

The End of the Beginning

And so we come to the end. And the beginning.

In these last verses of Mark, we experience the agony of Jesus's death and the ecstasy of his resurrection. We are the women at the tomb who weep as Jesus is put to death, and we are Joseph of Arimathea who wraps the body in linen cloth. We are Mary Magdalene, Mary, and Salome, who come to anoint Jesus and find him risen from the dead, yet tell no one, for their fear. We are the disciples who walk with Jesus and do not truly see him, and we are the people called to go into all the world and proclaim the good news.

We appear in each part of this story, and yet it is Jesus's alone, the Son of God, the Messiah, who solely pays for the sins of the world with his very life so that we might have new life in the kingdom of God.

As we begin our reading, Jesus cries out: "*Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This question is considered one of the Seven Last Words from the Cross. This nomenclature is a little confusing as it actually refers not to seven individual words but rather seven expressions or sayings from Jesus during the crucifixion collected from the four gospels. This cry from Jesus, asking God about being forsaken, is the only one to appear in more than one gospel, in both Mark and Matthew. It echoes Psalm 22:1, with the psalmist asking the same question of God. Scholars offer several interpretations of why Jesus says these words. For me, they speak to Jesus's humanity, to being both fully human and fully divine.

As Jesus breaths his last, the curtain is torn in two. The reference here is to the curtain or veil at the high, holy temple. In Exodus 26, God gives Moses very specific (almost Ikea-ish) instructions on how to build the tabernacle, a place of worship for the Hebrews. God tells them to cover it with a curtain (veil) made of "blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen...with cherubim skillfully worked into it." Then God explains the purpose of the veil: "the curtain shall separate for you the holy place from the most holy." When Jesus dies, this veil is torn in two—a literal sign that with his death, nothing can separate us from the love of God. This is at the heart of Atonement: that we are "at-one-with" God because Jesus atoned (paid) for our sins through his sacrifice. The Gospel of John offers another of the Seven Last Words, "It is finished." The Greek word for that phrase is *tetelestai*, which means "paid in full."

Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the council and a follower of Jesus, asks Pilate for the body so that he might bury Jesus in his own tomb. It is there that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bring spices so they can anoint Jesus's body. On their way to the tomb, they express a very practical concern: "Who will roll away the stone for us?" But the stone is rolled away, and a man, dressed in white, greets them, telling them Jesus has been raised. Since this is the first—and last time—in the history of the world that someone has died and been raised from the dead, the women are, understandably, freaked out. They flee from the tomb and, gripped by fear, say nothing to anyone.

Now here's an interesting historical situation. Early copies of the Gospel of Mark show it ending here, at verse 8. Debate has simmered among scholars: Did the ending get lost somewhere? Did Mark's author intend for the book to end at this moment? Were verses 9-20 added later to make it more palatable and optimistic for the burgeoning church?

While this historical and scholarly discrepancy about the ending is compelling, it ultimately misses the point, in my opinion. This is a story about beginnings. Jesus tells the women to "go, tell." And this has been our commission and mission from that day forward: to begin a new life in Christ and "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation."