

Mark's resurrection story is relatively subdued. There's no angel, just a "young man" dressed in white. There is no joyous embrace, as in John when Mary recognizes Jesus. There's no post-resurrection story like the encounter on the road to Emmaus, or the appearance to doubting Thomas. It's just the three women who had watched Jesus die two days ago from a distance, finding the tomb empty except for the young man. He tells them not to be alarmed, for Jesus has risen and is not there. They should go and tell his disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. And they flee from the tomb, for "terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

It's not a very glorious ending to the story, and apparently later generations of Christians thought they'd better fix that, and added a coda to the gospel so that it ended in a more upbeat way. However, I am told that the oldest and best versions of Mark end where our reading ended today, and that's what we're going to go with, because it points us in an interesting direction.

The message of resurrection here is given in an open space—a space where the expected corpse is not present, and where expectations have met emptiness. And in that space, the promise is made: "He is going ahead of you; there you will see him." The women are exactly where Mark's audience is, and where we are—in a space devoid of the physical presence of Jesus—and that's where the promise is given too. Where will Jesus meet you, if not where you thought he'd be? *On the way.* He will meet you on the way, when you step forward into the future.

The book of Hebrews has a wonderful riff on this, reciting all the biblical ancestors who stepped forward without knowing where they were going: "By faith

Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.” This is how it happens, we step into the void at God’s invitation, and *on the way* we find what we were looking for.

In my online religions course we saw a video about a Pentecostal minister and an imam in Nigeria who together run the Christian-Muslim Interfaith Mediation Centre.<sup>1</sup> For decades Nigeria has been torn by violence which has a religious component. Tens of thousands of people have been killed, and communities devastated. In the 1990s, Pastor James Wuye and Imam Muhammad Ashafa led opposing, armed militias, dedicated to defending their respective communities as violence broke out in Kaduna, northern Nigeria. In pitched battles, Pastor James lost his hand and Imam Ashafa’s spiritual mentor and two close relatives were killed. In 1995 they met each other unexpectedly at a gathering convened by the governor of Kaduna state. An acquaintance challenged them to make peace.

James Wuye says,

Initially it was full of suspicion. My fear was that, because of my training, he may be planning to identify me and my friends for possible attack when an occasion provides the space for them to do that.... If you see his dressing and the way his posture is, you see like an embodiment of an Islamic fundamentalist from the dressing code he has. We see them as fanatics. That's a group that believes that Islam only and no other religion. And then my mother took ill. Then he came with some group of young men to greet her, to see her, to visit her in the hospital and then I started changing. I say, wow, how does the Moslem come to greet me as a Christian? Then at a point ... my mother then passed on. Then they came again with a team to greet and that was what broke me and my resistance to interact him started falling. I then visited his mosque ... well it was like I will swallow my heart... Because I wasn't sure I will come out of the place alive. But gradually I developed confidence and he too kept coming and the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kFh85K4NFv0>

relationship begin to grow.

But it was not easy process or a foregone conclusion that they would maintain the relationship. Wuye also says that many times when they were traveling together, he fantasized about suffocating Ashafa with a pillow as he slept.

But what really removed that from me... was when... Pastor Ina Omakwu of the Family Worship Centre in Abuja... said to us you cannot preach Christ with hate. Christ is love and the message he is carrying is love. And he say to you James I know you and I know what you are doing. If you will truly do this work, you must learn to forgive them for every hurt against you or against anyone that you have loved or your loved ones...

That broke me finally so when I came back I was anxious to meet Ashafa. It was like a lover looking for his loved one... I was trying to come demonstrate this new insight. ...

Over the last five years, the work of the Interfaith Mediation Centre has been expanding. They send out teams of ministers and imams to lead workshops and seminars on reconciliation. Sometimes when they travel their wives come along, and the video shows the two ladies, one dressed in Sunday best, the other entirely covered, chatting together while they wait for the men. Their teams tell people that you cannot change Islam into Christianity or Christianity into Islam, but Muslims and Christians can love each other just as they are.

What these two men are doing is almost unthinkable in their context. The level and duration of the violence in Nigeria is staggering—think of Boko Haram, and you'll get a feeling for how brutal the conflict is. Each of them has suffered deep losses due to violence from the other one's "side." They fought, not out of greed, but in what they saw as self-defense against an implacable enemy. They fought because they loved their own communities that were in such distress.

When James Wuye was challenged to make peace with Mohammad Ashafa, it

was like being told a crazy thing. He couldn't see a way forward. He couldn't visualize peace ahead. But the power of resurrection is the power to make an open space into which people can step into a future. The disciples wouldn't have known the promise of resurrection was true if they'd stayed in Jerusalem; they had to get out on the road as if God were writing another chapter after they thought the book had ended—which of course is exactly true. . Resurrection faith is not static but dynamic, summoned into being by an intangible but powerful promise—the power to open up the future.

The young man tells the women, “Go, tell his disciples . . . *and Peter* . . . that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. His disciples *and Peter*. Peter had denied Jesus in his hour of trial, essentially closing off from relationship with Jesus. Peter had ceased to be a disciple. But the denier is restored with the Resurrection. The same would have happened for Judas if he hadn't foreclosed the future by killing himself. It's unthinkable, but again, the Resurrection makes an open space into which a person—even a traitor—can step into a future. When we accept that opening and step out onto the way, *then* we meet the risen Christ.

Like the women at the tomb, we cannot find the physical body of Jesus. Where we thought it would be, there is just open space. And like the women at the tomb, we will find him when we get on the way, because he has gone ahead already. Let us pray.

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.

