

He is risen! *Mark 16: 1-8*

What has God done? Everything. What have we done in return? Nothing.

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [April 12, 2000](#) issue

Easter morning is the defining place and moment of Christian space and time. It is the Christian Genesis: male and female in a garden, darkness becoming light. The first day. It is the Christian nemesis: death and despair displaced by life and hope. The last day.

As Christians we come to church on Easter Day to celebrate the greatest day of the year, to sing for joy at the central moment of our faith and to experience again the wonder, relief and excitement of the first Easter morning. We read the story of how the women went to the tomb at daybreak. And we hear these words: “You seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here.”

Is this good news or bad? Initially, it sounds like insult added to injury. Look at it from the women’s point of view. To lose the man who had turned the world upside down, to lose the person who showed them the Father, to watch goodness and truth personified being nailed to two planks of wood—this was more than they could bear. But then not to be able to minister to his dead body: this took grief and despair beyond all reason.

The women come to the tomb and are met by these words: “You seek Jesus who was crucified.” Yes they do, and so do we. For we come to church on Easter morning because we seek Jesus who was crucified. We know he healed and taught and died a horrible death—everyone knows that. But we have come back this morning because, even though he was crucified, dead and buried, we still seek him. The women came to the tomb confused about the past, bewildered about the present and scared about the future. And we too come feeling all of those things: confused about our past, bewildered about our present and scared about our future.

To both the women at the tomb and to us, the angel gives three messages: one about the past, one about the present, one about the future. The first message is this: "He has been raised." It has *already happened*. Death could not hold him. The consequences of human sin could not imprison him. This is the foundation of Christianity, and it lies in something unique that has already happened. Human failure has not had the last word. The last word lies with God.

But if he is not here, if he is not dead, where is he now? The young man speaks again: "He is going ahead of you." This is a message about the present. God's activity did not stop at the cross, did not stop in the raising of Christ. He is still alive and active, still busy, still going ahead of us, blazing a trail for us to follow. He is going ahead of us. Whatever difficulties lie ahead, he is already meeting them before we do. He was betrayed, tried, persecuted, killed: so may we be. He was raised: so will we be. Our faith is founded in a unique event in the past: "He has been raised." But it is alive in the present: "He is going ahead of you." He is preparing a place for us.

And the third message is a promise for the future, delivered to the disciples: "There you will see him." This is our Christian hope, that the whole church, living and departed, and through the church the whole creation, will see the Lord face to face. The resurrection of Christ means that even though Christ died, he has been raised again and we can see him. Our own resurrection means that even though we die, we will be raised again and Christ can see us.

This news leaves the women and us filled with terror and amazement. Terror, for if he has done this to death, what will he do to us? Death took his life away, and he destroyed death. But we broke his heart, pierced his soul and wounded his love. When we see him again, will he not punish us, hate us, destroy us? And amazement, because this is both the beginning and the end of the world. It is the end of the world in which goodness, truth and love are trampled by hatred, violence and fear. It is the beginning of a new world where nothing is certain, not even death. Our imaginations are dizzy with what God has done. What on earth will he do next?

The women's silence leaves us on the note of irony, summing up the whole story. What has God done? Everything. What have we done in return? Nothing. But there is a clear lesson here. The Easter story has given us truth about the past, confidence for the present, and hope for the future. He has been raised; he is going before us; we will see him. Our hearts are full of faith and wonder. Don't fear death, the Easter

gospel tells us, because he has been raised. Don't fear evil, because he is alive and active. Don't fear the future, because you will see him.

But don't be a gnostic either. Yes, God has done it all, but Christianity is not an agreed-upon set of conclusions about what God has done. It is a response. It is not a religion of the head or the armchair, but of the relentless disciplines of apprenticeship. The women make no response—they pass on no discovery about the past, no confidence about the present, no hope for the future. Their failure shocks us. So it should. Only gradually do we understand that their failure represents our failure. By ending in this shocking way the gospel draws us into its story. We can't be silent as the women were. We won't be. We want to do better. We want to follow Jesus to Galilee, to Jerusalem, to the cross . . . and beyond. Because of Easter, we can.