

The four gospels and their very different endings

Some things are too big for a single narrative.

by [Peter Choi](#) in the [April 2025](#) issue

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In a well-known talk, Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie addressed the dangers of a single story: about the tendency to collapse rich, diverse strands into a flat, one-sided narrative. This “creates stereotypes,” she said, “and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

One reason to be uneasy with a single, dominant narrative is that some things in life feel too big for just one story. How, for instance, does one tell the story of a world-changing event like the resurrection of Jesus? The Bible tacitly acknowledges the enormity of this task by giving us four gospels, which tell the stories of Jesus in multiple registers from various angles. If there are sharp variations between these accounts, they point to the nuances beyond the reach of human language.

Uncomfortable with loose ends, many have tried to harmonize these narratives. Yet there is danger in riding roughshod over discrepancies in a canon comprising diverse books. I’ve had too many conversations over the years with people who lost their faith because they believed there was only one way to interpret and apply scripture. In contrast, the gospel endings offer us a fourfold reminder of the multivocal call of resurrection spirituality. It’s hard to imagine four more different gospel endings. It’s as if the authors got together and decided that one narrative simply would not do, that they needed to present four dissimilar trajectories.

The dominant idea at the end of Matthew is: *Go*. Following Jesus is about going out into the world. Make disciples, baptize, and teach (28:19–20). For a book so focused on demonstrating that Jesus’ ministry fulfills the prophecies of old, there is palpable enthusiasm for preaching the message of Jesus to anyone and everyone who will listen. We know from history that this gospel mandate to go and make disciples of all nations has had mixed results, sometimes leading to inspiring acts of cross-cultural collaboration but just as often resulting in cultural imperialism. Heralds of good news have frequently conflated their gospel proclamation with Western civilization’s social and political messages.

Matthew’s ending is the only one with a special name, the Great Commission—revealing a cultural predilection for this ending above the others, at least in North America. If we need to examine our obsession with “Go, go, go!” Christianity, it’s also important to remember that there are other paths commended by the other gospels.

A very different verbal exchange marks the end of Luke. Instead of a call to go, the disciples hear the exhortation to *stay* (24:49). In the context of Luke's closing chapters, the command to remain where they are is a challenging word. The disciples, many of them from remote villages far from an urban center like Jerusalem, are likely finding the city of shalom anything but peaceful. Jesus, their intrepid leader who took them there, is gone, and they are no doubt eager to return home.

Luke's spirituality, rooted in staying, differs from Matthew's vision of going. Stay where you are, the place you'd like to flee, practice patience, and muster what strength you can. Sometimes—not always, as there are three other endings—life with God involves staying put when you want to run.

Mark's vision of discipleship is different still. There is no inspirational call to action at the end of Mark. Instead, we see followers of Jesus *failing* to act on explicit instructions. "Tell the disciples," they are told, yet "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:7-8). It's a strange way to wrap up a story that's supposed to be good news. There is, of course, the disputed longer ending of Mark, which most biblical scholars agree is a later and unreliable addition to the text. Its mere presence testifies to the very human yearning for better closure than this abrupt cliff-hanger Mark offers.

The spirituality of Mark is one in which Jesus' disciples regularly fall short. Sometimes life with God looks like weakness. *And that's OK*, seems to be Mark's message. The good news doesn't need our heroics; it can handle our doubts, fears, and weaknesses.

Finally, in the Gospel of John, the invitation is to *follow*. Jesus restores a friend who denied him three times despite loud assurances he would never do such a thing. After the grueling ordeal he has just been through, Jesus makes breakfast for his friends. And as if that were not enough, Jesus speaks to Peter, who is probably still wallowing in shame, words of sweet reassurance: "Follow me" (21:19-22). When all is said and done, no matter what we have done or how we have failed, the final word for John is *follow*.

This is good news for those of us who do not have the wherewithal to go to the ends of the world, who are reluctant to stay in the place of discomfort, who are cowering in fear rather than loudly proclaiming the one who has overcome death itself. To the

likes of us, this word is a balm: follow.

There is no flat, one-dimensional vision of spirituality in the gospels. The resurrection stories extend a radical, multivocal invitation to all. What does following the risen Jesus look like? Go into all the world. Stay right where you are. Stand still and take time to work through your fear and trembling. And when you can't see the way before you, Jesus is there, holding your hand, making you breakfast, saying, "Follow me." We don't have to pick one gospel ending. We have all four, and we can choose all four, at different points along our journey, as the Spirit leads.