

I am a voracious reader. I'm guessing some of you are too. Maybe we can exchange book lists. I color code mine in four categories. Green for those that are life-changing reads like *The Overstory* or *The Swimmers*. Yellow for those that are outstanding: Pulitzer prize winning, *Demon Copperhead*; critically-acclaimed *Between the World and Me*. I have a red mark by those that I enjoyed but wouldn't re-read – lots of murder mysteries here. And then there's pink for the ones I could hardly get through and would definitely not recommend.

The book *Birnam Wood* by Eleanor Catton should have been a delight – a well-known, best-selling author, an interesting plot. And in the first 400 pages it was on its way to the top tier, but then – ya'll – the ending. It left so much to be desired. There was no clarity at all. The **approach** to the end was dramatic, the plot twisted and turned, an appealing climax ahead. But, man, this book did NOT land. I won't go into more detail. But let's just say, the vagueness of the ending, the openness of the conclusion, made for a wholly dissatisfying finish.

So in light of this disappointing literary experience, I was glad to get to work reading the Biblical texts for Easter. Now, that is a good ending folks: the grave empty, the angels glowing, the women preaching, trumpets blaring.

And even if you haven't read *Birnam Wood* recently, we all use some better endings. Things haven't exactly been going

**well.** There are unending wars, we have a bitter election season to look forward to, not to mention gun violence and global warming. And what about our March Madness Brackets? Am I right? We could all use some better endings this year.

So, I approached the Easter text with excitement, until I realized the lectionary selection for this year was from Mark's Gospel. I could hardly believe **it. THIS** was text for the resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday? Did you notice how it ends? It's really quite strange, because the original conclusion of the earliest Gospel says this:

**The women said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.**

How about that for a bad ending? An angel and a resurrection announcement, but the people are too scared to move? I know, I know you are about to start flipping through the pew Bibles in protest, saying: "Wait What? A gospel that doesn't end with the witness to the resurrection? How is that called Good news?"

But the women's silence, although wholly unsettling, really shouldn't be THAT unexpected. The disciples are often coming up short – especially during Holy Week. We know that the traditional twelve fled from Jesus in his darkest hour, leaving the Mount of Olives when he was arrested and betrayed. And while Jesus stood before the Council being

spat on and attacked, his disciple Peter was out in the courtyard cursing and swearing that he **absolutely** did **not** know this Jesus criminal in **any** way. Then – again – the disciples flee from Jesus' death on the cross, instead of tending to the body, they lock themselves away.

So, when we put the women in this context, we see that their silence is a rather unremarkable thing. Like the other disciples, they let Jesus down in a disappointing way. Friends, there was a time when the church's book had a wholly unsatisfying ending.

But the original ending didn't last long. In later years, writers added two additional conclusions to Mark's gospel. Bracketed off with heavy footnotes in your study Bibles, you'll find these verses in the text. These closings don't rewrite the story, but they do add to the first ending. And in both versions, the women decide to speak to the men.

There is the shorter version: few sentences, a bare-bones but – admittedly- a more pleasing wrap-up than the original one. But in the longer version, the writers really go all-in. There is blockbuster material for a humdinger of a finale.

Not only does the angel speak to the women at the tomb, but Jesus himself appears to Mary Magdalene again, and later goes on the road with two tangential disciples, and finally comes to a dinner table surrounded by the 12 (minus Judas, of course).

With these dramatic entrances, the disciples then believe and receive a commission “Go and baptize in my name.” They are also given signs as proof of their faith: Heal the sick and cast out demons in my name. Pick up Snakes and Drink any deadly thing. Now, THAT my friends is a bang-up ending. That leaves you wanting more.

The gospels are not first-person accounts of Jesus life, death and resurrection. They are written later - from the oral stories that had been passed down for at least one or sometimes, two and three generations. And while the Gospel writers were decades removed from Jesus the person, what these additional endings prove, is that they were **in no way removed** from the **experience of the risen Lord**.

They were Easter people out there in the world. Because of their experience of new life in Christ they were welcoming strangers. Eating with Gentiles. Learning from women. Sharing goods in common. Healing the sick. Visiting the prisoner. Spreading the Gospel.

Apparently, some of them were picking up snakes.

They were a people empowered by the Holy Spirit of Christ **still with them** – the Easter Lord, the risen One. And in an effort to describe and spread this new communal reality, this freeing faith, this life-changing thing, they **wrote better endings**. And even though we are millennia removed, they

witness to the experience of new life in Christ that encourage us to write better endings in our world too.

Here's one:

Pastor Charlie Johnson is Baptist pastor from West Texas. I was on a ZOOM with him not too long ago where he shared about his non-profit organization called Pastors for Texas Children. It is a ministry that serves Texas' neighborhood public schools through prayer, service and advocacy. They connect local congregations with schools in their areas, leading to things like tutoring and staff appreciation days.

And they are tireless advocates for public education acting against voucher systems in the state. And they are effective. Rumor has it that Governor Abbot called Charlie Johnson the worst pastor in Texas because the legislature voted **down** vouchers promoted by Abbot and attached to a bill in 2023.

Why does Charlie do this thing? He believes public schools strengthen multi-culturalism and provide services for people in need. And he believes scripture tells us this is a decidedly Christian thing. And so, because he knows and experiences the risen Lord, Charlie writes a better ending.

And if you want a story closer to home, I recently had an email from a member at Peachtree UMC, just down the street. They have a new non-profit organization from within the congregation called OneLamb. And it is an amazing

thing. OneLamb has the explicit aim to normalize and destigmatize mental illness and addiction concerns, particularly within communities of faith. With resources, classes, and support systems, OneLamb opens up conversations and provides for those in need.

And **why** do they do this thing? Because they believe Jesus never gives up on the least, lost coin. They believe Jesus leaves the 99 to find the lost 1. They believe God created you and you and you and you and me in the image of GOD. And so because they experience the risen Lord, they write better endings.

One of my favorite things is to learn about the work you – Covenant folks do - as people of faith out there in the world. You are raising your voices to expand Medicaid in Georgia, so that hundreds of thousands will be medically insured. You are supporting local musicians and struggling artists so that live music becomes a more easily accessible thing. You are partnering with people struggling with addiction, walking beside them day after day. You are accompanying family, friends, and strangers as they approach death, so that they will not be alone, and they will hear someone pray.

And those are just some of the examples. There are many, many more beautiful ways you are witnessing in the world. You are Christ's disciples. People who by the power of the Holy Spirit know the Easter message and experience the risen Lord and you are writing better endings, too.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.

Friends, there is no better ending than at this table. Here bodies broken by the powers of state are re-membered in the faith. Here blood spilled by offense and violence is reclaimed in his name. To eat and to drink is simple, but to love without fear is not. So the risen Lord meets us here today and all the days of our lives, giving us strength for the journey, helping us write the story. Thanks be to God. Alleluia. Amen.