

The Christ Rising sculpture is one way to respond to the openness of Mark's Easter story. It is one artist's vision of what follows the unfinished ending of the Gospel—not a tying up of loose ends, but an invitation into the ongoing action. Christ is rising still. The event of Jesus' resurrection has already happened. But resurrection - the gift of new life, the promise of newness out of death - is still happening all around us. God's great hope is that we would join the action. That we would join God's work calling forth life from empty tombs and grieving hearts. That we would move along with the Spirit to allow love to bloom and usher in justice where brokenness has prevailed. And we do participate in that action every time we love our neighbor, give what we have, pray for our enemies, forgive someone who has hurt us.

There is dramatic tension in the story of Easter we encounter today. The women who saw the empty tomb went away unsettled, and our world often makes us feel the same. Though Christ is risen indeed, that truth means the rest of the story is still open. The last note of the scale has not yet been played, or maybe it's the whole symphony that is yet to come. And so, as disciples of Jesus, as Easter people, we are invited to join the song. To move through our fear, silence, and amazement so that we can lift our voices. To sing alleluias in every key. To love with abandon and to serve without counting the cost. To notice Christ Rising out in the world and to walk alongside him. We are invited to play the next notes and see where the music takes us.

Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti...



March 31, 2024

Easter Sunday

*“Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti...”*

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8

**W**e have opened today singing *Alleluias* and shouting with joy that Christ is risen! [Christ is risen indeed!] We are here to rejoice, after a Holy Week marked by Jesus' betrayal and arrest, his suffering and death. We have been waiting in the shadows, and now the sun is rising. The stone has been rolled away. The tomb has been found empty! Alleluia!

There are four Easter stories in the Bible, one given to us by each of the Gospel writers: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In our minds, we meld all the elements of those four Easter stories into one: early morning on the third day, women coming to the tomb, empty tomb, and usually, the appearance of the risen Jesus. But this year, we read Mark's Easter story. It has many of those pieces, but no resurrection appearance of Jesus. No conclusion where we and the women begin to make sense of what it means that Jesus has been raised. The women leave the tomb frightened, not saying anything to anyone. There is something disconcerting about that; an unfinished quality to the story.

My friend Mamie told me a story that illustrates that feeling perfectly. She once had a teacher named Ms. Brown. Ms. Brown's daughter was taking piano lessons and spent time at home practicing each day. Her daughter was assigned scales to practice, up and down the keyboard in every key. But, as daughters sometimes do, Ms. Brown's daughter occasionally liked to get under her mother's skin. So the daughter would play her scales like this:

*Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti.*

*Do, Re, Mi, Fa, Sol, La, Ti.* She'd stop before that final "Do." Ms. Brown, cooking dinner in the kitchen or listening from another room in the house, would hear those unfinished scales, over and over again. Finally, she could not take that tension anymore. She marched over to the piano where her daughter sat and banged the key: Do, Do, Do, Do!

There is something inside us that struggles to sit with the tension, the unresolved feeling of that unfinished scale. The musicians among us can probably tell us the science of why that is. But whether we know the why or not, we know the experience to be true. The sense in our hearts, mind, and chest is almost painful, or at least, unsettled. The music is not done. The song is not over. Like Ms. Brown, we feel the need to complete the song.

This Easter story feels the same way: not done, not over yet. Now, if you open your Bibles you'll see that there are some verses in Mark that follow what we read today. So you might be saying, "look here, Pastor, don't worry. Mark says Jesus *did* appear to Mary Magdalene and two other disciples." But scholars all agree that Mark didn't write those verses. They were added much later; your Bible even labels it as such. Probably some early scribes who were copying down the earliest scriptures said, "you can't end on Ti. Let's finish that up neatly here." So they essentially wrote down the "Do, Do. Do." That doesn't mean the verses they added were bad or wrong; those words are actually much in line with the other gospels. As one commentator writes, "It is not that the added verses say anything in any way misleading. It is just that there is much to be gained by assuming that Mark's gospel finished with the women running from Jesus' tomb afraid and struck dumb. There is a ring of authenticity to it precisely because it feels so incomplete and unexpected."

We might have felt something similar, if we had walked to the tomb with those women in the dawn hours. Their situation was awful. Their friend and teacher had died a horrible death. They were fearful about what it meant for them to have been associated with him. But they were also clear on their next steps, on what they needed to do: anoint the body, follow the religious laws, observe a time of mourning. When a loved one of ours dies, the process is overwhelming and can feel like more than we can bear. But there are certain things that must be done, which provide a kind of clarity to the next steps: talk with the funeral home, meet with the pastor, get the death certificate, call the insurance company, stay on top of the bills. Every step is a challenge, but each one comes with the assurance that, amid the sadness, it is the next right thing to do. There is clarity on what needs to be managed, even though we see it through our tears.

That clarity was thrown into disarray when these women disciples found that the stone had already been rolled away; when they saw a young man in white—an angel perhaps—at the tomb, who said, "Jesus has been raised. He is not here." They suddenly felt disorder and chaos. No matter how many times Jesus had tried to prepare his friends for these events, it's hard to process the idea that one who has died, might return.

They struggled to believe it. And this angel, this man also told them to expect to see Jesus again, in Galilee. The women's plans were upended, their emotions shaken. There was now the possibility for something other than death. And also a nagging sense that the news was too good to be true. Could Jesus possibly be alive again? Would anyone believe what the women had heard? Instead of clarity about their situation, the women now found themselves completely out of sorts, unsure what to do next, or where their situation was headed. It's no wonder Mark says "terror and amazement seized them."

This Easter, we may be right there with them. So much is unsettled in our world, in our families, and in our lives. We often feel fear and chaos, too. The world around us, with wars, elections, famines, violence, scary diagnoses—it all feels very unsettled. But we are also people of faith. We carry hope with us. We read these scriptures attuned to the grace God offers. We look out at the world and refuse to see only the suffering, without also noticing the signs of mercy. We both already believe and so much want to believe that love indeed wins. So as we stand at the entrance to the empty tomb, we, too, feel the uncertainty mixed in with the promise of something new and good.

There's another way to think about the uncertainty that Mark's Easter story leaves us with. There's another way to face our own world where so many things are up in the air, unresolved or full of tension. To be unresolved also means to remain open. We can think of it as *possibility*. If we are sitting at the second to last note in the scale, anything could happen next: a meaty chord, a note of dissonance that resolves into beauty, a familiar tune or an unexpected improvisation. Those early scribes wanted there to be finality in the Easter story. But Mark wanted there to be openness to what God would do next. And openness for disciples to respond to the resurrection, then and now.

Last fall, I visited the retreat house of the Adrian Dominican Sisters over in Adrian, Michigan. They had a small art gallery on their campus. When I went inside, I was moved by a bronze sculpture by Judith Engel. The sculpture is a figure of Jesus. His lips are parted as if he is about to speak. His arms are spread apart, feet almost leaping. The image shows Jesus after his crucifixion. But this is not a crucifix filled with pain. The sculpture is called *Christ Rising*. The figure juts out from the wall as if Jesus is about to take flight. It almost looks as if Jesus could soar. The sculpture shows Jesus with openness to the world, to the future. His posture is filled with possibility. The artist wrote this of her sculpture: "Christ Rising is not the Risen Christ, which is past-tense, once and over. Christ Rising continues today in each of us and in all creation."