

University of Dayton eCommons

Religious Studies Faculty Publications

Department of Religious Studies

10-25-2016

Response: A Scary Resurrection

William L. Portier

University of Dayton, wportier1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Portier, William L., "Response: A Scary Resurrection" (2016). *Religious Studies Faculty Publications*. 124.
https://ecommons.udayton.edu/rel_fac_pub/124

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Religious Studies at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religious Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Response

A Scary Resurrection

_____ William Portier _____

AS ONE WHOSE CHURCH has not called him to proclaim the gospel to a congregation every Sunday, and, as one who has heard Dr. Kennedy preach, I approach the task of writing a “critique” of his Easter sermon with trepidation. Kennedy’s text is the first eight verses of Mark’s last chapter, his “original ending,” as some have it. It ends starkly: “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mk 16.8). Fear silences us and keeps us from fully feeling the “resurrection power” God pours into “our fearful world.” Kennedy wants us “to dampen our dark fears” so we can really hear the proclamation of Jesus’s resurrection on Easter.

Throughout his gospel, Mark plays with fear and faith. Jesus himself juxtaposes them when he calms the storm in 4:40. He has been asleep in the disciples’ boat, an ancient image for the church. “Why are you terrified?” he asks his fearful followers, “Do you not yet have faith?” The storm-tossed boat returns in Mk 6. Jesus walking on the water terrifies the disciples. They don’t realize it was he coming toward them (6:50).

As in this last example, God’s powerful acts cause fear. Earlier in the gospel, the cure of the Gerasene demoniac seizes the people with fear (5:15). After Jesus heals her, the woman suffering from a hemorrhage approaches him trembling with fear (5:33). To Jairus, the synagogue official whose daughter had just been reported dead, Jesus says simply, “Do not be afraid; just have faith” (5:36).

“Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief,” (9:24), the prayer of another father pleading for an afflicted child, suggests that fear and faith are not simply juxtaposed. Neither are they incompatible nor mutually exclusive. Rather, as Kennedy makes clear, they are mixed together in varying proportions. The people who are afraid in Mark’s gospel have approached Jesus. They want to believe. “They were on the way, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus went ahead of them. They were amazed, and those who followed were afraid” (10:32). As in the Statler Brothers’ old song, “Would You Recognize Jesus?” they have trouble making sense of the scheme of reckoning upon which God bases his mighty acts. We expect to see Jesus driving a chariot of the Lord, but he’s more likely to arrive in a ‘49 Ford.

So, when we read in 16:8 that, upon hearing the first Easter proclamation, the loyal disciples, who had gone to anoint Jesus, fled in fear, we are shocked. As Kennedy emphasizes, however, believing in the deferred happy ending promised by Easter is hard. The women at the tomb “believed, but they were still scared.” They were at faith’s first stage. The Greek verb Mark most often uses for being afraid contains the root of our English word *phobia*. We have a phobia for God’s mighty acts. They unsettle our expectations and our normal places in the world.

Instead of being surprised at this verse, we need to ask two questions: What are we afraid of? And who are *we*? Mark’s disciples get really scared when Jesus starts talking about his own suffering and its connection to his messianic office (9:32). The chief priests and the scribes feared Jesus because of his effects on the crowds, and, by implication, their position (11:18; 12:12). Both groups worry about what will happen to their place in the scheme of things.

Kennedy speaks of “Christ-haunted” souls, including himself, who “worship with our fingers crossed.” In the “loyal struggle” of “fearful believers” such as those we find in Mark, Kennedy speaks of resurrection raising “what is dead in your heart . . . dead in your sense of boredom and feeling that this is all there is.” As a relatively well-off white Christian, I recognize what Kennedy evokes here. When I look up at the vastness of the night sky, I hope I’m looking at God’s grandeur proclaimed. The thought of an unimaginably vast twinkling abyss haunts me just the same. But these are relatively comfortable, nearly domesticated fears.

Kennedy needs to remind people like me of other kinds of fears which might put meat on the bones of his gesture in the direction of social justice. He mentions our economic fears but then he loses me with the “female

goose that lays golden eggs.” Is this the free market? Why not say so? If not, what am I missing? Aren’t there deeper fears? In a racially divided city such as Dayton, the kinds of fears that Ta-nehisi Coates relates to his son in *Between the World and Me* are alien to me as a white man. Facing them jeopardizes my position in the scheme of things, much as Jesus threatened the disciples with talk of his suffering, or the chief priests and the scribes by inspiring the crowds. Though related to them, these fears go deeper than economics, touching our familiar place in the world, threatening to overturn it in the interests of those who suffer unjustly.

First among the women who went to the tomb early on Easter morning is Mary Magdalen. Immediately following the original ending, she is identified as one “out of whom Jesus had driven seven demons” (16:9). In Mark, Jesus casting out demons was one of the things that made people afraid. Sure enough, when Mary proclaims the resurrection after Jesus appears to her, his companions close their ears and do not believe. To which Mary or prophetic Miriam proclaiming God’s mighty acts are we closing our ears? What mighty acts is God now doing in our midst? How must we change our scheme of reckoning in order to recognize Jesus risen when he comes toward us?