

Resurrection grows on you

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You may recall that this ending of the Gospel of Mark, the one that appears in the most ancient manuscripts of the book, seemed too abrupt to later copyists. Before long, 11 more verses had found their way there, a busy digest of post-resurrection experiences from a variety of sources: John's account of the scene at the tomb with Mary Magdalene, John's story of Thomas the doubter, a version of the walk to Emmaus, an account of Jesus' ascension, other material from Luke/Acts. These are entered almost as bullet points.

But the tacked-on verses need not concern us here--the Revised Common Lectionary walks away from them politely. We are left with the bald confusion and fear at the end of the ancient tale, from a time before it was canonized and liturgized. Late at night, a few years after the events recounted in the passion narratives, a fire flickers shadows across the faces of the people assembled to hear the story from a traveler who heard it from someone who heard it from someone else. He ends his story just this way.

And what happened next, someone asks.

Well, I don't know. All I know is what I heard, that they went to his tomb and he wasn't there. And an angel appeared to them. And they got scared and ran away. That's all I know.

A tale told by the light of a campfire. One of those mystery tales campfires seem to generate--a ghost story. Nobody back then thought he was writing the Bible; they were telling stories about a mystery. One person told the tale to another, and

another, and another. There was embroidery upon it, we know; the bare bones of the one we have from Mark was not the last word on the resurrection. But it was one of the first.

We walk through the events of Jesus' last days with sorrow and horror, but also with some understanding. We know death; we have seen death. But we hang back from the resurrection because we do not understand it. Still, we struggle to tell the tale, uninformed as we are. The very telling has become important to us--more important than a ghost story, for no ghost story has changed our lives. This story has.

The resurrection is unknowable in the way we like to know things, the journalistic who-what-when-where-how that we grandchildren of the Enlightenment think comprises truth. The writer of Mark was different: he was willing to have his life changed before he understood fully what was changing it.

Actually, this is the only way life ever really changes. You won't understand marriage until you've been hitched for a while--maybe not even then. You're not going to know what it's like to have a baby until you have one. You don't even know your profession until you've been in it a while. Nothing in life is obvious immediately. It all grows on us.

This is how we must approach resurrection, as well. No, you don't understand it. Let it grow on you.