragic accident. He reflects on his loss in this way: “When someone you love dies, and you're not expecting it, you don't lose her all at once; you lose her in pieces over a long time—the way the mail stops coming, and her scent fades from the pillows and even from the clothes in her closet and drawers. Gradually, you accumulate the parts of her that are gone.”

Whenever we lose someone, whether it is sudden or expected, whether it is a life that has been cut short or one that is long and full, it is hard. Losing someone is difficult and there is nothing that necessarily makes one loss any easier than another. It is something we have to adjust to and learn to deal with, each in our own way. This is called the process of grief and the truth is that we all “process grief” differently. A lot of times we think grief and sadness are synonymous, but I am not so sure. I think grief always entails a level of sadness, but there are many other emotions that are part of grief as well: anger, guilt and even relief. These others can be harder to talk about and can add to the feeling of isolation that is often present in grief. During these times we may try to keep ourselves busy, perhaps to help us process, or perhaps to help us avoid the loss.

I wonder how those who loved Jesus grieved his death. I wonder what emotions they felt and if they felt isolated even as they gathered and mourned their loss of him. The scene at the end of Mark's Gospel, where the women make their way to Jesus'

tomb, is pregnant with emotion. As they make their way to the tomb they are worried about who will roll away the large stone. When they arrive to see it had already been rolled away they are alarmed. They are further surprised to find a young man sitting there who tries to assure them, “Do not be afraid.” After he tells them the good news of Jesus’ resurrection they flee, not in joy, but in terror and amazement.

These are all the surface emotions going on in the narrative, but as with all grief, I suspect there are many more emotions beneath the surface as well. They have all been through so much together in such a short period of time. They had been caught up in the ministry of this man, Jesus, followed him from town to town as he brought good news to the poor, sight to the blind, healing to the lame and freedom to the captives. These women stood quietly behind him as he clashed with those in authority. And even as his disciples fled out of fear and embarrassment they remained faithful to the tragic end. When he died on the cross they did not just lose a loved one, they lost a dream, and not just any dream but the dream of God’s kingdom come to earth. It wasn’t just their friend who died on the cross, but their messiah, their king.

So of course they were sad, fearful and lost, but I bet they along with the rest of the disciples were also mad, mad at God for seemingly breaking God’s promise and for allowing it to come to this. I am sure they must have felt guilty too, remorseful that they didn’t or couldn’t do more to save Jesus. And I have a strong suspicion they also were experiencing a great deal of relief—because I sure know I would if I were in their shoes—at not having to bear the burden of this dream with Jesus. But of course it doesn’t seem right to talk about someone being a burden on us right after they pass, so if the disciples were like the rest of us, they probably didn’t talk about the sense of relief they felt at his death. Sure they were angry that this wonderful dream of God’s

kingdom had not come to be while he was with them, but you can't tell me that they weren't at least a little relieved as well. I am not sure how else we can understand the ending of this passage otherwise. Why do the women flee? Why are they silent? Isn't this the good news? Why aren't they relieved to find the tomb empty? Why don't they run off to tell the others the wondrous thing that has happened?

I cannot imagine what it must be like to watch as a loved one slips away, to know that they are nearing the end. I can only imagine that after a while, after a level of hope has faded, the unspoken desire is simply for any form of closure. I can only imagine that there comes a point when the end just brings relief. Now I am not saying that the women who attend to Jesus' tomb prefer him dead, rather I am wondering why are they afraid when they receive the news that he is alive? Could it be that they prefer the comfort of the closure over the uncertainty of Jesus and his dream of the kingdom of God being alive and at loose in the world?

The ending of Mark's Gospel has long been the source of consternation and controversy. There are later additions that attempt to wrap up the story with a nice bow, but almost all scholars agree that the Gospel as we have it ends with the women fleeing the tomb afraid, not telling anyone. The Gospel writer literally leaves us hanging, writing in the Greek, which uses different syntax than English, he ends with the preposition "for." There are two schools of thought on this ending. The first is that something happened to the original complete manuscript and somewhere along the line the full ending was cut off and has been lost for all time. The other, in some ways less satisfying conclusion, is that this is precisely the ending the author intended; that he means to leave the story open ended, without closure.

The idea of an open ending reminds me of those *Choose Your Own Adventure* books. Do you remember those? They were stories that would give the reader choices at various junctures in the narrative. The character would arrive at a decision and as the reader you could choose for the character. If you made one choice you turned to a designated page where the story followed a particular course. Or if you made another choice, you would turn to a different page and an alternative narrative would begin to unfold. They were great fun not only because as the reader were you integral to the story, but also because you could read them again and again and if you made different choices along the way, it was almost like reading a whole different book.

I have often thought of the ending of Mark's Gospel in this way. If Mark intended to leave us hanging, might he also have meant to communicate that we are integral to the story and the choices that we make matter; that the good, yet terrifying news of Easter is that God's narrative is alive and on the loose in the world and we are a part of it? You and I have an important role to play. Easter is not just about something that happened a couple thousand years ago; it is about the ways that God is alive and at work in our world and in our lives. It is about Jesus' ongoing dream of God's kingdom in our midst: good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom to captives and comfort to the bereaved. It is good news, but not the kind of good news that is simply comforting. It is scary good news, because if it is true it means that God is not done with us yet.

In many ways it would be nice to have a nice neat ending, to have the narrative all wrapped up with a nice bow. The other Gospels, Matthew, Luke and John have much less disturbing and less abrupt endings than Mark, but I, for one, am glad for Mark's rugged, messy ending. It strikes me as real, true to life as we know it. It

teaches us something important about this God who raised Jesus from the dead. This is not a God that is easily defined or controlled. This is an untamed and unpredictable God. It also tells us something true and important about us, I think. By the end—or at least by what passes for an ending in Mark—the disciples who were eye witnesses to Jesus’ life and ministry all fled and denied him. Even the women who were faithful to Jesus at the grave finally flee in fear.

Who is left in the end to complete this story? Part of the reason that I love Mark’s ending is because it speaks to—or rather it shows us by example—that we are not the ones who finish this story, we are not the authors of its ending. This is God’s story and God is the only one who has the final say, the final edit if you prefer. Another way to say this is that our hope is not in our faithfulness to God, but in God’s faithfulness to us and to God’s own vision. The resurrection means that God did not break the promise to us in Jesus. It means that God will not allow our failures or infidelities to be that last word. We may say “No” to God, but God still says “Yes” to us. It means that the dream, the hope and the promise for which Jesus lived and died is still alive, still narrating our lives and inviting us, beckoning us to join in the rest of the story.

*Let us pray: O Lord, when we look at the work of your hands—the sun, the moon and the stars, the ocean, the many, many and varied species that inhabit this planet with us— we are amazed at your creativity and your care for all things. You have made this world to reflect your glory. Among these, what are we that you are mindful of us, O God? We have not, we could not earn the love and care that you have given us. And yet, just as you have raised Jesus, you have lifted us up through him, to join with you in the care of your creation. You have placed trust in us, trust we did not earn, trust we do not often live up to. Yet, you do not give up on us, and you do not let our failures be the last word. We thank you that because Jesus lives, so does your promised kingdom, in this life and the life to come. We thank you that because he lives, the story of your care and creativity, your grace and love continues to narrate our lives. We pray in the name of our living Lord, Jesus Christ, who was with you at the beginning and will be with us to the end. Amen.*