

Life lost and found

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It always takes time to get my bearings when I jump into a week's lectionary texts, because I'm wading into a story that's already underway. A week and a half into Lent, we're in Mark 8 and Jesus is well into his ministry. He has fed the multitudes, twice. He has called and sent out his 12 disciples. He has preached and healed, and he's beginning to turn toward Jerusalem.

Despite Jesus' deeds and growing fame, the real meaning of it all is just coming into view. He gives the first of three predictions of his crucifixion and resurrection, each of which the disciples fail to understand. Mark's unflattering portrayal of the disciples is shocking but also heartening. If the Gospels were simply early Christian propaganda, would they include Jesus calling Peter, the leader of the apostolic church, "Satan"? There is something here that cuts close to the bone. The text seems to insist that to tell the truth about God, one must tell the truth about how prone we are to get it wrong. The God at work through the death and resurrection of Jesus is a confounding character, a difficult truth. The disciples won't begin to understand until Easter, and even then the truth will remain both demanding and capacious beyond telling.

I suspect that the disciples fail to understand partly because of the nature of the gospel itself. At this point, Jesus is still speaking of his death and resurrection as an idea. But this is not everyday information—these are events to be journeyed into and through. We have learned to use words such as "existential" for such matters, but Paul didn't need these abstractions—he just told his story. Jesus' death and resurrection seem to have [swallowed him whole](#).

James Alison has taught me an important lesson about what is at work in the cross and the resurrection, or for that matter in the barren womb of Sarah bearing Isaac or in a band of Hebrew slaves sprung to improbable freedom. Jewish, Christian and

Muslim teachings maintain that God creates the world from nothing. Existence itself is a gift, pure grace. The God who brings creation from nothing is the same God who brings life to the dead—creation and redemption are of a piece. When we stumble into the hands of this creating and redeeming God, we discover what it is both to live and to love.

The title of David James Duncan's novel [*The Brothers K*](#) refers to [Dostoyevsky](#) but also to the "K" of a baseball strikeout and, improbably, to the cross. Everett, one of the brothers, offers his own definition of "K," as good an insight as any into Mark 8:

K (Kā) verb. K'ed, K'ing. 1. baseball: to strike out. 2. to fail, to flunk, to fuck up, to fizzle, or . . . 9. to lose your home, your innocence, your balance, your friends, 10. to lose your happiness, your hopes, your leisure, your looks, and, yea, even your memories, your vision, your mind, your way, 11. in short (and as Jesus K. Rist once so uncompromisingly put it) to lose your very self, 12. for the sake of another, is 13. sweet irony, the only way you're ever going to save it.