

Now *You* Run With It!

B Easter Day

I have this friend who's a spiritual director, which is sort of like being a therapist only cheaper and more religious. Some of you know her because she's actually been running a group at our church, where people listen to each other's concerns, and pray, and share what came to them in prayer, and there's a lot of silence and I'm told it's been really deep and powerful. Anyway, I recently learned from this friend that it's a lot harder to run these kinds of groups successfully when they have clergy in them. Apparently, priests and pastors love to talk and give advice and can be sort of dominating presences--who knew?--and worst of all, they have this compulsive need to tie people's stories up into neat little packages of meaning. As my friend put it, "I prefer just to leave the mystery out there, and let the Holy Spirit do its own work." But, evidently, the clergy gene for sermonizing at all times and in all places overrides this particular mark of spiritual maturity.

Well, if this is true, then it must have been some kind of first-century pastor or priest who read this original ending of Mark that we have today--in which the women run from the empty tomb in fear--and said, "Oh, no, this won't do. All we have is an empty tomb, some strange man in white telling the women they'll see Jesus in Galilee, and fear and confusion? And that's it? No encounter with the risen Jesus himself? No tears of wonder and joy? No slow-motion sprint through fields of golden wheat towards the living Lord? This will never preach. No one in Hollywood will ever option the rights for this story. We're going to have to add an ending. Oh, Jeez, I'm late to bring communion

to Mrs. Trumble. Let's see. 'So the women told Peter, and then Jesus appeared and sent them all out to proclaim the gospel.' There. A bit hasty, but it does the job."

And then, because wherever you have two clergy you have at least three opinions, a bit later some other first- or second-century minister-type came along and read that ending and said, "Oh, please! What kind of literary hack wrote this? It's awful. Let's borrow some material from the other gospels and see if we can't give this thing a little more finesse. Let's see here: some post-resurrection appearances to his followers, a great commission speech, and an ascension into heaven. There! That's more like it!" I'm not kidding about this. You can check any good study Bible yourself. None of our earliest manuscripts have these other endings, which have clearly been tacked on later. And of course, as in the case of clergy in spiritual direction groups, this meddling tendency to tie up the loose ends has really messed with the spirit and the meaning of Mark's gospel.

See, Mark is the earliest of the four gospels. And even though it was written about thirty-five years after Jesus died, it feels like the kind of gospel you'd expect from a community still coming to terms with the profound trauma and inexplicable aftermath of that death. Compared with the other three gospels, everything in Mark is raw and immediate. There are no soliloquies from the cross about commending his spirit to God or forgiving the crowd for not knowing what they're doing. In Mark, Jesus's words are the words of a man dying a torturous death: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then there's the ending, as we've already noted, with no resurrection appearances and very little clarity. Just the empty tomb, the man in white, and the women's terrified silence. In fact, the last line of Mark in the original Greek actually ends on a preposition,

"for," a very strange construction. It's as if the gospel just breaks off mid-sentence, as in, "The woman fled from the tomb, said nothing to anyone, and were afraid, for..."

But this, of course, is the point. The gospel doesn't end. Like a relay runner, it just hands its story to us, this messy, scary, unfinished tangle of events and feelings, hands it all to us and says, "Now *you* run with it." I realize this may not be very comforting, but isn't it so like life? We don't get to see the end. We just get to contribute to a new chapter and then hand the story on to the next generation and say, "Now *you* run with it." But within that knot of terror and amazement, in Mark as in our lives, the gospel also gives us a promise: "He is not here. He is going ahead of you into the world. Go out yourself, and *there* you will see him. Not here but *there*, out at the crossroads, out in the bars and along the highways, in the prisons, in the shelters, at the twelve-step meetings and artists' collectives and urban food gardens and a million other places across the globe where people gather in community. Just as he told you, he will meet you *there*."

Now that is a scary ending. That ending makes the women's fear our fear. Who wouldn't prefer a real experience of the resurrected Son to hold onto and take with us? But to be shoved into the story before we get this guarantee, to be sent forth without a risen Christ but with only a promise that we will find him where we are going--*that's* scary. It's scary because it forces us to live with our doubts and questions. It's scary because it sends us out of our comfortable environments, to seek Jesus where we can't dress him up in safe, pious language. And it's scary because we might actually find his presence as powerful, or more powerful, out there than we do in here, in our church, in the home we have built for God.

I've come to know this woman in town who just won the Saline Citizen of the Year Award, a huge distinction. Her name is Margie Bovee. She runs Two-Twelve Arts Center in Saline, and because I like to hang around with artists, I go to their Friday morning coffee gatherings from time to time. Now I don't know what Margie's religious beliefs are, but really it doesn't matter, because what I find in that community she has created is the presence of Jesus. I mean, those folks help each other through hard times, and carpool out to the funerals of each other's family-members, and welcome newcomers into their midst, and donate their skills and talents to good causes together, and laugh and cry and support each other. One woman who nominated Margie for this award doesn't even really know her that well. She joined a quilters group that Margie had started, and she found such a sense of family there that she was moved to fill out a nomination form. So what Margie has cultivated in that place has truly touched and changed people's lives. It is church as God meant church to be. It is church by another name.

Now please don't get me wrong. I'm not trashing conventional church. I think churches can be places of powerful witness and social activism and authentic spirituality and healing for those who enter them. I hope and believe that our own church is constantly growing into that vision. All I'm saying is that we don't own exclusive rights to the presence of Jesus. No one does. And what Mark's gospel dares us to do is to go out and to find and name that presence in the world, and then to participate in it. Mark's gospel dares us to seek a living Jesus out in some future time and place which Easter Day has promised to us but has not made fully manifest. That is our call. That is our challenge, scary and exhilarating as it may be.

And so, my brothers and my sisters, the tomb is empty. The assurance is made that he has gone before us and will meet us out there. And what we do with this mysterious and miraculous news, is now entirely up to....