

RESURRECTION

(Mark 16:1-8)

The story of Jesus' resurrection sets the shame, defeat, and injustice of the crucifixion in the context of the glory, victory, and justice of the new age of the kingdom of God. Having experienced Jesus' death and burial from the perspective of the women, listeners are invited to join them on their trip to the tomb where they find a young man quietly announcing Jesus' resurrection. The story ends with the commission of the women to tell the story of Jesus' resurrection. The final reversal in the story, as Mark recounts it, is the women's response of flight and silence. Their response to the commission is both completely understandable and utterly wrong. The story invites listeners to be open to the purging of their fear in response to this commission.

In the earlier stories, I have preserved with very minor changes the Revised Standard Version translation of the Greek text. In this story, however, the meaning and impact of the story is intimately related to verbal threads that are not preserved in the Revised Standard Version translation. For this reason, it is necessary to give a translation for storytelling that renders those verbal threads in English.

The Story

And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.
And very early on the first day of the week they went out to the tomb, as the sun was rising.

And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?"
And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back. For it was very large.

And going into the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right hand, clothed in a white robe, and they were amazed.
And he said to them, "Do not be amazed.

You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised.

He is not here.
See the place where they laid him.

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee.
There you will see him, as he told you."

And going out from the tomb, the women fled.
For trembling and astonishment had come upon them.

And they told nothing to anyone.
For they were afraid.

Learning the Story

Verbal Threads

"The tomb." The story is structured around the women's relationship to the tomb: "They went to the tomb" (vs. 2); "And going into the tomb" (vs. 5), "And going out of the tomb" (vs. 8). This verbal thread, which introduces each of the movements in the women's trip to the tomb, is the primary link between the parts of the story.

"The stone." The stone episode is organized around this verbal thread: "Who will roll away the stone" (vs. 3); "the stone was rolled back" (vs. 4). This verbal thread picks up the motif at the end of the burial story of Joseph rolling the stone over the door of the tomb (15:46).

"Amazed." The climax of the description of what the women saw in the tomb is that they were amazed (vs. 5). The English word is a poor substitute for the Greek (*ekthambeomai*), which has connotations of both terror and wonder. It is a highly emotional word that captures the full range of their emotions: amazement, terror, wonder. The young man's response is a word of calm: "Do not be amazed" (vs. 6). This verbal thread is the objective correlative of this initial interaction between the women and the young man, which moves from panic to not-panic.

"Go and tell"/"they told nothing." The usual English translation, "they said nothing," does not preserve the verbal links of the original narrative, therefore the change here. The conflict between the young man's command and the women's response is concretized in this verbal thread. The young man says, "Go and tell the disciples and Peter"; the women "told nothing to anyone" (vss. 6, 8).

"For." The last two episodes conclude with two climactically short sentences that share a common key word, "for" (vs. 8b, d). This conjunction (in Greek, *gar*) is consistently used by Mark to introduce narrative comments. These narrative comments explain why the women fled from the tomb ("For trembling and astonishment had come upon them") and why they told no one anything ("For they were afraid"). This one-word verbal thread ties these two climactic episodes together.

The young man's announcement to the women is the most complex part of the story and the most difficult to learn. The structure is straightforward and, once recognized, is easy to remember. The first episode has the theme of amazement. The second is organized on the antinomy of crucifixion and resurrection: "Jesus who was crucified"/ "He has been raised." The third addresses the evidence of the resurrection: his absence and the command to look at the place where he had been laid. The fourth is the commission to go and tell and the promise of Jesus' appearance to them.

Listening to the Story

This story has an unprecedented number of short sentences. This indicates the tempo at which the story was told. The story goes from moderato to slow to very slow. It is in

musical terms a long and steady retard. The short sentences are each given a full breath. As a result, the story gradually slows down to a climax of joyful intensity and poignant mystery.

The time is the story's first note. "When the sabbath was past" means Saturday evening after sundown. "Very early on the first day of the week" means Sunday morning. Just as the listener can count Peter's three denials (14:68, 70-71), so also here the listener can count the days: sabbath, the day after sabbath. Add these days to the reference to the day before sabbath, the day in which the burial took place (15:42), and the total is three days. The possibility of the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy of resurrection on the third day (8:31; 9:31; 10:34) is thereby subtly introduced. It is interesting that the fulfillment of both this prophecy and the prophecy of Peter's denial is confirmed in the narrative by inviting the listener to count in threes (see 14:66-71).

The recital of the women's names recalls their presence at Jesus' death and burial and their faithfulness to him both in Galilee and in his moment of greatest need. This repetition of their names also reinforces the listener's positive identification with the women and their grief. Of all the followers of Jesus, only the women were present at his death to mourn for him.

The episode of the trip to the tomb ends with another allusion to the dawning of a new time. Ever since the deep darkness that introduced the recounting of Jesus' death (15:33), the atmosphere of the story itself has been darkness and gloom. The burial was on Friday evening just before dark, and the women bought spices Saturday night after dark (16:1). This night imagery is a clue to the tone of the storyteller. Everything is darkness and death. The trip to the tomb begins in the darkness of the early morning, but it ends in the light-"as the sun was rising" (vs. 2).

The stone episode intensifies the identification with the women. The report of the women's question is the first direct expression of their grief (vs. 3). The content of their question is factual but the emotions implied in their words are grief and sorrow.

The discovery of the stone rolled back is described through the women's eyes: "And looking up, they saw" (vs. 4). The narrator's tone is surprise and shock. The amazement of the women thereby expressed is explained in the concluding comment to the listeners: "For it was very large" (vs. 4b, author's trans.). Here Mark explains why the women were so stunned that the stone had been rolled back.

The entry into the tomb has the haunting tone of ghost stories and descriptions of the place of the dead. The discovery of the young man is once again reported from the women's point of view: "And going into the tomb, they saw" (vs. 5). The surprise of what they saw is related to the motifs in the story it picks up:

And a *young man* followed him *clothed* in a linen cloth over his nakedness. (14:51 – the climax of the flight of the disciples at the arrest)

And you will see the Son of Man *seated on the right hand* of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven. (14:62 – Jesus' messianic confession to the high priest)

And going into the tomb, they saw a *young man seated on the right hand, clothed* in a white robe and they were amazed. (16:5)

Earlier in the story, the image of a young man clothed in a linen garment symbolizes the shame of the flight of the disciples. The image is here reversed into a symbol of divine presence, a young man clothed in a white robe. Furthermore, his being seated on the right hand is verbally connected with the Son of man's position of power. This image characterizes the young man as a divine messenger who stands near the throne of God.

The storyteller's description of the amazement and alarm of the women is the first explicit insight into the women's emotions. Until now in the story, their emotions had to be inferred from the narrator's tone. This direct description of their alarm creates a strong sympathetic identification with the women.

The young man first calms their fears. As we have seen in the angel's response to the shepherds, this is in the best tradition of angels in New Testament narratives (Luke 2:10; also 1:29-30).

The young man's reference to Jesus as the one who was crucified recalls the shame of Jesus' execution. It would be similar to describing someone as "Jesus, who was executed in an electric chair." The announcement of the resurrection is only one word in Greek, *agertha*, which means "He has been raised." The passive tense indicates that this was an action of God. This one word, spoken in a soft and calm voice, is the supreme fulfillment of Jesus' passion and resurrection prophecies and the confirmation that Jesus is the Messiah.

The evidence of the resurrection is the empty tomb. The young man's pointing to the place where Jesus was laid refers back to the climax of the burial episode:

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where he was laid. (15:47)

See the place where they laid him. (16:6d)

Again, the words that were the sign of defeat are transformed into the sign of victory. And, because of the number of times the storyteller has described what the women saw, it is possible here for the listeners to visualize that empty tomb.

The young man commissions the women to go and tell (vs. 7). The message the women are to tell the disciples is a paraphrase of Jesus' earlier promise to the disciples:

But after I have been raised, I will go before you into Galilee. (14:28)

He is going before you into Galilee. (16:7)

The young man's message concludes with the promise of an appearance. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the disciples' flight and Peter's denial, his message holds out the promise of reconciliation with Jesus. The final emphasis is on the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies "just as he said to you" (vs. 7). The young man's tone in this climactic commission is full of joy and energy.

The plot of the entire Gospel here reaches its conclusion. The prophecies of Jesus are being fulfilled. Many more remain to be fulfilled, but the fulfillment of the resurrection prophecy makes the fulfillment of the others certain. The resurrection confirms Jesus' status as both a true prophet and as the Messiah. The earlier signs of defeat in his passion and death are now transformed into signs of victory. The expectation of condemnation for the disciples and Peter is changed into the promise of reconciliation. The place of grief in the tomb is now a place of joy. The humiliation of a young man's naked flight is changed into the glory of a young man in a white robe seated at the right hand. Jesus' way of suffering and death, which seemed so absurd, has been confirmed as the road to victory. In light of the resurrection, everything is turned around. Thus, the effect of the young man's announcement to the women is to transform the causes of grief into reasons for joy. But it is all done in a very restrained manner.

The flight of the women is, therefore, a total reversal of expectations (vs. 8). The associations of the word for "flight" (*pheugo*) were determined earlier by its use to describe the flight of the disciples and the young man (14:50, 52). The narrator explains the flight of the women by describing their extreme emotions: "trembling, quivering" (*tromos*), and

"astonishment, terror" (*ekstasis*). This narrative comment is an intimate explanation of their action. It implies that the storyteller regarded their action as wrong. Their flight must be explained. And yet it is given with such emotional intensity that the listeners can understand and even sympathize with the women's response.

The women's silence is even more incredible than their flight. It is in direct contradiction to the angel's command. The story they are commissioned to tell is joyful good news. Why would they tell nothing to anyone? The narrator's explanation is a climactic two-word sentence in Greek, *ephobounto gar*, which means "for they were afraid" (vs. 8). Once again, this narrative explanation is an intimate insight into the women's inner motives. Thus, the sympathetic identification with the women is maintained at the same time that the shock of their disobedience to the angel's command is explained.

Why would they be afraid? In the context in which the story was originally told, there are a range of explanations: fear as a response to being in the presence of God, the possibility of persecution due to association with a crucified man, the potential for mockery since women were considered unreliable witnesses, and the unprecedented character of this commission for women. Fear as holy awe is a frequent response to being in the presence of God in the biblical tradition. From the man in the garden (Gen. 3:10), to Moses at the burning bush (Exod. 3:4-6), to the death of Uzzah when he touched the ark (II Sam. 6:6-7), fear is an appropriate response to being in the presence of God or one of God's messengers (for example, Baalam and his perceptive ass, Num. 22:21-35). In Mark, people frequently respond with fear to the actions of Jesus: the disciples at Jesus' calming of the sea (4:41); the crowd at Jesus' healing of the demoniac (5:15); the woman who was healed from a flow of blood when Jesus called her (5:33); the disciples seeing Jesus walking on the water (6:50). These are presented as appropriate and right responses. Thus, the women's fear is a fully understandable response to what they heard and saw in the tomb.

For Mark's listeners, the possibility of persecution and ostracism for those who would tell the Jesus story was real. After all, in the story itself, the young man was seized in the garden and Peter barely avoided being arrested and condemned with Jesus. Jesus was executed as a criminal. The persecution of Christians by other Jews was not usually violent. But the attacks on Stephen and Paul (Acts 6-7, 21-23) were probably part of the common memory. And Christians were increasingly ostracized from the Jewish community in the period after the Jewish war, as the Pharisees pursued their policy of centralization. Roman persecution was also a growing threat in the aftermath of the Jewish war. Christians had been blamed by Nero for the fire in Rome in A.D. 64, and hundreds were killed. The persecution of Christians under Domitian (A.D. 93--96) was the culmination of hostility toward Christians during the Roman administrations of the New Testament period. For Mark's listeners, therefore, the commission to go and tell the stories of Jesus' resurrection was related to the possibility of taking up your own cross. Being publicly identified with Jesus was potentially dangerous.

Finally, this commission to the women is a major reversal of the roles of men and women in the tradition of Israel. Generally, men rather than women were called by divine messengers to be the agents who would announce the actions of God. With the exception of Deborah, men, from Moses through the prophets, were called to deliver God's messages to the people. Furthermore, in the earlier parts of the Gospel, women are neither mentioned as disciples nor are they called by Jesus to take roles of leadership. Therefore, the commission to deliver this most critical message is a total reversal of normal expectations for women. For the listeners, a response of fear by the women would be fully understandable. Not only are the women inadequately prepared but also a hostile or skeptical response is probable if they do attempt to carry out the commission. Such a commission for women was utterly unexpected and would have been highly controversial. Of the women's silence, the fact

remains that in the story their silence is radically wrong. They have the best and most important news that anyone has ever been given to tell. Their silence is the ultimate irony. Earlier in the Gospel, the leper and the people in the Decapolis who were commanded to be silent ran out and proclaimed the news (1:45; 7:36). Here those who are commanded to proclaim even greater good news are silent.

The effect of this ending is to open up a whole new plot: the story of the mission of the church. A whole new mystery is thus introduced. The story leaves the listeners with a major puzzle: will the story be told? Obviously, as the telling of the story itself demonstrates, the women had told the story of what they saw and heard. But, to whatever degree the listeners identify with the women's fear, the question about whether the story will be told is a question they must ask themselves. The story requires that every listener reflect about the response of running away from this commission and remaining silent. The story's implicit appeal is to go and tell the story regardless of trembling, terror, and fear. In the end, therefore, it is up to the listeners to determine how the story will end.

Telling this supremely mysterious ending requires the storyteller to honor the profound silence with which the story ends. To lead the listeners into this silence is to invite them to meditate on the wonder and mystery of the resurrection and the awesome commission that it entails.

Connections

The connections that make a vital telling of this story possible begin with the experiences of darkness, of the times when the powers of sin and death seem to be totally dominant. These are the times of grief, helplessness, devastation, and awareness of our personal and corporate captivity. That is where the story of the resurrection begins, with the women who loved Jesus, preparing to go out to the tomb to love him for the last time. These are times of letting go of loved ones and loved projects. They are times of abandonment, of giving up hopes and dreams.

Thus, these experiences of the dark night are a context in which to hear the story. In a group, it is appropriate to ask persons to share them with a spiritual companion. A form of the question is, in what ways do you now feel subject to the power of sin and death? How are you presently in the dark night of death? This is one way by which we can connect with the experience of the women going to the tomb.

It is in the midst of these dark nights that the clues, intimations, and realities of Jesus' resurrection can happen. The deepest power of this story is to open our eyes to see and our ears to hear the signs of the victory of the powers of the new age of God's kingdom. It calls our attention to the ways in which God transforms death into life. The story is itself the sign that the victory has been won in Jesus' resurrection.

In this story, as in the birth narrative, the foremost problem is how to bring authenticity to the words of a divine messenger. Identifying with the women's experience of grief and despair is relatively easy. Presenting an angel's report of the decisive victory in the cosmic struggle between the powers of good and evil is more difficult. We do not have as many points of connection with that message. As in the birth narrative, the young man's report is related to experiences of telling unexpected good news to someone. However, the announcement of the resurrection has a depth of quiet and mystery that is different from the birth narrative. The joy and mystery of this story is absolutely unique.

The dominant underlying spirit of this narrative is peace and wonder. Rather than a victory celebration with fireworks and brass bands, this cosmic victory is celebrated in the quiet of a tomb. But, rather than talk about this spirit of the resurrection story, let me tell you a story about it.

When I returned to teaching the year after the accident, I decided to teach a course about the resurrection. After the experience of nearly dying and in the midst of the ongoing struggle to recover, I wanted to understand more about the resurrection. And so I did what teachers often do. If you want to learn about something, teach a course about it. And this was my plan: we would memorize and tell all of the resurrection narratives. We would study them in detail and through telling the stories we would seek to experience the resurrection of Christ. I wanted to find the spirit of the resurrection.

I assumed that if we really experienced the resurrection, if we in some sense found it, we would experience great ecstasy and joy. It would be like the ultimate Easter: trumpets blasting, hymns of joy and triumph, lilies everywhere, people hugging. We would all be ecstatic. And I hoped for that kind of ecstasy.

Somewhat to my surprise, ten people were interested in studying the resurrection. And we did it all: we studied, we learned and told the stories, and we searched the Scriptures together. And nothing happened: no ecstasy, no great joy. Nor could I find much of that in the stories. On the last day of class, I proposed that we have an extra session and spend a whole afternoon and evening telling the stories. Maybe if we told the stories all at once, it would happen and I would find some confirmation of my hope.

A woman in the group, Nancy, invited us to her lovely home up in the woods of Connecticut. She and her husband had built it together. But, just as they were finishing that previous spring, he had a heart attack and died. He was only in his mid-forties. Nancy too was on a search to understand and experience the meaning of the resurrection.

We gathered in a room downstairs without any furniture and a big fireplace. I had structured nothing. And so we told some of the stories and sang songs. Then there was a long period of silence. We told more stories, and people began to do some sharing. Nancy shared about her grief and her sense that her husband was still present in the house. We talked about the reality of death and the hope of the resurrection, not a soul living on but a full resurrection of the person.

Then another silence. There were conflicts in the group. There was a black pastor in the group who had been deeply involved in the civil rights movement, and a major conflict emerged between him and two equally militant white feminists in the group. Later, there was a sharp conflict between a more conservative pastor and the liberals in the group. Then more stories and more silence.

We took a break for supper and had communion together. After dishes, we started a fire. More stories, more silence. We told all the resurrection stories. We sang songs. We did lots of sharing. And the silences got longer and deeper. People sat closer together. It was a wonderful, peaceful quiet. But finally, it was time to go.

As we were leaving, I said to them, "Well, it didn't happen. I had hoped that if we told all the stories we would experience the great joy and ecstasy of the resurrection." And they looked at me with surprise, and Nancy said, "But, Tom, don't you understand what has happened? I feel a kind of peace that I have never known before. My husband is gone. But somehow I know he is going to be all right." And, one after another, they began to share what had happened to them in the course and on that day. And they had all had the same kind of experience.

Then it hit me. Peace! That is the spirit of the resurrection. The stories are all quiet. And the spirit of the resurrection stories is a spirit of peace: angels in a tomb with a message; Jesus appearing and saying, "Peace be with you"; conversation and communion on the road to Emmaus. Telling and listening to the stories had made clear the spirit of the mystery of the resurrection and the character of life after death: peace. And the stories had transformed our grief and conflict into a measure of peace and community.

Thus, I would suggest that exploring your experiences of peace will bear fruit in making this story come alive for others. However, the story does not end with peace. The greatest puzzle of Mark's resurrection narrative is the ending.

The principal connection of the ending of Mark's narrative is with the fear of telling the story. A recent study of people's primary fears had a surprising result. The number one fear of more people than any other was not nuclear war, cancer, or being a victim of a crime or accident. The number one fear was speaking in public. For most laypersons and many clergy, telling the stories of the Gospels is frightening whether for a large group or for another person.

The possible explanations of the women's silence are points of connection now. One of the major barriers to biblical storytelling is a sense of awe and fear at telling these holy words. Because of the unique associations of these stories with God, I have often felt inadequate. For years, I did not tell the stories because I was afraid I would do it wrong. Thus, in what ways do you feel afraid in the presence of God when you sense the commission to tell these stories? Paying attention to that fear and offering it to God is one way of connecting with the mystery of this story.

The fear that others may misunderstand and be offended by the telling of the stories is real and fully justified. Telling the stories almost inevitably results in conflict and some degree of ridicule or disdain. The reasons are many: hostility toward God, disgust at the negative effects of Christianity in particular or religion in general, anger at the Bible or various schools of biblical interpretation, and sophisticated disdain for the simple-mindedness of merely telling the stories. Some people are simply put off by the mere fact of telling these stories. The richness of the associations of these stories in people's experience is a source of their power. But those associations are often negative as well as positive. And telling the stories calls forth all of those associations. To tell these stories is to be a lightning rod. Thus, the story also invites us to identify and connect to the story our fears of persecution and ridicule. The invitation of the ending is to examine those fears in the perspective of the empty tomb and the commission of the young man.

Finally, there are connections with a sense of inadequacy, of being called to a role for which you have not been prepared. Everyone can identify with the women. Just as Moses felt inadequate to the task, so also each one who is called to tell the stories feels inadequately prepared. The story invites us to identify with the women and the reversal of roles they experienced. In what ways do you feel inadequate and unprepared to tell these stories? What are the sources of your feelings of inferiority? They may be related to your ethnic background, social status, economic class, racial group, sexual identity, or educational background. And each of these dynamics of human communities is experienced in concrete ways rather than in vague generalizations.

The place where I have felt a sense of inadequacy and fear most deeply has been in relation to writing rather than public speaking, and in particular to writing and publishing a book. In the introduction, I recounted the way the idea for this book happened on the journey up the river. But there is more to the story. I first sensed the need for and began to work on this book in 1978. Two years later, I was given a contract for the book and wrote an entire manuscript of over 250 pages over the next two years. The writing was an ordeal for me because of the anxiety and fear that was associated with it. When the manuscript was turned down for publication, I was very discouraged. I tried for another two years to revise it. But the process went nowhere.

At an earlier retreat at the Jesuit Renewal Center, two years before the journey up the river, this quest became a center for my prayers. This retreat was during Holy Week. And on Good Friday afternoon, I told Mark's story of Jesus' passion and death to the community. During that day, I grieved for my father who had died that previous September, and for the

book. On the afternoon of Holy Saturday, I went to the nearby Cincinnati Nature Center. The daffodils were in bloom, and it was a beautiful early spring day.

I had my pen with me. My pen was my most precious possession. It was an expensive, red, Parker fountain pen. I had managed to keep it for almost ten years. Every time I lost it, I looked diligently until I found it again. The case was worn from years of use. But it had always worked flawlessly. I loved that pen. It symbolized all of my hopes and dreams of being a writer, a scholar who was respected and famous.

As I walked up a long hill, I sensed from God a call that made absolutely no sense whatsoever. The call was to bury my pen. During this retreat, I had been gifted with such an overwhelming and all-pervasive sense of God's love that there was really no choice but to do it. It was somehow the way in which I was called to join Christ in his death, to abandon what I was holding onto. But it made no sense at all.

I found a place off the path in the midst of a group of daffodils. I dug a little grave with a stick and fashioned a cross out of two small branches to mark the spot. And I buried my pen. I sat and wept for almost an hour, for Dad, for my hopes, for my pen which I really liked, for everything that I had to give up and let go. I left my pen there in the ground.

I sought for months to discern the meaning of this action. For months, I thought it meant to give up writing completely. And I did; for over a year, I wrote nothing. In response to all the questions of friends and associates about the book, which I had announced widely, I could only say, "I have given it up." Only after two years was the idea resurrected, in a whole new form. This book is itself a gift that has grown out of the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. I now see, at least in part, that burying my pen was a way that God could change the associations of writing for me from fear to love.

I know at least something about how the women felt and why they were afraid to tell the stories. Nevertheless, their silence was wrong. The story invites us to explore the mystery of the reasons for saying nothing in light of the commission to go and tell the stories of God's victory.

Telling the Story

In the end, each person is called to tell the story. How will the story of Jesus' death and resurrection end? To tell or not to tell—that is the question with which Mark's story ends.

The commissioning of the women is a clue to the basic strategy for the proclamation of the gospel in early Christianity. The power of the gospel storytelling tradition is in the telling of the stories by the people. The apostles had a crucial public role, as do clergy now. But the gospel as storytelling is not primarily an issue of performances by virtuoso storytellers. There is a vital place for the telling of the stories in public worship and for large gatherings of people. But telling the story is the calling of every follower of Jesus in daily life.

And the calling makes sense. These stories have their greatest impact in the context of the relationships between persons who live and work together. Just as each woman and man has a distinctive storytelling style, so also each of us has a unique network of relationships. The stories of the good news are most meaningful when they are told by one person to another in the context of a personal relationship of care. No one else can tell the stories in the same way. The gospel is made present in the infinitely varied connections between our stories and God's story that can be made by a storytelling network.

If there is one thing I have learned from the past twenty years of studying and telling the stories, it is this: trust the story. The stories of God, when told faithfully out of a commitment to understand and internalize them deeply, have their own power and life. The

stories are like the seeds of Jesus' parables. They grow in their own time and in their own way. But they bear fruit far beyond anything one would expect.

This story is told by Louise Mahan, who is pastor of Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago. It is a story about the way in which the connection between a Gospel story and the life of her congregation was a critical factor in the new life of the community:

I'm the pastor of an inner city church in Chicago, situated a few blocks from Wrigley Field. I became the pastor there in June of 1983, four months after an arsonist burned the building beyond reasonable saving. This was the culmination of two difficult years in the life of the congregation.

We spent the first year I was there fighting with the insurance company and trying to heal wounds, the scars of which will last forever. A rebuilding committee and a rebuilding finance committee were formed and began work. Decisions were made to demolish the old walls and to work with an architect on a new building that would better suit our needs and be handicapped accessible. Pledges were made. But for every small victory, we seemed to suffer two defeats. By the end of the second year, we were all discouraged. The burned out hulk still stood, the insurance settlement was woefully inadequate, we were meeting in a church building where we were only tolerated on Sunday afternoons-the litany of woes could go on and on.

In July of 1985, I attended the first national biblical storytelling festival in Maine. One of the stories we learned was the parable of the sower. Probably because of the allegorical material in the Gospels, I have always, when hearing or reading this story, thought of myself as dirt. I never liked the story much. But as I learned it and told it and heard it told, it suddenly came to me that I was not dirt, but the sower, and that my congregation was filled with sowers! With great excitement, I took the sower back to the people of Broadway UMC.

The first Sunday back we were worshiping on the lawn and I told them the parable. They were immediately engaged by the telling instead of the reading. Then I asked them to line it back to me. They looked at me strangely but I was standing up and they were sitting down so I had some authority, and so they lined it back to me twice. Then I asked them to tell it to each other. With very little encouragement they did so. Then I preached about our being not dirt but sowers, and that we had been sowing seeds for two years and most had fallen on packed down soil or rocky soil or among thorns, but that some had fallen on good soil and we had seen some results of that and that we would see more results in the future.

We were all encouraged, lifted up, by the story. We used it over and over. It became our story. We used it in worship, on a big banner, at meetings. Every time we got bad news (which was often) someone would tell the story.

We don't need the story much anymore. Our building is going up, and we'll be worshiping in it in the winter of 1987. We'll need a new story for the new people of God that we will be. But I know that without the parable of the sower, Broadway UMC would have disappeared. The story saved us and gave us new life. Thanks be to God!

The telling of the stories of the gospel is a sign of the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the world. But, in the end, the possibility of persons and communities hearing the stories is dependent on one thing: the victory of God's love over the legitimate fears that would prevent each person from telling the stories. No other storyteller can tell the stories in the way that you can.