

The Resurrection story in Mark's gospel reminds me of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> movements of Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. I thought of that myself. Yes. So here's why. The 4<sup>th</sup> movement of the Pastoral sounds like this: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rn9\\_C6X4UXM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rn9_C6X4UXM) [1<sup>st</sup> 30 seconds]. The earlier movements of the symphony were all light, serene, you know, pastoral. Then along comes "the tempest," and it represents the very real terror of nature unleashed in a storm. It growls and roars, and when it quiets, it sounds like dread. At about 2:45 it dies down and an earlier musical theme re-emerges, the Shepherd's Song. Quiet at first, a single voice, but gradually other instruments join and the music becomes more confident and you have a joyous 5<sup>th</sup> movement.

Mark has told us a terrifying and bleak story of Jesus' crucifixion and death. From the time that he appeared before Pilate until he cried his last words of abandonment on the cross, Jesus has been silent, as if stunned. The male disciples disappear from the story; the only people left once Jesus has died are some women and Joseph of Arimathea, who puts Jesus' body in the tomb and disappears from the story along with the other men. The crucifixion had been a public event, designed to draw attention and terrify those who saw it. It was emotionally big, if you will, like "The Tempest," and when it was over, virtually all of the onlookers had fled, overwhelmed and terrified. Jesus lay dead in the tomb as night falls and the sabbath begins, inaccessible until the first light of dawn the day after the sabbath.

The women make their way toward the tomb like the first flutes of the 5<sup>th</sup> movement, just three of them, without a plan. They have spices to anoint his body, but they don't even know how they're going to get access, since there's a big stone in front of the entrance. It's like they've just taken the first step without knowing how they're going to complete their mission.

And that, my friends, is the key to the whole story. Taking one step, OR not.

Mark gives us three important events in which an opening of some kind forms, but it's up to the reader to make sense of it. At Jesus' baptism the heavens are torn apart and a voice calls Jesus "my Son, the beloved." At Jesus' death the curtain in the Temple tears apart. Now when the women arrive at the tomb, the stone has been removed. Each time, it's up to us to decide whether this matters or means something. We're perfectly free to decide it's nothing and move on.

The women are alarmed to see a young man in white sitting on the right side of the doorway. He tells them not to be alarmed, which is what angels usually have to say before they can get anything else across to human beings. But Mark doesn't say he's an angel, and he doesn't tell the women that he is either. He *could* be just a guy. It's interesting, too, to speculate on whether these women had ever heard Jesus' predictions about his death and resurrection—perhaps this was new to them. After all, in Mark's gospel Jesus was constantly telling his disciples to keep it to themselves. Maybe the way they hear about the resurrection is from this young man (or is he an angel?) who refers to Jesus as a human being—"of Nazareth," "crucified"—and claims that Jesus has been raised. Well, do we believe him? This is not exactly the same grade of robust evidence that we have of Jesus' death. That was big, public, witnessed by many, probably documented in some Roman commander's office file cabinet. We can take that story to the bank. But this one? All we can see is that the tomb is empty and there's a guy who claims Jesus has been raised.

The women have taken their first step. They've made it to the tomb with their spices and ointments. But now the next step is *not* to anoint the body, as they had anticipated. The

young man now tells them to tell Peter and the others that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee, and that they'll see him there. But the gospel ends (its original ending, not the one that scandalized scribes inserted later) with the women fleeing from the tomb, "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Do they take the next step? We never find out, not from Mark.

The reader knows that Jesus had predicted his suffering and death, and the angel is confirming it. But in Mark's gospel, you don't get confirmation that you've chosen the right thing to do before you do it. Rather, you step through the door, you do the thing, and *then* you get confirmation. It's like a scavenger hunt, or monkey bars, where you can only take one step at a time, without ever knowing what'll come after it. And within Mark's narrative, you never get confirmation that the young man was an angel, or that Jesus was resurrected. You're left to decide, how will I inhabit this narrative? Will I move forward on its truth? Or will I walk away, as one does from something momentarily arresting but ultimately meaningless, and go elsewhere?

"They said nothing to anyone"—this whole thing could fall apart right here, with the women. The whole Jesus movement could just dead-end, if they don't take the next step. How often have we had occasion to comment on God's extremely imprudent reliance on fragile and fallible human beings? Being born to a teenager in a stable was only the beginning. Well, the angel has told the women, "This whole thing depends on you," and it's understandable that they freaked out. They *know* Jesus died; they do not have strong evidence, let alone proof, that he has been raised.

And that's how it is, right? We have a story, and we have some evidence, but is it solid

enough to propel us into the world living as though it were true? Mark thinks it is; that's why he leaves *us* to walk through the opening at the end of his gospel. Our translation says, "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid," but apparently in Greek the last word is the "for," or "because." Greek grammar, what can I say? The point is, the gospel ends with an ellipsis, a dot dot dot. "For," . . . . Mark has turned the story over to us, to continue. And to do that, we have to decide to take ownership of the story.

I think if people had listened to Jesus and taken his teachings to heart, he would have accomplished his mission. He would have shown us how close God is, how not to be controlled by fear, and how to live the reality of the kingdom. But since they didn't listen, and they killed him, God just accomplished the mission through that instead. I'm saying that the crucifixion was truly an unmitigated disaster. It's just that God keeps going anyway, God just integrates disaster into ultimate redemption. So when we pay attention not only to the thunderous tempest but also to the opening notes of the first bird's song after the storm, we are choosing to take ownership of the story of resurrection. When we pay attention not only to the breathtaking corruption of lawmakers but also to the courage of health caregivers who keep showing up for total strangers at tremendous cost to themselves, we are choosing to take note of evidence that God is in charge. When we make our decisions based on hope and compassion, not knowing what our path will be beyond the next step, we *are* evidence of the resurrection. That's what the confirmation/validation is. It's that people step out and stake their lives on the goodness of God and the power of compassion. And when we freeze up, overwhelmed, like those women at the tomb, God keeps going anyway and we can pick up again when we get our breath. Meanwhile the resurrection is in full swing. Thanks be to God!

Holy Lord Jesus, on this day we rejoice in your glory and stand in awe of how you have transformed this world with your dying and your rising. Receive our joyful praise. Alleluia!  
Amen.