

## A Phoenix Faith

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Mark 16:1-8  
Psalm 118:1-4  
Jeremiah 31:1-6

The phoenix is a mythological bird which arises out of the ashes of the fire that burns away its life. Here in Elon, we also know it as the name of an exceptional team at an excellent college! In ancient Rome, its image was stamped on coins, as the phoenix represented the immortal vitality of the Empire. The early Church leaders also adopted this symbolic bird as a sign of resurrection. Perhaps it was a defiant jab at those who trusted in Rome and political absolutes. But more importantly, it was a reminder of the ongoing nature of their faith.

The phoenix is indeed a wonderful image of Easter. Its death and rising again from the ashes did not occur just once, but over and over again. The early Christians recognized a truth about the resurrection which sometimes is forgotten in some of the Easter messages we hear today. The resurrection was not just an event of the past which affected one man. It is also the present force which renews and transforms the dead places in our own hearts. It is still happening.

The story we heard read this morning from the gospel of Mark is probably the oldest account of the resurrection in scripture. Most scholars agree that the book of Mark originally ended with verse 8, not the two later additions of verses 9-10, or 9-20. In the original ending of Mark, the women who had stayed with Jesus throughout the crucifixion return to the tomb early on Sunday morning to anoint his body, wondering how they will roll away the heavy stone placed at the entrance.

When they arrive, the stone has already been rolled away, no body is inside, and they see a young man who tells them that the Jesus they seek, the one who was crucified, is not there but has been raised from the dead. They are told to go give the other disciples the message that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee and that they will see him there, just as he had told them.

The last verse of the original and oldest manuscript of the gospel of Mark, verse 8, ends this way, "So they went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." This resurrection account is similar in some ways to the Easter story described in the other gospels, but it is also strikingly different. The risen Christ does not appear to anyone. Only the mysterious young man announces the resurrection. And, this story ends in the middle of a sentence. The last word of verse 8 in Greek is *gar* which means "for" or "because".

This has caused great consternation throughout the history of biblical criticism. To some it seems that this is an ending that is no ending. It is troubling, unsatisfying, and not conclusively joyful. As Frank Kermode puts it, "Mark's book began with a trumpet call: "This is the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1). It ends with this faint whisper of timid women." (Kermode, *Genesis of Secrecy*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1979, p.68).

Matthew's gospel concludes in a different way: "So they left the tomb in a hurry, afraid and yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples." (Matt: 28:8). In Matthew the women are appropriately afraid, yet they are also filled with happiness, and they do the right thing: run to tell others what they have seen. We like this story. It is hopeful and satisfying.

Mark's ending is much more uncomfortable. The faithful women who have stayed with Jesus throughout his trial and crucifixion, seem to fail at the end. They flee, too afraid to do the one thing that is asked of them, tell the amazing news of what has happened to others. How could this be? Why is this good news? No wonder later scribes would attempt to add a more "appropriate" ending to Mark in which Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, two of his followers on the road, and finally the eleven remaining disciples. But, if we allow ourselves to absorb the original ending of Mark, not trying to impose a closure, we may find some unexpected wisdom that touches us where we are: smack in the middle of life, wrestling with our own existential questions.

Biblical scholar Donald Juell likes this ending of Mark which is not an ending. He reminds us that it is human nature to fail, to flee, to misunderstand, to attempt to contain that which can't be contained.

But, what Mark is trying to tell us is that God will not be put off by our failures, our infidelity, or our sophisticated schemes. Jesus is always beyond and ahead of us.

Juel writes: "Jesus cannot be confined by the tomb any more than by the hopes of his followers or the designs of his enemies. The grave clothes have been shed; Jesus is out of the tomb, on the loose." (Juel, "A Disquieting Silence", *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God*, ed. Gaventa and Miller, Westminster John Knox Press, 2005, p.6-12)

Jesus is on the loose, the future is open. We are not in control, and that makes us afraid. Yet, we have the promise that we will encounter God again. The young man in the tomb tells the women, "He is going to Galilee ahead of you; there you will see him, just as he told you." Here is expectancy and hope. The resurrection story is not finished; there is no closure. It is an on-going action, needing our participation, our improvisation, as we go to the Galilee's ahead in our own lives. The forces of death and destruction are painfully apparent to us every day. But the message for us, just as for the women at the tomb, is that the Rising God does not stay in the place of death.

God is ahead of us, beckoning us into the future, inviting us to be part of a culture of life, urging us to heal what is wounded and build up what has been torn down. And that God promises to meet us on the road over and over again.

We like stories with endings. But sometimes, we forget that a good story doesn't always come with the ending we expect, or indeed, with an ending at all. The French director, Jean Luc Godard, was once scolded by a critic who said that movies should always have a beginning, middle and end. "Certainly", he replied, "but not necessarily in that order." (Patrick Henry, *The Ironic Christian's Companion*, Riverhead Books, 1999, p. 222). Movies, stories, and especially lives, don't always proceed as expected.

Gilda Radner, of Saturday Night Live fame, died of ovarian cancer at the age of forty-two. While she was ill she wrote an autobiography that was published shortly before her death. Her words are honest, heart-breaking, and hopeful as she writes:

"I wanted to be able to write on the book jacket: 'Her triumph over cancer' or 'She wins cancer war'. I wanted a perfect ending, so I sat down to write the book with the ending in place before there even *was* an ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end. Like my life, this book has ambiguity. Like my life, this book is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity." (ibid, p. 223).

Our own life stories are an unfinished business, and the beginning, middle and end are not necessarily in the order we expect. Ambiguity is everywhere. But the message of Easter is that God's promise can be trusted. The phoenix will rise again from the ashes. As the psalmist says, "God's love is eternal"! And, God reminds the people in the book of Jeremiah, "I have always loved you, and so I continue to show you my constant love. Once again I will rebuild you. Once again you will take up your tambourines and dance joyfully." We claim a phoenix faith. We believe in a God who never leaves us alone, who can surprise us again with joy out of the ashes of hopelessness. This is the message of Easter.

But this is not all. Easter also proclaims that death is like a story which ends in mid-sentence. God has unfinished business with us. Love will not let us go, even after we die.

Woody Allen was once asked if he believed in an afterlife. "Well, yes", he replied, "But I'm afraid no one will tell me where it's being held."

We all wonder what will happen to us when we die. Like Woody Allen, we have a fear of being left without the necessary information. Most of us feel a deep-seated longing for some assurance that the end of our span of years on earth is not the end of our true selves. We hunger for a divine "Amen" to the feeling in our gut that there must be more beyond the existence that we now live.

What we do know is that we can have moments, even if they are fleeting, where we instinctively know that the world and our lives are not some chance combination of atoms that exist in an indifferent universe. We can feel that there is indeed a Power at work behind the universe which will not let death and pain have the final say. There is a great and sacred Force, a God, who in the end will not let beautiful, living things be lost in a void of non-being.

I have experienced moments in my own life when this conviction washed over me in a profound way. One particular time I remember was when I was sitting in a psychology classroom in college watching a filmed interview with Carl Jung, one of the most famous psychologists of our time.

The film showed Jung as a lively old man, sitting in his office in Switzerland on a sunny day. Birds sang near his window and in the distance you could hear church bells. But the sun and shadows outside of the classroom played across the screen and the images there would periodically grow thin and fade. All of a sudden I was struck by the thought that this wise human being was dead. He was no longer here. His image and words were only coming to me through the trickery of technology.

But just as suddenly as I thought this, there came another feeling, equally as strong, that such a gifted life and such a lovely day as that could not be lost forever. I felt a powerful certainty rise up within me that the God who created and enjoyed and loved such a life would never let it be ultimately lost, never let it be "poured through a hole at the heart of things" to be gone forever.

Somehow, at that moment, I knew in my gut that all that is loved will somehow be preserved. I felt the saying that our lives run "from God, in God, and to God again" was absolutely true, and that, in the end, God will not allow the annihilation of a single beloved creature or thing or moment of beauty.

There are other clues that crop up along the way. As we get older, it seems we become increasingly frustrated with the sense of how short and incomplete our lives are. As the years pass, we see that we are always just beginning something, just now learning for the first time, or just now unlearning mistakes.

Then there are the relationships with those who are close to us. We feel the pain and poignancy of insufficient time with those we love most. The eighteenth century English hymnwriter William Cowper closed a letter to a dear friend with these words:

*"For you must know that I should not love you half so well, if I did not believe that you would be my friend to eternity. There is not room enough for friendship to unfold itself to full flower in such a nook of a life as this.* (Quoted in A Memorial Sermon: *The Revelation of Immortality*, Gossip, The Expository Times.1923; 34: 171-175)

We have all been created with a spiritual hunger which cannot completely be satisfied in the span of years we have been given. In this nook of a life, we know that our spiritual lives can never be as full and complete as possible. We sense that our journeys toward God and each other cannot end with our deaths.

Even more, we are born with a deep emotional need for justice, a desire to see that pain and suffering somehow find solace and resolution in the end. We feel that if this nook of a life is really all that we have, then this is a tragic and absurd world indeed, a world where many lives end prematurely, where many experience existence as a sequence of sorrows. Some people do arrive at this conclusion. For them, pain and death and suffering are case in point for the absence of God. End of story.

Yet, many religions and much of humanity declare that this is not the end of the story. There is unfinished business. The tomb is empty and a sacred Presence is sending us on to Galilee and new adventures. For Christians, the Easter event was God's resounding "Amen" to this. We live in a Good Friday world, and we should never minimize the reality of suffering and death. But, we have a phoenix faith. We are an Easter people.

Death is part of what it means to be human. But, we have been promised that God has gone before us, and that we will encounter God again, somehow, some way. William Sloane Coffin, a famous preacher at Riverside church in New York, said, "We do not know WHAT lies beyond, but we do know WHO is beyond the grave." And that is Love, and that is God.

I have a family friend who lost his wife to cancer a few years ago. I had written to Bob at the time of Katherine's death to express my sympathy. He wrote back and said that he thanked God for the gift of her life and their marriage. His letter went on to declare he and Katherine still loved my family. He used the present tense, and he had written "we" instead of "I", as if Katherine were still here. How could do that when she had died? The answer came at the end of the letter when he concluded his note with the words, "After all, Denise, love never dies, you know!"

Today is Easter, the spring of souls. It means that we live with a once and future hope, that the story is unfinished, that we proclaim a Love which never dies. Love comes again, like the phoenix from the ashes, and like wheat rising green from the dark earth. Jesus says, "Lo, I am with you always", and we can say, "Alleluia! Amen!"