April 5, 2015, Easter Sunday: Mark 16:1-8

If it hadn't been for the snakes, I might have let the reader continue. Instead I went to the lectern and quietly said, "we are stopping at verse 8 today."

by Martha Spong in the April 1, 2015 issue

It is never taking the easy way out to preach Mark's Gospel on Easter Sunday. The first time I tried it, I spent more time than usual in study. I looked for connections to the shock and awe the women at the tomb felt, and I contemplated their reasons for telling no one. I worked hard to make sure my sermon would explain how Mark's account is unique but without becoming the sort of thing that's more compelling in the footnotes than in the preaching.

The bulletin clearly listed the passage: Mark 16:1–8. I listened as the reader reached the end, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." I took a breath and prepared to stand and move to the pulpit—but wait! Clearly convinced that the bulletin contained a misprint, she continued to read. "Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons."

The story seemed incomplete to her. She thought that of course she was supposed to go on and read the contested longer ending of Mark, which describes various appearances by the risen Christ and names the signs of power passed on to his disciples, including the ability to handle snakes. Terror and amazement seized me, and I quickly considered the possibilities. If it hadn't been for the snakes, I might have let her continue. Instead I went to the lectern and quietly said, "We are stopping at verse 8 today."

She stopped, apologized, murmuring, "I thought it was 18." I gave her an encouraging smile and a pat on the arm, and she returned to her seat. It was

uncomfortable.

Stopping at verse 8 leaves us all in an uncomfortable situation. We crave the resolution the additional verses bring. It's a day when we really want to offer a few "Alleluias" and "He is risens" and let the trumpets and the choir take care of the rest. The lectionary also assigns John's resurrection story, and we preachers may feel drawn to this more familiar version, in which Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Mark 16:1–8 leaves us mostly with questions. Why preach it?

I chose to because I find the discomfort compelling. Three women arrive at the tomb already living in a liminal moment, deeply grieved. They have come with a plan for their actions, a set of rituals meant both to mark the death of their friend and teacher and to help them begin the mourning process. The reality of Jesus' death weighs on them as they worry about how they will get into the tomb to anoint his body. Who will roll away the stone?

Then things get real, yet unreal. The stone is already rolled away, the tomb already open. Instead of a dead body, they find a young man in white. Mark tells us that "they were alarmed."

I should think so. It's worth unpacking this alarm, slowing down the story to recall times in our own lives when the unexpected shocked us—and the effort it took to regather ourselves and decide how to respond. Our paths are strewn with these kinds of moments, in which our perceptions of reality are influenced by grief or anxiety or excitement."I am poured out like water," says Psalm 22, "and all my bones are out of joint." This expression of being spiritually and emotionally out of joint captures human feelings of shock that transcend time and place.

I remember when my father called to tell me that my mother was dying. He could only repeat in a mumbling drawl, "It's bad. It's bad." It was the emotion in his voice—more than the words of the doctor who later explained my mother's metastatic cancer—that conveyed the end of the world as we knew it. When my daughter was born, I went through a difficult labor and delivery and suddenly understood as I hadn't before that the distance between life and death is immeasurably small. Years later, my son called late at night from an emergency room: he had been thrown from a car. I had to remind myself that the very fact that he was on the phone meant he must still be alive. This was good news, and I needed to inform others—but, shaken, I struggled to put the facts into words.

The women’s response parallels these comparatively ordinary situations. With their horror and bereavement still fresh, they hear the kind of news we might fantasize about getting after a loved one dies—and they are afraid. Their fear reminds us that the good news of Christ’s resurrection is not simply reliable news to be taken for granted. It is a truth so shocking that even the first people to hear it, people who hear it on the spot where it happened, cannot imagine how to tell anyone else.

On that Easter morning when the reader continued past verse 8, I planned to preach about the difference in Mark’s ending. Did I need to stop the reader? Probably not, but in the heat of the moment, I leaped up on behalf of the women and their shocked response. Their story allows us to stand in their place, with our doubts and our questions and even our hopes. It offers an opportunity to talk about our own disbelief without rushing straight to the celebration. It reminds us that even when it’s hard to believe, there is no good news unless someone shares it.