

April 1, Easter Sunday (Mark 16:1-8)

On Easter Sunday, we want to feel triumphant. Instead we get Mark 16.

by [Diane Roth](#) in the [March 14, 2018](#) issue

There were always three Easter services. The first and the third were respectably attended. But the middle one—that was always packed, the large sanctuary filled with people and sound. There was a procession with cross and torches and choir and book, and it was all very grand and inspiring.

One woman always claimed her spot, carrying the cross at the middle service on Easter morning. She would serve at another service if she was needed, but she had to be at the middle service too because, as she would say, “Now it’s Easter!” It wasn’t that the other two services weren’t really Easter. But she felt it at the second service, the triumph of the resurrection. I can still see her eyes as she stood at the top of the chancel steps with the cross held high. Now it’s Easter. He is risen indeed!

I want to go to church on Easter Sunday and experience the triumph of the resurrection. But if that’s what the day is about, why would I ever want to hear the resurrection story from Mark? There are just eight verses, and though there is a proclamation—the angel announces the resurrection of Jesus—he never appears, at least not in the original eight verses. And, to add insult to injury, the women who hear the news flee in terror and say nothing.

It’s hard to read Mark 16 on Easter Sunday and feel triumphant. It’s tempting to move right on over to John 20, where you get not only a resurrection appearance but also an extended conversation between Jesus and Mary Magdalene. Or you can do what a neighboring congregation did one Easter: preach just the first six verses of Mark 16. There still isn’t a resurrection appearance, but at least you aren’t put face to face with the failure of the women. If you end at verse six, you can still talk about the triumph of the resurrection, which is what we all want on Easter Sunday. Isn’t it?

One Easter, before I was in seminary, I went to three different Easter services, including an Easter Vigil. I was trying to “get” Easter. I was desperately seeking . . . something, perhaps that feeling that the woman always felt when she carried the cross at the second service. Triumph. The sense that, despite all the doubts, despite the implausibility, despite all of the grieving, it’s all true. It’s not just something we say. Jesus is risen indeed.

In Mark’s Gospel, *failure* is a more relevant word than *triumph*: the failure of the disciples, of the women, our failure, my failure. My failure is not something I want to be reminded of, but it keeps coming back to haunt me anyway. I fail to say the right word at the right time, to believe without doubt, to inspire a congregation, to be the person I should be, to be triumphant. Among other things, that’s what I come face to face with in Mark’s story of the resurrection. The disciples fail to understand Jesus. The women run away and say nothing to anyone. Jesus rises from the dead but no one sees him. How is it possible that there is even a church around after 2,000 years, with all of this failure?

In the past it was common to add material at the end of Mark’s Gospel, to try to smooth out its rough and unsatisfactory ending. These days it’s more common to interpret that rough and unsatisfactory ending as a sort of challenge. Finish the story! Do what the women would not do! Say something to someone. Be triumphant.

But lately I’m thinking that failure is the point. That Mark is the gospel of failure, our failure—and that resurrection grows only out of this.

Many years ago I read a lovely and sprawling essay by Minnesota author Bill Holm. In it he relates the lives of his Icelandic relatives, who settled in the small Minnesota town of Minneota. In particular, he remembers Pauline Bardal. She was poor; she never married or had children; she had a houseful of books; she loved music. She played the piano (badly, he remembers, but with much love). By American standards, he says, she was a failure. He considers stories of immigrants who failed, of orphans and widows, the weak and the drunk. He titled his essay “The Music of Failure.”

Toward the end of the essay, Holm writes, “In every artery of my body the music of failure plays—continually. It sounds like Bach to me, and you must make up your mind what it sounds like to you.”

The Gospel of Mark is the gospel of failure. It is the theme that runs through the whole book, and it doesn't resolve during those last eight verses—it's like a piece of music that ends on a discordant note. I suppose this is why there are so many attempts to resolve it. Make your own ending! Add verses! But the gospel of failure is the gospel of life. It is the gospel of our lives, which, no matter how successful they are, always end in death.

It is left to God to resurrect us, to complete the story and resolve the chord. It is left to God to overturn failure and create and re-create the church, despite our failures. It is up to God to raise the dead, including us. The women run away and say nothing to anyone. The disciples miss the point. The church leaders set the wrong priorities. The people are petty and small.

And we're here. Turning to the people, lifting high the cross. Listening once again to the music of failure, the triumph of God.