

Birthing Terror & Amazement
Easter Day
April 4, 2021
The Rev. Scott Walters

Walker Percy once wrote, “Why is it that, when you are shown a group photograph in which you are present, you always (and probably covertly) seek yourself out? To see what you look like? Don’t you know what you look like?” I first read those questions in my father-in-law Henri’s copy of *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self Help Book*. Ardelle and I hadn’t been married long, and I was glad to find a common affection with this warm, complicated, literary pentecostal preacher who’d be our children’s grandfather one day.

Henri’s wife, Cora, had been a sometime midwife’s assistant, who was present to dozens of births, 14 of which were her own, lucky number 13 being my beloved. Which is surely why everyone in town but her elders called her Mama Cora. The births she attended were mostly for women who were too poor to afford a hospital or too remote to get to one, and delivered their babies in their humble houses, and at least one in the back of a decommissioned school bus.

But when Mama Cora told stories about these births, I worried that Walker Percy might have called me out for another secret narcissism. Even though the heroes and main characters were all women, I couldn’t help looking over at the person in the story who looked most like me: the poor dad. The one pacing nervously in the hallway, or putting a kettle on to boil in the kitchen, where the women had sent him to get his fretful energy out of the room for a bit. My heart went out to the guy, out of place, lost in the cosmos as he watched these women who seemed so capable and at ease, even as they tended to this strange and impossible and ordinary miracle.

Unlike the gyroscope of baseless worries that spins in my interior, this one was fairly spot on. As a few years later, I was that pacing, anxious dad who, when the time was fulfilled, caught our second child, our daughter, as she slipped from her mother and into this world, like an otter from a rock. I was the dad who, until that moment, didn’t know that in addition to the wonder and the joy of it all, there would be a flash of knee folding terror. The sudden realization that as long as this perfect creature was alive in it, he would be exposed to the world’s cruelty and pain, not only through his own body, but through hers. She’d be a bundle of his own nerve endings, with a will of its own, drifting off and away, but still perfectly entangled by way of some quantum weirdness with his own fluttering heart.

Put another way, terror and amazement seized me. I said nothing of this to anyone. I was afraid.

I guess this is me again, seeking myself out in Mark’s strange resurrection account, in which the women at the tomb found themselves seized like a father at a birth. Terrified and amazed at once.

In Mark, there are three responses to Jesus’s death on Good Friday. There is the centurion, who, after Jesus’s last breath, says, “Truly this man was God’s Son.” Women are also looking on. Mary Magdalene and another Mary, whom we just saw at the tomb, as well as “many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.” Mark clearly wants us to see that none of the men who had been Jesus’s disciples were there when he died. And then there’s Joseph of Arimathea, a “respected member of the council,” who asks Pilate for the body of Jesus, places it in a tomb, and seals the opening with a stone.

We know these people. But let's spend a few minutes taking a fresh look at them, and see if doing so might help us locate ourselves anew in a familiar old story.

Ched Myers, perhaps the most important modern interpreter of Mark, says that many readers have misunderstood the responses of the centurion and Joseph of Arimathea. We see them as converts at the foot of the cross. Myers says that's far from certain in Mark. What is certain is that they are representatives of the two sources of opposition to Jesus, both of which were complicit in his death: the empire and the religious establishment.

Let's start with the centurion. He does speak the truth, that this was the son of God. But he bears no mark of discipleship, especially according to Mark's definition, which is to drop everything, take up one's cross, and follow. A few verses later, the centurion is summoned by Pilate to confirm that the crucified one is dead. He dutifully replies that he is. He and his soldiers have made sure of it. He looks more like a minion of the emperor than a disciple of Jesus.

And remember, the purpose of crucifixion was to make an execution gruesomely public. Crosses were visible reminders of what opponents of the empire had coming. So, over in the gospel of John, when Pilate nails "King of the Jews" above Jesus's head, it wasn't to honor him. It was to let people know who's really in charge: not this Jewish king. Similarly, with no evidence of conversion, the centurion's calling Jesus son of a god might even be something of an imperial brag. Elevating the importance of the ones the empire has killed or conquered is how empire elevates itself. Death is how empire establishes its realm.

Joseph of Arimathea is also someone warmly assumed to be a disciple, kindly offering to bury Jesus. Over in John, he's called a "secret disciple" along with Nicodemus. But in Mark, it's harder to see him in such a positive light. He's a "respected member of the council," which would not conjure up happy associations. And the word used for "respected" also suggests he was wealthy, another strike against him in Mark. He was a wealthy member of the religious council who wanted the empire to execute Jesus.

We're also told he was, "waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God," but nobody thought its arrival would look like another executed Jew. It makes at least as much sense to see Joseph as someone who just wanted to get a Jewish body off a cross and sealed away. The council got the empire to do its bidding, but after that, the desecrated body was an embarrassment. Joseph wraps it in a cloth, lays it in the tomb, and rolls the stone in front the opening, sealing the horrible story for good. The two Marys, we're told, were looking on. The two Marys watch the whole disgraceful thing.

You see, this respected member of the religious council did not finish the work of religious preparation. That's why the women return early Sunday morning. To give the body of their friend the proper Jewish burial it deserved.

And, not to belabor this, but don't you think that if Joseph were a true disciple, the women might have gone to him for help rolling away the stone he'd sealed the tomb with? As it is, they have no idea how they'll get into the tomb. They expect no help from the men. Not any of them. But still they take their spices, and they go. There is work to be done. Women's work, it seems.

When they arrive, as you know, the tomb is miraculously open. It is as open, we might even say, as the wombs of Sarah, and Rachel, and Hannah, and Samson's mother, and Elizabeth, and...in a different way from the rest, but maybe not as much as we think, Mary, the mother of the one who's suddenly gone missing from this tomb we thought was closed for good.

Is this not another opening, by God, of new life that involved the power of no man? An opening of new life, by God, *in spite of*, in *defiance* even, of the power of all these powerful men?

Terror and amazement seize the women. For the powers that always seem to run the world, may not be the ultimate powers after all. None of their representatives are to be found. Only the women are present. Only these faithful representatives of everything the emperors and authorities are not.

And what they're told by that strange young man in white is that Jesus has been raised and is on the way to Galilee. Galilee. The place where Jesus of Nazareth was from. Galilee. Where, in the first moments of Mark, his ministry of healing and making disciples beholden to a different kingdom, a different kind of power began. The story, in other words, is beginning again. Or beginning anew. And being seized by terror and amazement makes all the sense in the world at a birth.

I've taken all this trouble with characters we thought we knew, because I believe, as Annie Dillard said, "There never was a more holy age than ours, and never a less." And unless the Resurrection seizes us with the terror and amazement of a new life come to term, a life we could neither summon nor control... If it's just one debatable fact among others, then it's just another dusty, lifeless object among the furniture of our religious imaginations.

But if we begin with terror and amazement we've known, we can enter the redemption story from right here. Because there never was a more holy age than ours. Our strange pandemic age included.

It's not so common to baptize a child on an Easter morning. But the pandemic has created a bit of a baptismal backlog for us, so it's just one more convention we're happy to set aside. Just as we traded the dusty ceiling of our beloved Calvary church for this magnificent April sky. But maybe little Bayne's presence here, as well as his parents, Morgan and Wil, recent nervous witnesses to his entrance into the world, can help wrench you and me into the power of the resurrection as well.

Because there never was a more holy day than this one, and never a less.

Walker Percy was a Christian. And he had some thoughts about why we look for ourselves in group photographs. The chief one being that the greatest mystery in the cosmos to you, is you. We're often distracted and captivated by the powerful and the important and the heroic, however we've learned to define them. We wonder at the Pilates and the centurions and the respected members of our councils. The places and people among whom what matters in the world really happens. Or so we think.

But today, go home and pull out that old group photo. Look in on the mystery of your very own self until that self becomes the mysterious stranger it is. Look with the attention of Mary Magdalene and the other women, not with that part of you where you feel like emperor of some small realm. Look with the parts of you that carry no weight at all in the world. The overlooked and secret parts you'd just as soon no one find out about. The hurts, the failures, the wounds, the fears. Look at that somebody in the photo with the eyes of a nobody in the gospel story. And then let the terror and amazement gather, that the ordinary sort of sinner Christ rose from the grave, to birth into a new life, is you.