

Each of the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John tell the story of women coming to the tomb after Jesus had been crucified on a cross. The four gospels do have some differences concerning how many women came, what their names were, and who they encountered once they arrived at the tomb.

Today we are going to hear Mark's version of events. Mark's version is probably the least read version in Easter Sunday worship services. That is because Mark's version is very short. Mark's version is also unique in how there is not an agreed upon conclusion to the gospel of Mark.

I invite you to open your Bible or one of the pew Bibles to Mark 16. You will notice that the book ends after verse 8. However, there is an add-on section. You will see in the pew Bibles these words after verse 8: "The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20." So, what is going on here?

Most scholars assume that Mark's version concludes at the end of verse 8. However, the assumption is that later scribes added these final verses. There is not one original version of the Bible. There are several different early versions that modern interpreters study and try to translate in the most authentic way that they know.

Modern scholars interpret this discrepancy at the end of Mark as an attempt by later biblical writers to add these verses because these scribes did not like the way the gospel ended at verse 8. In fact, many scholars assume that this add on section is borrowed material from the other gospels.

With this in mind, let's read the first 8 verses from Mark 16 and then also read the add on version. Pay attention to how it ends at verse 8 and why you think later writers would be uncomfortable with this ending.

Read Mark 16:1-8, 9-20 (Special music)

Alex Heard tells about his search for his cat that disappeared one cold, winter's night. Listen to his version of the details:

"There was a lot of fur," said a woman named Diane. I was standing with my wife, Susan, on the back patio at Diane's house, looking at a dozen little off-white fur balls that were getting nudged around by a breeze. Kneeling amid old snow and empty cat-food bowls, I collected a sample that went into a tiny plastic bag, like I was working a crime scene.

Ridiculous? Sure, but it felt right. A cat had been in a rumble out here, and we were trying to figure out if it might be ours.

Diane was a kind person who had called to report the latest lead in the agonizing search for Sami, a handsome, friendly, long-haired male that we adopted in early 2012. He showed up one morning at our house in Santa Fe, looking hungry, lonely, and in need of immediate TLC.

Several excellent years followed, during which time Sami blimped up to 13.5 pounds, enjoyed life, and escaped harm. He disappeared just before sunrise on the morning of December 12, 2015, when Susan let him out after he'd slept most of the night on a living room chair. Usually he would nose around for a while and then sit near the front door, waiting to be let back in and fed. But on that day, he didn't return.

It was now a month later. It snowed hard the day Sami vanished, plus a couple more times after that; most nights, the temperature plunged into the low teens. Various attempts to find him—a barrage of classified ads, posters, flyers, and boots-on-the-ground searches—hadn't worked, and I had trouble imagining how Sami could survive that long in such frigid conditions.

I also had a sick feeling he didn't make it off our property alive, because of something I saw that first morning: a big drop of blood next to his outdoor kibble bowl. The blood had been partially smeared onto a slab of flagstone by...I didn't know what. I assumed he had been carted off and devoured.

Sami's disappearance cast a black cloud over our home. Every day, I slogged around in despair, and Susan was waking up in the middle of the night, crying. I scrubbed away the bloodstain and decided not to tell her about it yet—a white lie that put me in a bind. Though I felt certain Sami had died, I had to proceed as if he might turn up at any moment.

On Christmas Eve, we got a phone call that appeared to be a break in the case. That's when a woman named Susanna called, and the trail got hot in a hurry. Susanna lived with her husband in a near-by apartment complex, with a couch on the porch, near the spot where a man had thought he saw Sami run under a car.

She called on January 15 and said a cat matching Sami's description was turning up periodically and sleeping on the couch. One night, she opened the front door to feed it, but it ran off. I drove over the next day and showed her photos.

Susanna seemed sure that the cat she had seen was Sami. We agreed on a plan. She would put food out. If the cat showed up again, she would call me—no matter what time it was—and I would zoom over.

Three days later, on the night of January 18, just after 10:00 p.m., my phone rang. It was Susanna: The cat was on the couch. In a few minutes I was speeding over there with a flashlight, food, and a carry bag. My heart was racing as I slapped the steering wheel, feeling psyched. I parked a block away, so I could calm down and quietly approach the jackpot zone.

After my initial approach, I got down on all fours and crawled to a spot in front of Susanna's unit. Then I peeped over a low wooden fence and saw a resting cat that looked like Sami, though it was hard to be sure in the dark. I turned on my flashlight and held it up, pulse thudding in my ears. The light's glow was weak, so it only helped a little. The cat noticed, stood on the arm of the couch, and stared straight at me.

Or I should say: through me. There was no recognition in its dark eyes, and after a few seconds it jumped down and ran off. The cat looked almost exactly like Sami, but it wasn't quite him. (The giveaway: not fat enough.) Groan. Now I had to go home and tell Susan that the hopeful signs were a mirage. I hadn't been that miserable in years.

The next day, around midday, I drove to Susanna's place to collect some kibble I'd left with her. I went home after that to eat lunch and pout. Pulling into the driveway, I saw a little beige blob weakly kneeling between two dormant rose bushes, about halfway back toward the garage. I knew right away who it was.

After putting my forehead on the steering wheel and saying a few words of thanks, I called Susan at her job and shouted into the phone: "We've got him!" Then I started moving. Sami had been out in the cold for five and a half weeks. There might not be much time to spare.

When he was weighed later by a vet, he was down to 7.5 pounds—he'd lost nearly half his body weight—but otherwise seemed fine. That night, Sami and Susan had a long petting-and-purring lovefest, after which, uncharacteristically, he glued himself to my lap for hours.

Susan diligently closed the loop by placing newspaper ads that announced Sami's return. These prompted about a dozen more calls from well-wishers, who reminded me of how much a happy ending can mean to people.

"I lost my own cat—I had to say goodbye to him," one woman told us in a message. "I lost my brother unexpectedly in October. I just needed some good news. Thank you for letting us know that Sami came home."

In the so-called real ending to Mark's version of Easter, the women flee the tomb in terror and amazement, and they say nothing for they are afraid. I don't know about you, but that pretty much describes what faith in the resurrection is like for me at times.

Following Jesus is not always about Easter lilies and emotional highs. Sometimes following Jesus guides us toward places of doubt, fear, and uncertainty. In the story I shared, Alex lamented that he wished he had not let his cat out that night.

There are times we lament choices that we have made in our past. There are those occasions when we hope something is going to work out only to discover disappointment once again. We find ourselves giving up and wondering why God seems so distant.

But in Mark's version, the women are told to go forward and there they will see Jesus. Maybe that is what we need to hear this Easter. We need to hear encouraging words to keep going forward and believe that somewhere in our future we will meet the risen Lord once again.

Easter has come again. Easter is a reminder that there are stories with happy endings. Easter is a story which reminds us, like the story we heard today, that we ultimately must give up control and trust. Trust that somehow and some way it will work out.

Sometimes it is hard to say the words. But we must say it over and over again. We must continue to shout the words:

Christ is risen!!! Christ is Risen indeed!!! AMEN.

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-Heard, Alex, https://www.outsideonline.com/2283571/where-hell-our-cat?utm_medium=email&utm_source=narratively&utm_campaign=partner

-Given: April 1, 2018 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)