Easter stories

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AFTER MAINTAINING THE ANCIENT TRADITION of the first post-resurrection appearance being that to Mary the Mother of Jesus, St Ignatius Loyola lists eight gospel accounts for contemplation during the week of the resurrection (Exx 299–312). Apart from placing last Matthew 28:16, he follows an order that most scholars nowadays take to be the sequence in which the Gospels were written: first Mark, then Matthew and Luke (who both draw on and go beyond Mark), John 20 and, finally, the appendix to the Fourth Gospel, John 21. What distinctive outlooks do the evangelists develop? What new perspectives on the resurrection can they provide for contemplation? Let me spend most of my time on Mark and Matthew, but draw in the other Gospels for a final word about Easter 'compositions of place'.

Unlike Ignatius who proposes Mark 16:1–11, contemporary scholarship understands Mark's Gospel to end at v 8. This is to see Mark's Easter story as confined to only eight verses. That can seem very little, when compared with twenty verses in Matthew's final chapter, the fifty-three verses of Luke 24, and the two Easter chapters which conclude John's Gospel. At first glance, the eight verses of Mark may seem pretty skimpy and not that promising for prayer and preaching. Nevertheless, these spare, laconic-sounding lines prove spiritually very rich.

Tensions and power

Three contrasts and two obstacles built into the story add tension to it. First, Mark contrasts the darkness of the night (between the Saturday and the Sunday of the resurrection) and the light of the sun which has just risen. Inside the tomb itself the absence of Jesus' body stands over against his presence through his agent, the interpreting angel. Third, the confident, consoling words of the angel ('He has been raised; he is not here; see the place where they laid him') contrast with the silence of the women when they flee from the tomb. Temporal and spatial obstacles also play their role in enhancing the story. Three female disciples, already named and recalled as bravely witnessing the crucifixion (Mk 15:40–41), want to be with Jesus and do something for him by completing the rites of burial. But they have to wait until the sabbath ends and a new working day dawns. Time thwarts their desire to remain

close to the Lord they love. A spatial barrier also threatens to block their access to his body. 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?' The stone closing the tomb is, Mark adds, 'very large'. Its size stresses the size of the obstacle faced by the three women, as well as suggesting the greatness of the divine intervention in rolling it away and raising Jesus from the dead. Three contrasts (light/darkness, absence/presence, and words/silence) and two very basic obstacles of time and space lend power to the structure of Mark's Easter chapter.

The angel and the young man

When Mary the Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome enter the tomb, they find a 'young man, dressed in a white robe, and sitting on the right'. His shining apparel is the dress of a heavenly messenger. Like Old Testament figures who remain seated to deliver a judgement, the angel does not rise to greet the women but speaks at once and with authority to deliver a most unexpected message: 'He has been raised; he is not here; see the place where they laid him.' Its triple shape adds force to the announcement. The angel proclaims, first, the great truth that concerns everyone and will change the universe for ever: 'He has been raised.' Then he turns to the particular place in which he is addressing the women: 'He is not here.' Finally, he points to the very specific spot in the tomb where the burial had taken place: 'See the place where they laid him.' The movement from the reality of universal impact ('he has been raised') to a particular place and a specific niche in the tomb might well encourage us to gesture towards the whole universe, then point around ourselves, and finally indicate a specific spot at our feet. Few passages in the Bible call more clearly for an 'application of senses' that takes the form of some bodily gestures. The angelic message that works so well in the text can work just as well in a form of 'physical' prayer.

Almost inevitably, attentive readers of Mark's Gospel, when they come to the 'young man dressed in a white robe' (*stole* in Greek; Mk 16:5), recall another 'young man' who left his 'linen cloth' (*sindon* in Greek) in the hands of those who had come to arrest Jesus and fled naked into the night (Mk 14:51–52). His nakedness, the linen shroud, and the darkness of night readily evoke the sense of Jesus now being led away defenceless and facing imminent death and burial. Three days later 'the young man' clothed at dawn in the white robe of resurrection also symbolizes what has happened to Jesus, who has died, been buried in a 'linen cloth' (*sindon*; Mk 15:46), and now has been raised

gloriously from the dead. The shroud of death has given way to the shining robe of resurrection.

The Markan 'young man' of the death and resurrection narratives serves as a symbolic counterpart not only of Jesus himself but also of his followers. In fleeing naked into the night, they may leave everything to get away from Jesus, and so do the opposite of what Peter claimed to have done: 'we have left everything and followed you' (Mk 10:28). But with Jesus' resurrection this unnerving failure can be reversed. They can sit white-robed in the tomb and quietly contemplate the Easter mystery. Our imagination may let us see our naked flight into the night, but it can also allow us to be dressed in a new robe. Then we can slip into the empty and silent tomb, sit on the right-hand side, and gently ponder how the risen Jesus changes our life, our death and our future.

The women's silent flight

Mark's Easter story ends surprisingly and abruptly. The three women flee from the tomb in amazement and terror. So far from running to bring the good news of the resurrection to the other disciples, they say nothing to anyone, at least for the moment. Here some scholars offer the bleak comment that the male disciples have already failed Jesus, and now even the women break down and disobey the commission they have received from the angel. So Mark's Gospel is alleged to close with total human failure.

Beyond question, the male disciples of Jesus start going downhill from Mark 6:52, where the evangelist states that they do not understand the feeding of the five thousand and their 'hearts are hardened'. Their lack of faith then leads Jesus himself to reproach them with their lack of understanding and faith (Mk 8:14–21). He reproaches Peter sharply for continuing Satan's temptation by refusing to accept the suffering destiny that awaits his Master (Mk 8:31–33). Then James, John and the other male disciples prove just as thickheaded (Mk 9:32; 10:35–40). Judas betrays Jesus into the hands of his enemies; all the male disciples desert their Lord (Mk 14:50), and Peter even swears that he does not even know Jesus (Mk 14:66–72). None of the male disciples shows up at the crucifixion, and it is left to a devout outsider to give Jesus a dignified burial (Mk 15:42–47). The progressive failure of Jesus' male disciples that begins at Mark 6:52 reaches its climax in the passion story.

Meanwhile women have entered Mark's story (Mk 14:3–9; 15:40–41, 42–47) and function faithfully in ways that the men have failed to do. They remain true to Jesus right through to the end, and are

prepared to play their role in completing the burial rites. But does the frightened silence with which they react to the angel's message express a sudden collapse on their part? Those who endorse such a dismal explanation should reread Mark's Gospel and notice how, from the very start (Mk 1:22, 27), over and over again people respond to what Jesus does and reveals with amazement, silence and even terror (Mk 4:40–41; 6:50–51). His story manifests the awesome mystery of God come personally among us. Some women who remain faithful and close to Jesus right to the end come to the tomb and so are the first to hear the astonishing news, 'He has been raised'. To be deeply shaken at the Easter act of God, that brings the climax of revelation and redemption, fits the occasion and the whole pattern Mark has developed from the opening chapter of his Gospel. The women's fearful silence pays homage to Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the beginning of God's new creation. Divine revelation reaches its high point in the event of the resurrection which produces the empty tomb (Mk 16:4–5) – a deed clarified and announced by the angel's word (Mk 16:6). Faced with the uniquely great revelation of God in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, the silent and fearful flight of the women is not only understandable but also highly appropriate.

The sun and the stone

Thus far my comments on Mark's Easter story have been anchored in his text and hopefully elucidate something of his cryptic intentions. Prayerfully mulling over this story may also lead to further associations and insights. Let me spell out three of these. First, Mary Magdalene and her two companions set off for the tomb 'very early on the first day of the week, just as the sun came up' (Mk 16:2). They do not yet know that this is the new day of the new week that will never end. They are walking into a morning that is infinitely newer than they ever dreamt. Christ is risen and all things are already made new. But one can so easily be tempted to think that the sun will never rise over our lives. It is desperately easy to lapse into thinking: 'O'Collins yesterday, today, and the same for ever, as he was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be – faults, failures, and sins for ever. Amen.' But this is not what Mark encourages, nor is it the message of the Easter Vigil liturgy. At that liturgy a new Easter candle stands radiantly in our midst. The celebrant blesses fresh water for initiating Christian life through baptism. Vases of fresh flowers enhance the crisp, new altar cloth. At the offertory procession fresh hosts are brought to be consecrated at the mass. So many details of the Easter Vigil underline the message, 'Jesus is risen

from the dead, and all things are made new'. At Easter a new sun comes up over our world and our lives are made forever fresh and new.

On their way to Jesus' grave the three women ask themselves anxiously: 'Who will roll away for us the stone from the entrance to the tomb?' (Mk 16:3). For good measure, the evangelist remarks: 'it was an enormous one' (Mk 16:4). This detail in the Easter story has often made me think of the many things in the world and in our lives that look impossible. They may be sufferings that we cannot cope with, injustices that seem unforgivable, or difficulties that look quite insuperable. If we imagine ourselves to be inside the tomb, we can sharpen further the sense of our powerlessness. Many of us can feel dead and locked in a tomb by some great stone. Who can roll away my problem? Who will help me deal with my difficulty? It seems that I have no exit. The door is locked and the stone in place. We may despair of ever coming out into the light. Even worse, we can become used to our darkness and painful state of imprisonment. But God will act on our behalf and do the impossible. Things can be reversed; unexpectedly and dramatically huge stones blocking our way will be rolled away. Our loving God wants to deliver us from our tombs, give new life to our existence, and let us come out into the light. The one question the holy women asked themselves on the first Easter Sunday morning nurtures in me the sense of 'the God who wants to do the impossible for us'.

Burial places

And then a third item in Mark's Easter story, the angel's word: 'See the place where they buried him' (Mk 16:6). We may say just that not only about Jesus himself but about so many others. Our lives are full of people that are dead and buried. Some of us have already lost both our parents. All of us have dead relatives and friends to remember and mourn. At times we go to see the silent tombs where we buried them. There are all those places in our own country and beyond where we laid our dead to rest. But there are also the people and places that in other ways have gone out of our lives, never to be seen again. There are the boys and girls we went to school with, and the neighbours on the street where once we lived before shifting to another suburb or another city. There are all those people that in other ways have gone out of our lives, never to be seen again. For a few years they shared our journey – at college, at work, and in various places around our world. How few of them have stayed in our lives! Our memory may bring back the places, but the people are gone – many of them for ever. Yes, we 'see the

places' where we laid our dead to rest and buried our past. We can see the faces and hear the voices of all those who have gone out of our lives.

But what we celebrate at Easter is the sure hope that none of those faces is truly gone for ever, the unwavering confidence that none of those voices will remain silent for ever. The dead and buried will rise again. None of those faces and voices is finally lost in the silence of the grave. The resurrection will gather into one the children of God who have been scattered. In Mark's Gospel that gathering begins already at the foot of the cross. The holy women and the centurion are there; then Joseph of Arimathea comes on the scene to bury Jesus. In the tomb the three holy women find an angel, who sends them to call Peter and the other disciples to a new rendezvous in Galilee with the risen Jesus. These men walked with Jesus and then left him. But their deadly failure will not have the final word; they are not lost for ever. They too must hear the amazing news, 'He has been raised'.

Matthew's story

When we turn to Matthew's Easter story, we may dwell first on a large pattern in his narrative and then reflect on some smaller but equally valuable touches. First, Matthew draws a large contrast between Jesus' friends (merely two women, Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary') and the hostile forces (represented by a bunch of soldiers set to guard the tomb). Matthew skilfully shifts focus from the two women witnessing the burial of Jesus (Mt 27:61), to the stationing of the guard (Mt 27:62–66), back to the women who come after dawn to visit the grave (Mt 28:1), again to the soldiers who at the sight of the angel of the Lord 'become like dead men' (Mt 28:4), and then to the women who receive the Easter news (Mt 28:5–7).

The two women

Against the powers of this world, represented by the squad of soldiers, those who stand with Jesus have seemed helpless. Pontius Pilate and the chief priests have sealed the tomb of Jesus and set a guard to watch over it. There is to be no monkey business. Through the power of the Roman Empire and the religious establishment in Jerusalem, Jesus is dead and buried. His corpse lies in a tomb that is sealed and guarded. Nothing more can happen. His body is locked away and will quietly decay. But through the magnificent angel of the Lord, God acts to change dramatically the whole situation, vindicate Jesus (and the two women), and shift the balance of power. The soldiers, who have been guarding a dead body buried in a tomb, now with delicious irony fall

down and become like helpless corpses. They thought that they were guarding a dead body. Now it is they who fall to the ground and become themselves like corpses. The two women run to share with the male disciples the astonishing truth of the resurrection and on their way have the unique joy of meeting the risen Jesus himself (Mt 28:8–10). Meanwhile some of the guards go into Jerusalem and report 'everything that has happened'. They are then paid handsomely to spread a lie about the whereabouts of Jesus' body: 'His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep' (Mt 28:11–15). Those opposed to Jesus symbolize death and lies, whereas his two friends announce the amazing truth of his new life. Prayerfully reflecting on Matthew's story, we open ourselves to the Easter truth which holds out the promise of a life which will never end. We may feel ourselves to be weak and helpless like the holy women opposed to overwhelming might. But God can and will change everything.

The angel of the Lord

A large, powerful pattern links the concluding two chapters of Matthew's Gospel. It is worth meditating also on several small but delightful touches in this Easter story. First of all, the evangelist turns Mark's rather demure angel into a splendid 'angel of the Lord' who, with an accompanying 'great earthquake', 'descends from heaven' and effortlessly rolls back the great stone, which not only blocks the entrance to the tomb but also symbolizes Jesus' having been imprisoned by death. To show further this marvellous victory over death, the angel of the Lord then 'sits' on the stone. His 'appearance is like lightning' and 'his clothing white as snow' (Mt 28:2–3). The angel of the Lord speaks, not to the soldiers, but to the women, and does so with heavenly authority: '*I know* that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified . . . He has been raised *as he said he would be*. He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see him. *Now I have told you*' (Mt 28:7). Matthew lays great emphasis on the authority of the angel's words, and on Jesus' words as well. The women listen to what the angel says and remember what Jesus has said. In word and appearance the angel of the Lord proves a kind of double for the risen Jesus himself. In particular, his appearance obviously recalls the glory of Jesus in his transfiguration (Mt 17:2).

The angel of the Lord at Easter also hearkens back to the angel of the Lord in Matthew's story of Jesus' birth (Mt 1:20; 2:13,19). There such an angel not only reveals to Joseph the divine origin of Mary's baby but also comes on the scene to deliver Jesus, Mary and Joseph from the

power of Herod the Great. Angelic activity at the start and the end of Matthew's Gospel serves, along with other themes such as the divine presence (Mt 1:23, 28:20), to give the whole story a satisfactory unity.

Joy and fear

Matthew gives his Easter story a second lovely touch by adding 'great joy' alongside the 'fear' with which Mark has characterized the women's reaction to the Easter announcement. Mary Magdalene and 'the other Mary' leave the tomb 'with fear and great joy' as they 'run to tell the disciples' (Mt 28:8). Matthew appreciates the mix of emotions that appropriately fits those who receive and carry to others the glorious Easter message: reverential fear and deep joy. The same mix shows up again at once, when the women, to their astonishment, meet Jesus on the road. They clasp his feet and kneel before him. In their love they cling to him, but they do so with awe and worship him. He is *the* fascinating and awesome mystery at the heart of their lives. They love him and are fascinated by him; yet at the same time they show reverential awe in his presence.

God's family

A third touch emerges at once in Matthew's Easter story. In a shorter form, the risen Jesus repeats the message the women have already heard from the angel, but with a significantly beautiful difference: 'Tell my *brethren* to go to Galilee; there they will see me' (Mt 28:10). The Angel of the Lord had said, 'Tell his disciples' (Mt 28:7). By altering one word, Jesus shows how much has been changed. Those who hear and believe the resurrection message will enjoy a uniquely new status: they will become Jesus' brothers and sisters. Of course, they will remain his disciples. But now they can enter God's new family, becoming children of God and brothers and sisters to Jesus himself. Sometimes, as we say, a single word can make a world of difference. Here we have a stunning example of that truth. One word makes a world of difference. Jesus' followers are called to be disciples, but now they also become his brothers and sisters, members of God's new family.

The Easter settings

Before leaving Matthew, let me add a word about the 'composition of place' he and the other evangelists offer for our Easter contemplation. In chapter 20 John locates Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus in a garden on the edge of Jerusalem. In chapter 21 the

evangelist will set the scene for Peter's being forgiven and commissioned on the shores of Lake Galilee. John uses a garden in springtime and then the waters of a lake as suggestive backdrops for the risen Jesus' meetings with Mary and then with Peter. Sensitive readers, recalling the Garden of Eden, can join some early Christian writers in appreciating Mary Magdalene as a kind of new Eve. After encountering and recognizing her risen Lord, she brings to the male disciples the news not of sin and death but of life and grace. Those readers will also appreciate how the penitent Peter will carry out his fisherman's work – no longer from his boat in the lake or wading through shallow water near the shore but out in the world 'catching' new disciples for the risen Jesus.

In using a mountain scene for the final Easter appearance (Mt 28:16–20), Matthew recalls the mountain where Jesus proclaimed the beatitudes and, from earlier times, Mount Sinai where God first revealed himself to Moses and later entered into a solemn and enduring covenant with the chosen people. By setting the Easter encounters with the risen Lord along a road and in a dining room, the Gospel of Luke hints at the way believers will continue to 'know' Jesus on their life's pilgrimage and in 'the breaking of the bread' (Lk 24:13–49).

The evangelists give the Easter appearances different locations or 'compositions of place'. But the frames of a garden, a lake, a mountain, a road and a dining room can evoke so much for Christians who carefully and prayerfully ponder the Easter stories.

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