

In the Gospel of Mark we get a most unsatisfactory ending to the Easter story. In the first of the Gospels to be written, we don't really have an ending at all, which is why scholars have long wondered if some verses didn't get lost along the way. Later editors added different endings and they are included in most modern translations. But some of the earliest manuscripts we have stop at verse 8 with the women who say nothing.

Mark's Gospel features an empty tomb but no appearance of the resurrected Jesus. The story ends in utter silence, which shouldn't be disturbing. In fact, it is fitting, because resurrection always leaves us speechless. There are no words to describe it. All we can do is grope around for a metaphor big enough that we can maybe get our minds around a little piece of it.

Preachers are always looking for metaphors like shepherds for lost sheep. And I found one in the news just over a week ago. Did you see the picture of the black hole? This hole is at the heart of

the Messier 87 galaxy, 55 million light years from earth. We have never seen a black hole before, and what you see is really the dust and gas that are swirling around it, like water swirls around a drain. That space matter casts a halo of light that helps us see the shape and size of the hole.

No one instrument is big enough to get this image, so scientists put together eight telescopes from around the world, essentially turning the earth itself into one giant telescope to peer up into the heavens. But all they collected were huge amounts of data. It was Cal-Tech's Katie Bouman who, while studying at MIT, came up with an algorithm that helped turn all that data into this visual image. Far out!

About the only thing I know about black holes, besides the fact that Einstein predicted them, is that the force of gravity in a black hole is so strong that nothing can escape from it. A black hole is like what the Bible sometimes calls "The Pit" sometimes *Sheol*, always meaning "death."

The women who came to the tomb early on the first day of the week could not escape from death. Unlike the disciples who ran away, near the cross these women had stayed. There they had watched Jesus die. They had seen his body being taken down from the cross and laid in a tomb which was then sealed with a stone.

There was something dreadfully final about setting that stone. It turned the tomb into a black hole from which nothing could escape. Now that is a pretty powerful metaphor for the finality of death, but it also works for many of the heart-stopping difficulties of life.

In November of last year, the people living in Paradise saw their entire town turn into a black hole. The Camp Fire burned 240 square miles, almost 19,000 structures, and took 85 lives. In a matter of a few hours, a retirement heaven became a living hell. Paradise UMC was one of the few buildings that survived the fire. Last week, I called the pastor, Bob Cicou, to see how they were doing. Bob had been the pastor at Evergreen UMC and a member of our circuit. He

and his wife, Pam, lost everything in the fire. And though the church building remained, his congregation didn't. Out of 300 members, 12 disciples are left. They are now gathering at Trinity UMC in Chico. The rest are scattered all over the country, from Alaska to Florida. And they all have PTSD. The question is open: will this church ever climb out of the black hole that swallowed up Paradise?

Black holes don't just appear in telescope images or on satellite maps. They appear in the landscapes of the human heart as well. Maybe it's the loss of a loved one that you intended to spend the rest of your life with. Or it's the prescription that you once needed for pain and now you just to get through the day. Or it's the dread diagnosis that starts with the letter "c." Or it's some terrible memory of something that happened that you never told anybody.

At some point in our lives, almost all of us have had a sense of what it's like to be stuck in a black hole with no hope of escape. The women who gathered at the tomb early on the first day of the week were trapped in the black hole of their grief. And they had no more

idea of how to escape than they had for how to remove the stone that was sealing the tomb where the body of Jesus was laid.

By the time they arrived with their spices to prepare the body for a decent burial, the sun had just risen and they could now see that the stone was already rolled away. Surprised but not yet scared, they went into the tomb. It wasn't until they saw a young man sitting instead of a dead man lying that they got spooked. So the words of the young man didn't compute. All they knew is that Jesus was not there. What the women heard but could not yet understand is that Jesus had risen. Against all of our expectations, all of our knowledge about what is physically possible, Jesus had escaped the black hole of death.

Talking about resurrection, Paul says, "Listen, I will tell you a mystery!" [1 Cor 15:51] And it certainly is an incredible mystery. It's like the existence of black holes used to be: prophesied but not proven. Resurrection requires a very strong spiritual instrument to detect it. It requires us to have a quantum faith to believe it, and

even then it takes a very large team of faith specialists, a whole church, to visualize it. So, face-to-face with such a mind-twisting reality, it's no wonder the women fled from the tomb in terror and amazement.

Like it or not, resurrection is not for the faint of heart. Few of us are prepared to be confronted with the proof that our God indeed has the power to do the impossible. God has the power—better yet, God *is* the power—that turns every black hole into an empty tomb. What I mean by that is that God is the power that rescues us from dead certainties and gives us new possibilities, takes our dead ends and turns them into fresh starts, takes away everything that leads to death and gives us everlasting life. “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Where does that leave us? What I like best about the Easter story in the Gospel of Mark is that it leaves the ending to us. We get to write it. Mark does not give us a definitive explanation. In these

verses, we don't get a proclamation of precisely what resurrection is or exactly what we have to believe. So we all get to—we have to—discover what that mystery means, what it looks like as it unfolds in our own lives.

The town of Paradise, is it a black hole or an empty tomb? We believe in the empty tomb, so we're going to be anxious to know what resurrection is going to look like for the people of Paradise. How will they write the ending to their Easter story? Bob Cicou tells me there is still a gigantic mountain of debris to clear. He's just gotten a permit to remove 100 dead trees from the church property. One of those trees didn't look burned at all, but it toppled over because the fire burned underground, killing the roots.

Most of the people may be gone, but the earth is telling the Easter story in Butte County this year. After the winter rains, the resurrection looks like grass growing and flowers blooming right up through the ashes. How long will it take to rebuild? Many years, but God never said that resurrection is instantaneous, only that a new

Paradise is coming, “a new heaven and a new earth” are on their way. [Rev 21:1]

That’s good news for the whole United Methodist Church. The Judicial Council meets this coming week to rule on the votes taken at the special General Conference in February. When it comes to the future of our denomination, we are faced with the same question: are we looking at a black hole or an empty tomb? But I am not afraid, because I believe in a God who gives us a quantum faith that can look at every inescapable problem, every hopeless situation and see not a black hole but an empty tomb. Quantum faith says that all it takes to escape it is one flying leap. For the good old UMC, it may not happen this week, but Easter tells me that a new church is on its way.

By the way, the first black hole ever seen has a name. It comes from the Hawaiian language because two of the telescopes used to “see” it were on Hawaii. The name is Powehi, which comes from a Hawaiian creation story. Translated, it means “embellished dark

source of unending creation.” I like it. Sounds like a black hole turning into an empty tomb to me.

So take heart. Your personal resurrections will take some time, too. Easter is a gift that everyone has to live into. And it’s ok if the process of taking the leap of faith to leave the tomb leaves you speechless. For the task of coming up with a brand-new ending to your story is not your job alone. God will be writing it with you. And I, for one, can’t wait to read the resurrection that is happening in you. Then I will say, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!