

# “Ever-expanding Easter”

Mark 16:1-8

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Easter is the celebration of God’s ever-expanding resurrection, love, joy, peace, and grace. Since Jesus rose from the dead to glorious eternal life, every restriction on love, every damper on joy, every disturber of peace, every perversion of grace, every limit on abundant life will be resurrected. One day we will be free of our restrictive shell, we call our body, so we can soar in glory beyond our grandest imaginations. Every day, Easter transforms us helping us let go of restrictive thoughts and feelings. God meets every person where they are at and is constantly resurrecting every life-diminishing aspect to the life-giving; guilt to forgiveness, regret to freedom, doubt to confidence, mistakes to fresh beginnings, sadness to joy, fear to love, hate to compassion, depression to rejoicing, confusion to clarity, anxiety to courage, fatigue to rest, dreary to dancing, grief to reunion, bored to creative, I am not good enough to I am a beloved cherished child of God, unworthy to a masterpiece, abandoned to belonging, foolish to wise, sickness to health, worry to assurance, wanting to gratitude, stress to playing, impatience to excitement, loss to restoration, frustration to satisfaction, grumpy to cheerful, scattered to whole, declining to growing, troubled to peace, and on and on. Easter is much more, for God resurrects more than individuals. God resurrects relationships, community, plants, animals, creation, the cosmos. Easter is much more than we can ever imagine, comprehend or dream for ourselves, others and the world. Open all your senses to Easter. Feel God attracting you into ever-expanding love.

Alister McGrath wrote, “The starting point for any sensible thinking about God is to realize that the human mind just isn't big enough to cope with such a concept. It's like trying to pack the Alps into a suitcase or the Niagara Falls into a coffee mug. How can the little word "God" do justice to the magnificent reality to which it points? We can no more reduce God to words than we can take hold of the smoke of a candle that's just been blown out, or capture sunbeams in a glass jar. To use a more formal way of speaking, we can't comprehend God – human reason is simply not capable of grasping God in full. It may try to prove and to define things about God, only to discover that what it has defined and proved bears little relationship to God. So, while it's great fun to explore human ideas about God, in the end we need to pay God the ultimate compliment. You tell us who you are! You tell us what you're like! You approach us.”

Easter is way beyond our understanding and perception. Easter is way beyond humanity’s ability to communicate. Mark conveys this in the ending to his gospel. **Mark 16:1-8 NLT “Saturday evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went out and purchased burial spices so they could anoint Jesus’ body. Very early on Sunday morning, just at sunrise, they went to the tomb. On the way they were asking each other, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” But as they arrived, they looked up and saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled aside. When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side. The women were shocked, but the angel said, “Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. Jesus isn’t here! Jesus is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see Jesus there, just as he told you before he died.” The women fled from the tomb, trembling and bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened.”**

Like the women, Mark’s mind was blown, expanded by Easter. Love transforms hate. Death is merely a portal to perfect, glorious, eternal life. God is resurrecting all. Easter, love, resurrection, joy will expand for eternity, so instead of trying to explain Easter, Mark’s carefully crafted ending invites us to discover Easter for ourselves.

Mark’s final sentence uses Greek words that we have difficulty translating into English. *New Revised Standard Version*, says terror and amazement seized them, for they were afraid; *New Living Translation*, trembling and bewildered, they were frightened; *The Message*, beside themselves, their heads swimming, stunned; *Contemporary English Version*, confused and shaking; *King James Version*, amazed; Amplified, astonishment. What is Mark trying to convey to us? Is it that change, finding out that God, Easter, resurrection, grace, love and joy are all much more than we have been taught, have perceived and experienced, produces an

array of emotions. The glory of Easter stunned them causing them to tremble in delight, shake with joy, be in bewilderment of the ever-growing Easter, astonished and amazed. They were confused regarding how to share Easter. They were frightened that their descriptions of Easter would limit someone's perception of the spectacular majesty of Easter. They were afraid for they knew many people were not yet ready to accept even a snippet of Easter. Some would be rigid sticking to current understandings of God, adamant that there are limits to Easter. They were afraid for they realized that the God limiting people would try to discredit them. They wanted with every fiber of their being to share the ever-expanding love of Easter with everyone.

Every attempt at an explanation of Easter is limiting. Throughout his gospel Mark gives the details with little to no commentary. Mark invites us to enter the story, to explore the mystery, to discover Easter for our self. Synthesis puts it this way. "Thus, we are to go back to the beginning and relive the story again and again through the prophetic words and actions of the life and ministry of Jesus. Proof of the Resurrection is the transformative power of Jesus alive in us. The silence at the end of Mark's Gospel is waiting to be filled in by people of every generation."

Reading the bible from beginning to end reveals humanity's ever-expanding understanding of God's love. God meets every generation where they are at, in their context, through their traditions, then God expands their love.

Rob Bell describes the Bible as "a fascinating, messy, unpredictable, sometimes breathtakingly beautiful, other times viscerally repulsive collection of stories and poems and letters and accounts and Gospels that reflect the growing conviction that we matter, that everything is connected and that human history is headed somewhere."

Every story in the Bible breaks through a limiting perspective of God at that time. In the beginning people once thought God was a distant Creator. They discovered God is with each of us. People once thought God wanted child sacrifice. They discovered God desires for every family to be loving, caring, and nurturing. So, people then thought God wants animal sacrifice. They discovered God wants us to love, for God designed us to love all people and care for the cosmos. People once thought God punished people with floods. They discovered God is not an angry God of wrath or destruction, rather a redeemer. People once thought you belong to God's family by circumcision, later by how you wear your clothes, later by how you cook your food, later by baptism, later by church membership, later by how you live your life, later by faith, now many have expanded to believe that we belong to God by God's grace.

Humanity's growing perception of God's love is seen in scripture accounts of the same event that were written at different times. 2 Samuel 24 states, "The anger of the Lord burned against Israel, and God incited David against them, saying, 'Go and take a census of Israel and Judah'." Several hundred years later 1 Chronicles 21 states, "Satan rose up against Israel and incited David to take a census." Back then you took a census to see if you had enough resources to win a war. In 600 B.C. people attributed all sorts of anger and violence to their gods, because that's how people perceived of the gods. They believed gods were mean and vindictive and you needed to sacrifice to them to appease their anger and keep them on your side. By 250 B.C. people evolved in their thinking about God. People discovered that God is good and a good God would never incite someone to do something bad, so there must have been some other force inciting David. So, the people substituted Satan as the inciter. Peter after the resurrection preached and wrote that Easter is for all people. The Apostle Paul took it even further, that God is gracious to all people. In reading Paul's circular letters, you can sense his desire to communicate Easter, yet he realizes he neither has full understanding nor the words. The progression of the Bible reflects the growing thinking of humanity. People once thought that God wanted them to do all sorts of unloving things. Thankful God is constantly expanding our understanding of God's love which inspires us to be more loving. What sort of unloving things are we doing today in the name of religion and blaming them on God? How is God expanding your love?

I am grateful for the people who had the courage to write their story in the Bible, to attempt to explain how God expanded their thinking and perception of God's love. It is confusing, frightening and terrifying to realize that your perception of God's love is way too small, to realize you have been taught limiting views of God, that restrict grace, joy, and peace. They were afraid to write of their amazing, bewildering, stunning, and astonishing discovery of a freshly perceived facet of God's love because people are uncomfortable with change. They were afraid to proclaim that God's love is bigger than what humanity has grasped from the beginning of time to their time because some people argue and fight to keep God small, distant, finite in grace, restricted in

resurrection, limited in Easter. Some people struggle to enjoy an ever-growing appreciation of God's love. Can we ever go too far in our expansion of grace, of resurrection? Is there an end to God? Or does God, and God's attributes, love, joy, peace, grace, go on forever in time, space and power? Should our thinking regarding Easter expand like science? In science we are constantly building on the knowledge and discoveries of those who have lived before us, to expand our knowledge, to discover new things and processes?

How is God expanding your love? Since Jesus rose from the dead to glorious eternal life God has expanded our understanding of Easter. Humanity has learned that numerous things humanity once did in God's name were misconceptions, that it was not God's will, that it limited love. Most of them were widely accepted, endorsed by religion and taught by parents. Such as the crusades, the abuses corrected by the Reformation, slavery, segregation, inequality between men and women, just to name a few. Easter will forever expand our love.

The writer, theologian, professor, pastor, Frederick Buechner tells of what was likely the best class he ever taught. "Late one winter afternoon as I was walking to a class that I had to teach, I noticed the beginnings of what promised to be one of the great local sunsets. There was just the right kind of clouds and the sky was starting to burn and the bare trees were black as soot against it. When I got to the classroom, the lights were all on, of course, and the students were chattering, and I was just about to start things off, when I thought of the sunset going on out there in the winter dusk, and on impulse, without warning, I snapped off the classroom lights. I am not sure that I ever had a happier impulse. The room faced west so as soon as it went dark, everything disappeared except what we could see through the windows, and there it was – the entire sky on fire by then, like the end of the world or the beginning of the world. You might think that somebody would have said something. Teachers do not usually plunge their students into that kind of darkness, and you might have expected a wisecrack or two. ... But the astonishing thing was that the silence was as complete as you can get it in a room full of people, and we all sat there unmoving for as long as it took the extraordinary spectacle to fade slowly away. For over 20 minutes nobody spoke a word. Nobody did anything."

Years later someone added another ending to the gospel of Mark. **Mark 1:8 "Then they briefly reported all this to Peter and his companions. Afterward Jesus himself sent them out from east to west with the sacred and unfailing message of salvation that gives eternal life. Amen."**

Years later someone added an even longer ending to Mark. What ending would you add to Mark today?

Adding an ending to Mark, that is trying to explain Easter, is frightening. For we know our perception is minuscule, our understanding infantile and our words inadequate. Christianity, our parents, church, and those who have disciplesd us did their best, at the time they dwelled on earth; yet, we know their understanding of God's will was distorted, and in some cases completely wrong. They, like us today, limit God's love. So, it takes courage to talk about Easter, for we know Easter is expanding forever, meaning every attempt will be inadequate.

Here is my feeble attempt for an ending to Mark: like a sunrise, the warmth of God's grace and the radiance of God's joy touched everyone transforming their lives. Resurrections teach each person that we all are free from all that restricts, oppresses, divides, and limits, so people grow in their love for self, others, and God. Each person lets God forgive them and mend their brokenness, igniting their gratitude that completed them. We let go of our burdens, teachings that divide, attitudes that constrain, kindling our compassion uniting everyone in harmony. We grew in our ability to embrace the mysterious and miraculous fueling our minds with grandeur visions and opening us up to robust emotions. We came to see each person's uniqueness as a treasure to cherish, to delight that each person reveals a distinctive aspect of God, so everyone around the entire world came together like a puzzle to give us all a fuller picture of God. We came to know that loss is a fleeting illusion, because everything that is good, every joy, every delight, every love is resurrected, preserved, enhanced, and eternal. Jesus has it all awaiting us in heaven. We became aware of an Easter dimension, that building blocks smaller than we can detect and galaxies so far that we are unaware and all in between, are all "love you" notes from God to us. We perceived that we are just beginning to plum the endless dimensions of God's love that will continually suffuse the cosmos with ever more spectacular blessings. All is ever expanding in love, joy, peace and grace. We are becoming more and more fully alive as we savor and share the ever-growing facets of God's love. Alleluia! How do you explain Easter? Amen