



Westminster Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, TN
March 31, 2024
The Rev. Dr. Richard Coble
Sermon: "God's Resurrection Story"

Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV)

16:1 When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

16:2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

16:3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

16:4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

16:5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

16:6 But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.

16:7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

16:8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

God's Resurrection Story

Have you ever gone to a movie, sat down, and realized you are in the wrong theater? Or, have you ever started a story, only to find it wasn't at all what you expected?

I've been doing this for years with a song: Bruce Springsteen's "Atlantic City," the breakout hit from his 1982 album Nebraska. Does anyone know it?

“Everything dies, baby, that’s a fact. Maybe everything that dies someday comes back.”

For the longest time, I thought it was a religious song.

And by the way, yes, that is the worst singing you will hear today. Every time I ask Peter if I can join the choir, he changes the subject. I don’t know why.

I should have known better about “Atlantic City,” though. If you listen to it closely, it’s a song about the hardships of living in a town run by organized crime. But none of the other lyrics ever seemed to grab me. Just that one line of the chorus: *Maybe everything that dies someday comes back.*

Picture this, it was April of 2006. I was in college at Carolina and working weekends as a youth director for a small Baptist Church in eastern North Carolina about an hour and a half away. One night, in the middle of the night, one of the teenagers in my youth group called me. She told me that her dad, whom I knew well, a 52-year-old farmer named Bryce, had had a massive heart attack that night and died suddenly. And she asked if I could bring her older brother home. Her older brother Will was a friend of mine and a fellow student at UNC.

I drove Will back to that small, Eastern North Carolina town, in the early morning hours. We sat in stunned silence. After we arrived, I stayed with the family at the house for a few hours. I was in total shock.

This was the first time someone close to me had died expectedly. I remember, asking another congregant visiting the family at the house, if this is something that just happens? Do relatively healthy, relatively young people just pass sometimes? I had never experienced such a thing.

On the way back to college that day, I had Springsteen’s essentials collection in my CD player. Yes – that was back in the day of CDs. That line from “Atlantic City” just seemed to reach out and grab me. *“Everything dies, baby, that’s a fact. Maybe everything that dies someday comes back.”*

As I drove, I was thinking of Bryce; in fact, I kept picturing Bryce in my mind, as I knew him. I had the clearest image in my mind of Bryce alive and well and peaceful. I couldn’t get it out of my head – almost 20 years later, I still can picture it. Psychologists will say that this is a normal reaction to sudden, traumatic grief.

Sometimes you have visions of the deceased. But it was more than that - this vision of Bryce gave me a sense of peace, with Springsteen's song in the background, "*Maybe everything that dies someday comes back.*" I mistook it for a religious song.

The women disciples of the 16th chapter of Mark make the opposite mistake. They are in a resurrection story, but they don't realize it. They think it's a tragedy.

And it is, of course, a tragedy. These very same women, Mark says in the 15th chapter, were 'looking on from a distance' as Jesus breathed his last upon the cross. Unlike the male disciples, who abandoned Jesus, they had stayed within eyesight. And on the 3rd day, following the Sabbath, they "bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him."

On the way, they fret about the stone, thinking Jesus's grave to be sealed, thinking Jesus to have been lost to the void of death. Instead, they find the stone rolled away, and inside they find a young man, likely an angel, who proclaims the resurrection:

"Do not be alarmed," he says, "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

And the Gospel ends, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

Overwhelmingly, Biblical scholars today believe this to be the last line of the Gospel of Mark. In your Bibles, you'll find a few verses that follow, but most believe these are additions not written by the original author. These longer endings do not show up in the oldest and most reliable copies we have of the Gospel. Instead, most believe this is how Mark ends his Gospel: A report of the risen Christ, met with fear and silence.

If this is true, notice that, in the Gospel of Mark, the risen Jesus never shows up.

There's only the signs he left:

- the stone rolled away;
- the empty tomb;
- the angel.

The characters themselves don't even seem to realize they are in a resurrection story:

- All the male disciples flee.
- Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss.
- Peter denies him three times before the rooster crows.
- And now, these first witnesses to the empty tomb flee, saying “nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

To these characters, it feels much more like a tragedy.

Which begs the question, what does your story feel like, right now?

And what story are we in, anyway?

And, if you and I, were characters of a resurrection story, would we even recognize it?

Because, let's be honest, most days this doesn't feel like a resurrection story, does it?

Death seems to have the final say;
Injustice and oppression seem to rule;
Might indeed seems to make right.

But the same could be said of the Gospel of Mark. Overwhelmingly, it looks like a tragedy. Even the resurrection doesn't erase the pain of the cross. Jesus's arrest and execution get 2 chapters. The resurrection only gets 8 verses.

But that's not the message of God's resurrection story, anyway.
The good news never promised to erase pain.

It does not erase the trauma, for example, when a healthy, 52-year-old father of 2 dies unexpectedly. And it doesn't discount your pain either, it doesn't erase whatever's gnawing on you these days, whatever hurt you brought to this service today.

No, the point is actually more profound than that, the point is that pain and death do not get the final say, not matter how much they claim it, in the heartaches of this world.

That is Mark's point. That is why he left the resurrected Jesus off the pages at the end of his Gospel. Pain is not erased, but there are these signs, that our story does not end there:

The stone rolled away;
the empty tomb;
the angel.

These are the signs, that it's not just a tragedy after all; that it's actually a resurrection story.

Have you ever seen signs that you live in a resurrection story?

Lisle Gwynn Garrity is a pastor in Western North Carolina. She published a story last week in the *Presbyterian Outlook* remembering her grandmother who died in 2019. In the article, Lisle recounts her last conversation with her grandmother.¹

It is, remarkable. This is how Lisle narrates it. These are her words:

“What do you think happens when we die?” [my grandmother] had asked me. I shrugged and postured, describing abstract ideas of a great release, a return to the heart of God.

“I want to believe that I’ll be with your mother and Ed and others who have passed on, but I’m not sure if there will be consciousness after death.” Her words surprised me. I expected something more orthodox from the devoted widow of a Presbyterian pastor.

Then [my grandmother] told me about the trees. “I look at them,” [she said,] — how they lose their leaves every winter, and then they come back every spring. I don’t think everlasting life is exactly like that, but they give me hope.”

Signs. Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity’s grandmother saw signs, hints that we live in God’s resurrection story. They are subtle. The empty tomb is still a tomb, after all. *“For now, we see in a mirror dimly,”* says the Apostle Paul.

But every once in a while, a song makes you remember someone you lost, and leaves you with the impression they are at peace; and every year, flowers reappear, and their return reminds us that resurrection life surrounds us, nonetheless.

But it’s more than that, isn’t it? It’s you. Because every week, this congregation gathers not to neglect the suffering of this world but to face it with integrity. Sunday after Sunday, year after year, together we sing resurrection songs; we hear a resurrection story.

¹ Lisle Gwynn Garrity, “Praying Easter Would Happen Again.” *The Presbyterian Outlook*. March 19, 2024. <https://pres-outlook.org/2024/03/praying-easter-would-happen-again/>

And yes, the resurrected Christ seems to have left the page in this life, but look at the signs he left behind:

A congregation gathered in his name.

Look around, the body of Christ, right before our eyes.

Two weeks ago, members of our congregation had a zoom conversation with the author William Yoo, whose book I've spoken about repeatedly from this pulpit.

Yes, I know.

I promise - This is the last time I'll bring it up for a while.

You'll remember, Dr. Yoo published a book that many in our congregation read together this Lenten season entitled, *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church*. When we met Dr. Yoo over zoom, at the conclusion of our study, the conversation was remarkable for many reasons. I'll name one.

Twice in our conversation, members of our congregation rightly noted to Dr. Yoo the despair his subject matter wrought in us, in his descriptions of widespread Presbyterian support of slavery in the 19th Century. In particular, we noted the striking way his book ended, with a critique of his own institution, Columbia Theological Seminary, where he now teaches. In the years leading up to the Civil War, that seminary had been a staunch supporter of slavery for our denomination. His book ends with these lines:

I do not think it is an exaggeration to suggest that Columbia Seminary was among the most wicked places in the nation. But here is the thing – it did not appear that way. It looked and sounded like a church.²

Wow. That ending blew me away. It is one of the most striking condemnations I have read of the white church in its complicity with slavery in the past and institutional racism today.

So, in our conversation, we asked Dr. Yoo, 'What's up? Why did you leave us with those words, as a professor at that Seminary and as an ordained minister in our denomination today?'

² William Yoo, *What Kind of Christianity: A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism in the Presbyterian Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022), 179.

This is how he responded: He said, ‘The truth is not always happy, but it is liberating.’

He went on to talk about his experiences of sharing his book in Black churches across this country. Over and over again, he said, Black church goers would come up to him afterward and tell him, ‘Thank you.’ Because they never thought a book this honest about such a devastating history would be written in their lifetime.

In other words, they saw signs. A history, that can only be called a tragedy, turned into a sign of resurrection – A stone rolled back.

Because when truth is liberation, and voices long silenced are at last heard, that’s what you see. You see God’s resurrection story. And when communities, like ours, are willing to walk this road, do this work, face this history, that too, is God at work. That too, is a sign that this story is not finished, that it does not end in tragedy, that resurrection and new life are possible.

This is the life of faith:

Knowing the resurrected Christ has left the page, we gather in his name: We weep together; we support one another, in the hardships of this life. We reckon with injustice, past and very much present.

And together, we keep watch, knowing that our story does not end there.

- Instead, we remember that this is a resurrection story and we proclaim that to the world, in word and in deed.
- In this proclamation, we point to signs of liberation, of healing, of resurrection all around us.
- And through that work, together we see, how when we gather in Christ’s name, we become one of those signs of resurrection too.

So, I ask again: Have you ever started a story, only to find it wasn’t at all what you expected?

Don’t ever forget whose story you are in.

This is a resurrection story.

And, boy, is it a great one to tell, to see, and to live. Amen.