

Story and Meditation: Unfinished Story

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Mark 16:1-8

by Eric Anderson

Why, yes, this story does have a bird in it. It's the pueo, or the Hawaiian owl.

You might not think I could get a nest into another bird story, but, well, I have.

For the first couple years they were together, the two pueo built their nest as well as they possibly could. She used the talons on her feet to scoop out a hollow in the ground surrounded by tall waving grasses. The two of them flew about to find the softest, finest grasses to line it, and groomed loose downy feathers from their chests to make it even softer and give it some warmth on the cold nights along the slopes of Mauna Kea. Both he and she were pretty diligent about it. They'd place a strand of grass, stand back, look at it, try another spot, and try another spot, until it was perfect.

Eventually, the two would place a last blade of grass or a last piece of feathery down, and declare the nest complete. Perfect. Done.

It always took them a lot longer than it took their parents. Or their grandparents, who tended to build their nests nearby. They were usually settled far before their diligent grandchildren. Er. Grandowls? Grandpueo?

One day during nest-building season the young female stopped to see her grandmother. She was sitting comfortably on her nest, which looked, to the younger pueo's eyes, really messy.

After asking about her health and diet and all the things important to a Tutu pueo and a grandpueo, the young one casually mentioned that Tutu was making good progress on the nest.

"Oh no, my dear," said the Tutu pueo. "We're all done."

"You are?" said the young one, who was too surprised for a moment to be polite. "But it's, but it's, but it's..." and now she couldn't finish the sentence because she'd remembered to be polite to her grandmother.

"Unfinished?" asked the Tutu pueo with a smile, which is a clever thing to do when you're an owl and you have a beak rather than lips to smile with.

"Unfinished. Yes," said the grandpueo.

“I always leave it unfinished,” said Tutu. “The eggs take their own place once they’re laid, and I’ll have to adjust when they do. Then the hatchlings will pull and push things around, and I’ll need to fix things or remove things or build some of the nest anew. There’s wind gusts and rain, and things dry out and crumble, and to be honest, dear, sometimes your grandfather is a little clumsy and he breaks things.”

They shared a laugh at this.

“Most of all,” said Tutu, “I leave it unfinished because everything this nest is about is unfinished. Laying eggs, hatching them, caring for nestlings, encouraging fledglings to fly, seeing them marry and build nests and raise chicks of their own: it’s never finished. It’s never complete. It’s never perfect. It’s never done. It’s goes on in all its weariness and wonder. It goes on.”

The young pueo returned to her nest, where she found her mate waiting, proudly carrying what was supposed to be the last blade of grass to finish their nest. She gently took it from him and laid it aside.

“Let’s leave this one unfinished,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

She told him: “Because love is never finished.”

Oh, Mark Mark Mark. You tease of a gospel writer, you. This account of Jesus’ resurrection is such a bizarre way to end what had been, up to this point, a remarkably direct and clearly stated book. As I’ve said so many times in Bible study that all those who’ve been part of it can say it along with me, Mark didn’t believe in keeping his readers in suspense. He is, after all, the one who began his book by writing, “The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”

If you want some time to linger with the question, “Who was Jesus?” I don’t recommend Mark. Or John. Or Matthew. Really, if you want someone to give you hints and signs, you’ve got to choose Luke.

But here at the end of the book, Mark seemed to adopt some other literary personality. Where is the risen Jesus? Mark – through quoting Jesus – told us repeatedly that he would be resurrected. That’s what we expect. Indeed, Mark’s first readers were people who knew already that Jesus had risen. That was the crux of the early Christian message: the Promised One has come, the Promised One has died, the Promised One has risen. The reading from First Corinthians this morning includes the earliest known written list of people who had seen and experienced the risen Jesus – Paul wrote his letters before the gospels were composed.

I suppose if everybody knew the resurrection stories, why bother to tell them again, but seriously? Why leave out the best part of all, Mark?

Everybody from the first century on seems to have noticed that the end of Mark's Gospel was a problem. Matthew and Luke certainly did. When each of them wrote their gospels, they most probably had a copy of Mark at their elbow. Both of them, you'll note, made sure to include some of the appearances of Jesus in their accounts. John lingered lovingly over experiences of the risen Jesus.

As copies of the Gospel of Mark circulated, some of the copyists decided there was something wrong with the ending as well. Some of them might have thought, "Oh, no. There's a missing page in this copy. I'll have to fix it." Some of them might have thought, "I can't believe this copy wasn't finished. I'll have to fix it." Maybe some of them even thought, "What a dumb way to end the book. I'll have to fix it." The result is that ancient copies of Mark's Gospel have no less than four endings, including the one we've read today. As Ira Brent Driggers writes at Working Preacher, "We can hear these scribes asking: who in their right mind would write a Gospel that ended with fearful silence? Evidently Mark."

Ending with fearful silence. Ending with fearful silence.

Except... the book might have ended with fearful silence, but the story didn't, and Mark knew it. He knew, for example, that the women did tell their story to someone. If they hadn't told someone, no one would know it. If they hadn't told someone, no one would have shared it. If they hadn't told someone, Mark would never have heard it to write it down in the peculiar ending of his book.

As April Fiet wrote on Twitter this week:

"When the twelve deserted him, the women remained.
When the morning was still dark, the women brought the spices.
When the tomb was empty, the women proclaimed the good news.
When they were not believed, the women did not give up."

Even when the Apostle Paul left them out of his account of those who'd seen the risen Jesus, those women or their daughters did not give up, and they have been remembered. Even by Mark, who seemed willing to leave untold other parts of the story.

At ucc.org, Cheryl Lindsay writes, "Easter is mystery, and we covet answers. The other resurrection narratives tie up the loose ends, either in response to rumor, speculation, or even apostasy in their time or in order to frame their narratives for their respective audiences. Mark invites the hearer to fill in their own blanks and to sit with the incomplete ending. Mark allows the story to end without resolution."

I'd amend Dr. Lindsay only slightly: Mark allows the story *not* to end without resolution.

That is the great reality hidden by the questions about scribes and their errors, or writers and their interruptions. Mark's Gospel in its strangely worded ending reveals that the story didn't, doesn't, will not end. Without the figure of the risen Jesus described, we the readers become searchers for the risen Christ. Without the account of the women's message, we the readers become responsible to communicate that message. Without the appointment of a new inner circle, we the readers become part of that group closest to Jesus.

Dr. Lindsay advises: "Christ has risen. Let it echo for a bit.

"Don't worry about the next actions of the first witnesses or the reaction of the disciples. We can even wait to consider what Jesus does next. Stay here for a moment. Don't take the empty tomb for granted or rush to post-resurrection events, sightings, and encounters.

"Life has transformed death."

Does that start to get the heart pumping? Life has transformed death. Does that start to get the blood flowing? Life has transformed death. Does that start to get the breath descending deeply into your lungs? Life has transformed death. Life in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, the Child of God, who strode from a tomb in power cloaked in mystery, but whose abundant life has been offered to us all to share.

The story of Jesus' resurrection did not end with silent fear, because Jesus' resurrection has no end. Christ lived then, lives now, and lives into the future. In his life we find our life. In his love we find our grace. In his gift we find our peace.

Molly Baskette writes at ucc.org, "Easter is not a history lesson with a tidy ending, but an invitation to look past death in all its disguises. After every death, new things get born. Your story is not over. You are a resurrection in progress, still becoming. You may sometimes have a year of Good Fridays, but Easter will always arrive."

Tomorrow we can take up our pens or pencils or tablets or keyboards and consider how we extend the story of Jesus which is also our story. For now, remember and embrace: the story of Jesus' resurrection has not, will not, does not end.

Amen.