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Drawn by Sacred Mystery: A Journey into Hope
Barbara E. Reid, O.P.

[Slide 1] Thank you for the invitation to reflect on being drawn by sacred mystery in our journey into hope. As a biblical scholar, I am drawn immediately to the narratives at the end of the Gospels that recount the passion, death, resurrection, ascension, glorification, giving of the Spirit, and sending of the disciples on mission as those narratives capture the very heart of sacred mystery.

I have often suggested that we read the Gospels backwards, since the whole narrative is told from the perspective of those who experienced the mystifying death of Jesus and its aftermath and told the story of his life in light of that paschal mystery.

Perhaps the most mysterious Gospel ending is that of Mark. But in order to grasp it, you must know all that came before. [Slide 2] A central question in the first half of Mark is “Who is this?” (e.g., Mark 2:7; 4:41; 6:2), his identity is shrouded in mystery. The question cannot be rightly answered if you’ve only seen Jesus as teacher, preacher, and healer, without the last part of the story. At the midpoint of the Gospel, Peter rightly identifies Jesus as Messiah (8:29), but he is far from grasping what that means. Like him, we continue to struggle with the mystery of suffering, dying, and rising.

At the heart of this mystery is self-surrender to love, the refusal to put ourselves and our concerns at the center of the universe, the recognition of our rightful place in the vast web of interrelationship with all created beings, and the willingness to let go even of life itself in loving and advocating for the most vulnerable among us.

The choice to surrender self to Love even to the point of death is not easy nor is the way always clear, although, like Jesus, at key moments in our life we are given grace-filled experiences that show us the next steps. [Slide 3] The Gospels recount that at his Baptism, Jesus knew with utter assurance that he was God’s beloved in whom God was so delighted. Jesus sees “the heavens torn apart,” just the way God manifested God’s self in Ezekiel 1:1 and he saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove, just as the Spirit hovered over the watery chaos at Creation in Genesis 1:1 (Mark 1:9-11). This experience of God’s presence and power served as a touchstone throughout his earthly sojourn.

At another key turning point, when Jesus was discerning whether to leave the Galilee and set his face to go to Jerusalem, he had another revelatory experience. [Slide 4] He had gone up a mountain to pray (Luke 9:28) and there God revealed the next steps of his journey. The appearance of his face changed as he entered deeply into the mystery of God’s all-consuming love. Like Moses, whose face glowed after his encounter with God on Mount Sinai, Jesus’s face irradiated his encounter with Holy Mystery, who affirmed that he was to accomplish a new

exodos in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).¹ The word *exodos* in Greek is a compound of *hodos*, “the way,” and *ex-*, “out.” It has a double meaning. *Exodos* of course recalls “the way out” of slavery of the Israelites from Egypt. But it also means “the way out” of this life, i.e., death (see 2 Pet 1:15). Jesus understands that he is to go to Jerusalem [Slide 5] and he will undergo death there, and his death will be the new liberation for all God’s beloved from anything that enslaves them. [Slide 6] In this profound experience of Holy Mystery, Jesus is assured once again with signs of divine presence: an overshadowing cloud, two heavenly companions, Moses and Elijah, and the divine voice that reiterates God’s all-consuming love.

But when Jesus approaches the end of his journey, those visible, tangible signs of divine presence are absent. [Slide 7] In Gethsemane, even the support from Jesus’s followers vanishes as first they sleep and then they flee (Mark 14:32-42). As Jesus discerns whether the path he is on toward death is really God’s will, there is no cloud, no voice, no heavenly companions, seemingly no response from God. He clings to what he has experienced before: he knows he is beloved and that his death will not take place outside of God’s will for life to the full for all. But how will God bring forth liberated life through an excruciating death? That is yet shrouded in mystery.

[Slide 8] In Mark’s account, Jesus dies without getting an answer. Moreover, he feels utterly abandoned; the disciples have fled, save the faithful women who are keeping watch. His last words are, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34). Jesus turns to Psalm 22, as he abandons himself fully to Holy Mystery without seeing the end that is unfolding. He dies before he can voice the verses of the Psalm that say: “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God” (Ps 22:9-10).

[Slide 9] Mark notes that the Galilean women—Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome—who had been following Jesus and providing for him when he was in Galilee, had been watching while he was crucified and saw where he was buried (15:40-47). [Slide 10] Early in the morning on the first day of the week—one of those thin spaces, where Holy Mystery tends to be most manifest, the women go back to the tomb. [Slide 11] When they enter it, they see a young man dressed in white and they are greatly alarmed (*exethambēthēsan*, 16:5). He tells them not to be, that the crucified One has been raised, and he directs them, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” [Slide 12] The Gospel concludes: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement (*tromos kai ekstasis*) had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).
The end.

What kind of ending is that—with terror and failure—to a story that claims to be good news (Mark 1:1)? [Slide 13] Early scribes fixed it. They cobbled together pieces from other traditions and added some resurrection appearance stories.

[Slide 13a] The so-called “Shorter Ending” says that the women did tell Peter and others all that had been commanded them.

¹ English translations such as NRSVCE that render the Greek *exodos* as “departure” mask the important nuances of the word. Better are translations such as NABRE and NRSVue that render it “exodus.”

[Slide 13b] Another scribe adds an appearance to Mary Magdalene (now labeled 16:9-11).

[Slide 13c] Another adds an appearance to two disciples that has echoes of Luke's Emmaus story (16:12-13).

Another one adds a commission to the disciples (16:13-18).

Yet another has Jesus ascend and wraps it up with the disciples going out and proclaiming the good news everywhere" (16:19-20).

There. That's better. Now we can close the book and we have a happily-ever-after ending.

But that's not the way Mark ended it. Let's look again, first at what the women saw then let's look again at their reaction.

[Slide 14] Six times Mark calls attention to what the women saw—in the crucifixion scene, the women are watching (*theōrouσαι*, 15:40), keeping faithful vigil at the cross all day from the time of Jesus's crucifixion at nine o'clock in the morning (15:25), through the darkness of noon (15:33), his death around three in the afternoon (15:33, 37), to the evening and his removal from the cross and entombment (15:42-47).² [Slide 15] When they come to the tomb after the sabbath, they look again and see (*anablepsasai theōrousin*, 16:4) the stone already rolled back; they see (*eidon*, 16:5) a young man who tells them to look (*ide*, 16:6) at where he had lain and then go to Galilee: "there you will see [*opsesthe*] him" (16:7).

When the women flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone, on one level, they, like many persons who suffer post-traumatic stress, may not have been able to give voice right away to the horror they had witnessed. On a theological level, their silence is the proper response when coming face to face with Holy Mystery. [Slide 16] Their silence matches the silence at the beginning of creation before God speaks creation into being. Mark's Gospel opened with, "The beginning of the good news" (Mark 1:1); it now moves to the beginning of a new creation that that is emerging. No words can adequately express what is happening.

The other two words [Slide 17] that describe the women's reaction are *tromos* and *ekstasis*. *Tromos*, "trembling," is caused both by witnessing horrific death and by awe at the power of God, as when all the people trembled when God manifested Godself at Mount Sinai in Exod 20:18. The overwhelming beauty and majesty of God's power manifest in creation also causes trembling, as in the book of Job, when Elihu says "At this also my heart trembles and leaps out of its place" (Job 37:1). And if I understood correctly—here is where we'll need Brian Swimme to elaborate—an article in the New York Times last June says the whole cosmos is trembling, reverberating, with a hum of gravitational waves.³

The women's trembling is accompanied by *ekstasis*, ecstasy, that takes them outside themselves. Ecstasy is a hallmark of mystical experience. In cosmic terms, ecstasy allows us to experience a dissolution of the boundaries between oneself and Holy Mystery and all of God's beloved ones in the cosmos.

² In 15:47, the verb *etheōroun*, "saw," is in the imperfect, emphasizing their continuing action as witnesses.

³ Katrina Miller, "The Cosmos is Thrumming with Gravitational Waves, Astronomers Find," *New York Times*, June 28, 2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/science/astronomy-gravitational-waves-nanograv.html>.

This ending of Mark's Gospel points the way ahead for us: a way marked by contemplative silence and trembling in the face of Holy Mystery, by letting go, and by ecstatic movement into interconnectedness and transformation.

[Slide 18] The letting go and self-emptying that is asked of us is depicted well in the empty tomb story in the Gospel of John. In that version, Mary Magdalene, representing the whole of the community of beloved disciples, comes alone to the tomb. When she recognizes the Risen One, he tells her, "Do not continue to hold on to me" (20:17), that is, do not cling to the way they had known him as an earthly human being. He points her to the believing community: [Slide 19] "Go to my brothers and sisters"—it is there that he will be experienced as palpable.⁴

[Slide 20] In John's Gospel, Mary does go and does announce to the other disciples that she has seen the Lord and all that he told her. But the disciples do not yet know how to move beyond their fear. That evening, as John 20:19-23 tells it, Jesus came and stood in their midst. [Slide 21] He says, "Peace be with you," and shows them his wounds, and again says, "Peace be with you," verbally surrounding with peace all the woundedness they carry. And then he says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." How can they be sent on mission in such a broken and fearful state?

Three key movements: [Slide 22] first, they need to open themselves to receive the Spirit that is empowering them. Jesus breathes on them, just as the Creator breathed the breath of life into the first living being (Gen 2:7). [Slide 23] Then, he urges them to forgive everyone and everything they can: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." Finally, they have to hold on to everyone; don't allow any to be lost. Many translations of John 20:23 say: "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But that's not what the Greek says. There is no word "sins" in the text. The sense is "whomever you hold are held fast." It is much the same as when Jesus tells his disciples in John 6:39: "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day." Or when Jesus is being arrested and he says, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me" (18:9).⁵

What I think of when I hear this verse, is the address that [Slide 24] Sr. Thea Bowman gave to the US Bishops in 1989 not long before she died.⁶ She finished her address by asking the bishops to sing with her and she intoned, "We shall overcome..." The bishops stood and began to sing with her, but she stopped them, and said, "No, brothers, not like that. You have to take the hand of the brother next to you as you sing." And so they did. As they began again, she stopped them once more and said, "No, not like that, brothers, you have to [Slide 25] cross your arms like we did in the Civil Rights marches." And she smiled and said, "that's right, brothers, you have to move closer together to do that. That's how we did it then so that when the dogs came, and the water canons came, and the police with their batons came, we wouldn't lose any one of the brothers or sisters in the struggle."

⁴ See further Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe. Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2023), 219-220.

⁵ See Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Resurrection (of the Body) in the Fourth Gospel. A Key to Johannine Spirituality," in *Life in Abundance. Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*. Ed. John R. Donahue (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 168-198; esp. 186-187.

⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOV0nQkjuoA>.

[Slide 26] As we let ourselves be drawn ever more deeply into Holy Mystery, the Gospels point the way for us to journey in resurrection hope. Resurrection is not a happy ending to a tragic death. Nor is it the fulfillment of all our expectations. It is a mysterious, baffling gift that draws into self-emptying, interconnectedness, and transformation. For two millenia, we spoke of how all humans would participate in resurrected life. [Slide 27] Today we speak of deep resurrection.⁷ Recognizing our interconnectedness with Earth and all living things, we now envision the whole evolving world of life will be transfigured by the resurrecting action of the Creator Spirit. Our response to such a gift is awe, self-emptying, and holding on to each beloved one as we create ever wider circles of love in mission.

⁷ See e.g., Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 208-209; Gerhard Lohfink, *Is This All There Is? On Resurrection and Eternal Life*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018). Ilija Delio offers a quantum understanding of resurrection in *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness*, Catholicity in the Twenty-First Century (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 83-85.