

For Mark, Easter begins in trembling

The bewilderment of the women at the tomb gives way to a hope that overturns power, shame, and death itself.

by [B. G. White](#) in the [April 2026](#) issue

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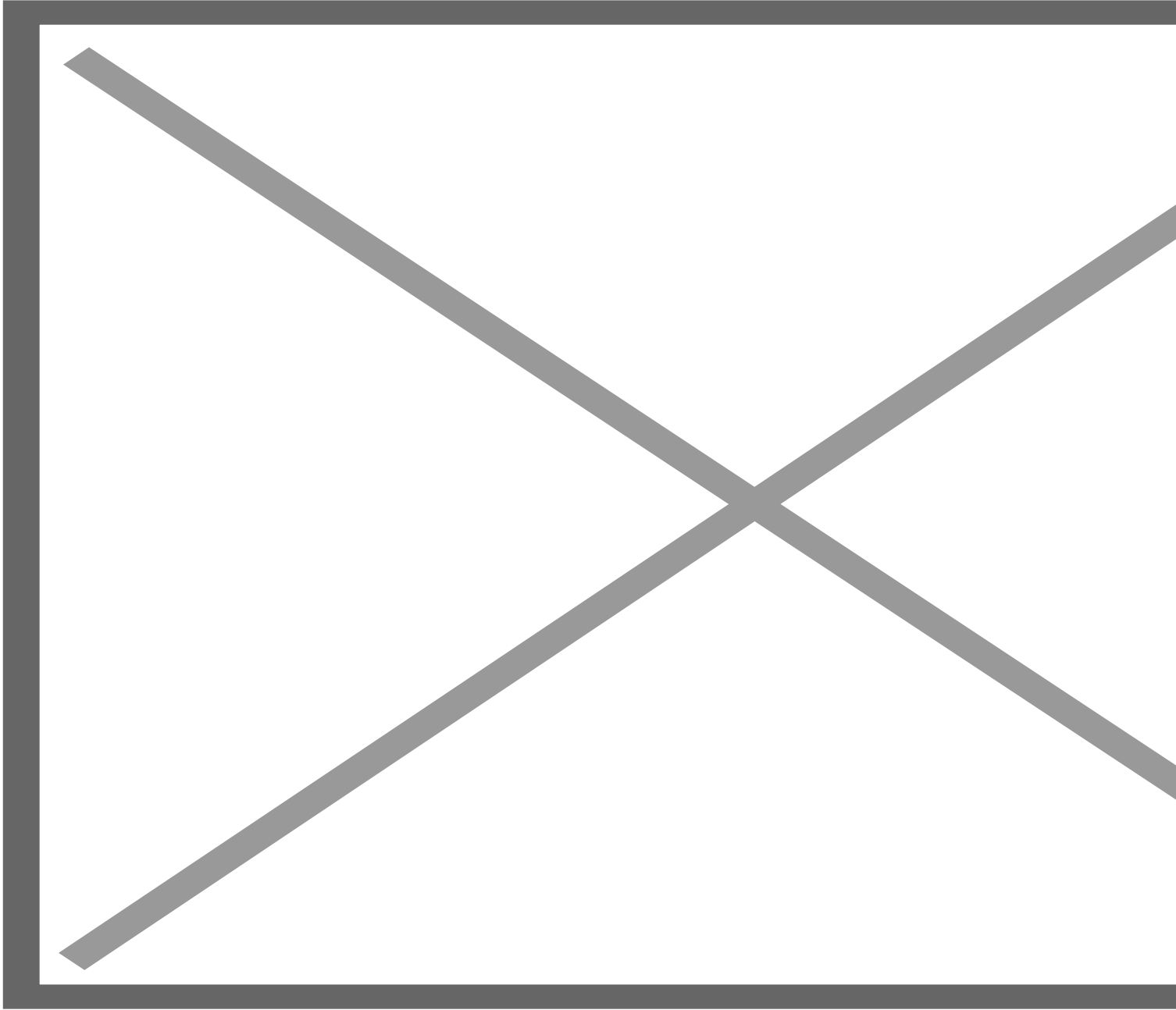


Illustration by Aldo Jarillo

Of the seasons in the church year, Easter is one of the more formulaic. It is a season of things accomplished, a time to celebrate the salvation wrought through the cross. The lectionary's assigned psalm, 118, features themes of exultation and victory. This year, Matthew's Gospel speaks of Christ being raised "just as he said" (28:6). This sense of completion, however, represents both a blessing to the church and a potential risk. It can be easy to take Jesus' resurrection for granted, especially when you are old enough to be familiar with Easter yet healthy enough to feel that death is not at hand.

Admittedly, the church's own reflection on Easter, particularly its intricate atonement theories, can contribute to this problem. We know that we need Jesus to be raised—whether or not we believe in a miraculous, bodily resurrection—because it offers an elegant solution to the problem of sin and death. Even some of the gospel traditions about this event, recorded decades later, have the benefit of hindsight and tend to gloss over what it was like for the first Christians to go from a stinging sense of defeat at the crucifixion to the genuine shock of the empty tomb.

The Gospel of Mark represents an exception to these tidy readings of the resurrection. Offering a short, fast-paced narrative, Mark careens toward the crucifixion and then, after acknowledging the empty tomb, closes the curtain without a single parting word or appearance from the risen Jesus. In its place, Mark concludes by describing how the resurrection rattles the soul: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (16:8, NIV).

This sudden ending presses us to consider the world-altering implications of the resurrection, which are implied by the words *trembling*, *bewildered*, and *afraid*. To understand why Mark ends with fear—and why this might be good news—we need to take a closer look at the other words, *trembling* and *bewildered*. These suggest that the women were unprepared, taken aback.

What, exactly, is surprising about Jesus' resurrection? The most obvious answer is the supernatural nature of the event. But given Mark's tendency to provoke, I don't think this is the sole reason for surprise.

Certainly Mark envisions a miraculous, bodily resurrection. Jesus is repeatedly portrayed as doing battle with demons and having the power to overcome them. The resurrection is the closing act, in which even the cosmic power of death is defeated. But we need to resist what amounts to an easy, even convenient answer. If we are uncomfortable with the women's fear and maintain that they are simply responding to a miracle, it becomes too easy to put the resurrection back in its box. It becomes something that happened to them, in the past, with some pleasant implications for us but little more. We need to resist the literary version of what psychologists call normalcy bias, often observed in moments of crisis, in which people struggle to accept and respond to an unfolding emergency. Mark is trying to rouse the church to life. To do so, he ushers us into the emergency, to share in the women's response to this apocalyptic event.

The key to understanding the resurrection's surprise lies in the way Mark adds a human frame to the unfolding cosmic battle that climaxes at the tomb. The surprise is there in the women's response, but it begins earlier in the story, as Mark focuses on the humanity of Jesus and the extreme nature of his suffering. Mark distinctively portrays Jesus as being exhausted by his ministry (4:38), as getting hungry and looking for food (11:12). All of this, however, is a prelude to the final days of Jesus' life, which take up roughly half of Mark's Gospel. Scholars often note that Mark, as the first gospel to be put to paper, preserves the traumatic memories of the eyewitnesses more than the comparatively preachy gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. Mark wants us to understand, in human terms—much like the crowds would have seen for themselves—that the crucifixion degrades, humiliates, and dehumanizes Jesus.

These realities were common to crucifixions in the Roman world, which focused on generating psychological agony as much as physical pain. Shouting insults as they worked, the Romans stripped their victims and nailed them to crosses. Sometimes soldiers added protruding spikes and nails near sensitive areas of the body. Each time the victim slumped in pain or heaved upward for breath, their body was cut again. Martin Hengel observes that the cross was so terrifying, so beyond comprehension, that the elite generally spoke of it only in euphemisms. It became known, the ancient historian Tacitus says, as the extreme penalty, the worst possible torture.

We put the cross on church buildings and wear it as jewelry. It's been suggested that we instead look at it as something akin to an electric chair: a violent tool of the state. But today's state executions are mostly private, whereas the Romans preferred to conduct a crucifixion as a public event. Hoisted on busy street corners, the victims' last moments would include the jeers of the passing crowd. In Rome's honor-shame society, this was an opportunity for even the commonest person to rejoice that it was not them up there on the cross. *At least I don't occupy the lowest rung around here*, they might have thought as they went about their day.

Mark tries to capture these dynamics when he describes the sign made to mock Jesus, naming him the king of the Jews, and notes that "those who passed by hurled insults at him" (15:29). Jesus is crucified beside two rebels, and while the other gospels either ignore what they say or focus on the "good thief" and his last-minute conversion, Mark simply comments that "those crucified with him also heaped insults on him" (15:32). Jesus' humiliation is nearly complete. Even these ruffians seem to think that his status rests lower than theirs. They are criminals who met a predictable end, but they seem to enjoy the idea that Jesus, with a claim to being something more, is hung to die with them.

Then, in the cry of dereliction, when "darkness came over the whole land," Jesus cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (15:33–34). Here Mark brings together the material and the immaterial to underline how Jesus has become totally other. Even the Father turns away from Jesus. This scene is observed by Mary Magdalene and other women: the party that will be surprised by Jesus' victory over death in a few short days first witnesses the death itself—from a distance, perhaps for their own safety. This lack of proximity again highlights how nobody is counting on Jesus to come back from this, not even his closest friends. Everyone flees. It must seem to them, as Albert Schweitzer famously says, that Jesus "throws himself" upon "the wheel of the world" only to be crushed by it.

This brings us back to the garden tomb, where Jesus is laid to rest. When the women arrive, we should not forget that they, too, are likely poor and of low status. They are attending to their deceased teacher, who they believe to be another victim of the occupying forces. But in a dramatic reversal of the familiar story of power crushing those on the margins, the women perceive that something has changed.

The resurrection's surprise is not primarily that God would raise someone from the dead; it's that he would raise *this* man, a crucified man, and vindicate his claim to being the Son of God. The messiah was supposed to be strong and subvert Roman rule, but this victim of state terror has become much more. He has transcended all powers, inaugurating a new kingdom that is still breaking into the world. The women, familiar with the promises of a coming arrival of God, would not fail to miss this moment. The time has come. The earth has given "birth to her dead" (Isa. 26:19) in the most unexpected way.

A crucial element of the surprise is that Jesus becomes an embodiment of his own teaching. As one of the poor and downtrodden among us, he is raised from the grave, and the women see with their own eyes that "the last shall be first" (Mark 10:31). Hope dawns in a brutal world, especially for those who have languished in places of great shame and indignity. The hierarchies and artificial divisions so common to the Roman era wilt in the face of the resurrection. As James Dunn says, Jesus' resurrection is "a first swing of the sickle" at the root of the old world and the powers that be. The full weight of the power of God now presses upon the present moment,

forging a new, upside-down kingdom for all who walk in faith.

The challenge before us now, as a church that rests between the old age and the age that is breaking into the world through the resurrection, is to embody the day the world changed and the revolution began. Jesus' resurrection represents one of the great archetypes of what J. R. R. Tolkien called a eucatastrophe, in which one experiences a sudden and favorable resolution to a crisis. But there will be no resolution if we cannot hold onto its constituent parts, and there are two ways we typically fail to do so. Some Christians want a supernatural resurrection, the promise of eternal life, without the everyday challenges of being people of the cross: divine security minus any duty to the poor and vulnerable. Other Christians are happy to serve others and to promote the social conscience of the early Christians but let go of the resurrection story's supernatural elements—the elements that anchor our conviction that the universe really does bend toward justice. If the resurrection is just a nice story, it will struggle to give anyone the hope that this world so desperately needs. The resurrection offers both a promise for the next life and an obligation for this one, and you cannot have one without the other.

This combination of the supernatural and the social, so basic to Mark's storyline, offers one way of processing the fear that the women feel about the empty tomb. Some commentators suggest that the original word means something closer to reverence than abject terror. The women fear the resurrection because they realize that God is doing something in the world and they must pay attention. It is a work that unsettles, but this life-giving intrusion of divine grace is exactly what the church needs to stay awake in a world still under the sway of the devil's systems of hierarchy and oppression. We can never get too comfortable. The last several years in the United States can only remind us of this.

Paul Lehmann says the gospel is always a hinge and never a door. It does not allow us to arrive somewhere, safe and sound, secured by our favored political party or by a predictable church. It spins us around, always reorienting our life to the dynamic work of God in this world. We must remain watchful and cling to our message about the turning point in history, God's decisive action in Christ, lest it be co-opted by the powers of this world (Eph. 6:12).

These powers take up residence in our institutions, corporations, technologies, and even the visible church itself. Hannah Arendt famously discusses the banality of evil, the way in which seemingly ordinary processes of bureaucracy—or the enthusiastic agreement of a population desperate for progress—can produce mass devastation. In this situation, there is no technocratic solution to the problem of evil. All of our human spheres of influence combined cannot overcome this, at least not for long. We must take ourselves less seriously and recognize that the world needs something more than what we can give it. It needs what the resurrection gives: a thrill of hope to pierce the deadening march of history.

The irony is that this apocalyptic thrill, this resurrection surprise, is supposed to be embodied by the faith community. Bearing this surprise today means at least two things. First, in our commitment to this supernatural story that presses upon our world, we must be people of hope. There is much to bemoan and lament about the present state of our country and our world. But if you believe in the resurrection, you cannot help but be hopeful. Carl F. H. Henry is thought to have said, "The early church did not say, 'Look what the world is coming to!' They said, 'Look what has come into the world!'" Second, we must take up our social vocation as a community that, like God's defiant act of raising Jesus, embraces the outsider, the marginalized, and the stranger among us. This may be costly, but it is the way that we give existential significance to the resurrection life that is now, by God's Spirit, living in all who believe.

Refusing to do this fails to keep the surprise of the resurrection alive. The fear that the resurrection instills is quickly lost and replaced by a more terrifying one: Sin is ugliest when it masquerades as piety and worse still when it leads others astray. Too often, the church has signaled an allegiance to the world. It has become, as Martin Luther King Jr. said, "a thermometer that records the ideas and principles of popular opinion" rather than

“a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”

Mark shows us, in the trembling and bewilderment of the women at the tomb, that the resurrection is God’s metaphysical mic drop. It is a defining moment that must be reenacted time and again until it saturates our proclamation and social witness.