

GOD'S ENDING

Mark 16:1-8

A doctor was dealing with a client, who is a wildly successful entrepreneur, rich, happily married, and well-regarded by his peers. The problem was the days when he felt depressed and run-down but unable to admit it. The only way to address it, he felt, was to regress, like a schoolboy, and look for permission from a doctor to regroup. “He knew he wasn’t sick, but he’d go in and make something up,” she says, “just so he could take a day off and be OK with himself.”

She recognized he was suffering from a surging contemporary malaise. “He always had to demonstrate his worth to people,” she continues. “He was thinking, ‘I must exude this image of success and a happy life that everybody has come to know about me, and I don’t want to ever change that image.’ That’s toxic positivity.”

Call it FONONO, or fear of a negative outlook. Also known as “dismissive positivity,” it’s expressed as an overbearing cheerfulness no matter how bad things are, a pep that denies emotional oxygen to anything but a big grin.

You see it on Instagram, where the affective filter is always upbeat, usually followed by the hashtag #blessed. You hear it from the SoulCycle instructor exhorting every rider to swaggeringly sweat through the pain. It’s available from the newly anointed chief creative officer for Vital Proteins, actress Jennifer Aniston, who claims that renewal isn’t only a result of its powders: Instead, “it’s within us.”

Don’t think the pandemic has put that in check. The Federal Trade Commission has reported an uptick in Ponzi schemes during the pandemic—70% higher in the second quarter of 2020 than the year before. Ordinary Americans, casting around for inspiration and reassurance, became prime targets for these peddlers of perkiness. Or think of the boss who insists that colleagues start every Zoom meeting by sharing a piece of good news to help keep moods buoyant amid the gloom. It is found in sentences that start with those negating words “At least,” which are followed by a suggestion that however bad you’re feeling, at least you’ve got plenty else that should offset and outweigh it.

I bring all of that up because today is Easter. If anything is supposed to be optimistic and happy it is Easter. It is the ultimate happy ending. It can seem like the top story to end, “And they all lived happily ever after.” But is this truthful or just an example of “FONONO” or “toxic positivity.” Why couldn’t the early Christians have just put a positive spin on the story of Jesus by adding this story to turn the trauma of His death into something happy?

Swen, Lars, and Ole attended a funeral. They began to talk about what they hoped to hear at their own funerals. Swen said, “I would like them to say that I was a good husband and father.” Lars said, “I hope they talk about how I was an honest businessman.” Ole said, “I hope they say, ‘Heh! He’s moving!’”

Most scholars, even those that are atheists, have no problem admitting that a man named Jesus lived and then died. Historians certainly are convinced of that. The problem is Him coming back to life. People die all of the time. But who comes back from death? I am not talking about people who have been pulled off life support and then come back. We are talking about a man who was executed by the Romans, who were experts at that, who didn't bother to break His legs because He was already dead, and just to ensure things pierced His side with a spear so that blood and water came out, showing us that they had pierced his heart—a mortal wound. And He had already been wrapped up for burial and was in the tomb for over 36 hours. He was truly dead! And those people don't come back to life.

So is Easter just tacking a happy story to give us an escape from the real world? Is it just toxic positivity?

Every three years we hear the Gospels accounts from Mark's Gospel. This is one of those years. Unlike the other Gospels which tell about Jesus appearing to people alive, risen from the dead, that is missing in Mark. There are later additions to Mark's Gospel which include them, but it is pretty much a given among scholars that those are later additions. Mark's Gospel ends as we heard with the women running in fear from the empty tomb with only the message of the angel that Jesus has risen. There is no "and they all lived happily ever after."

What we see in Mark's Gospel and in all the Gospels is that Easter is different from putting on a positive spin. That is something humans do to compensate. But if there is anything clear in the Bible, it is that Easter was not a human thing, but God's work. If Jesus' followers were going to fake that Jesus rose from the dead, they would have taken the body. How could they do that when it was guarded by soldiers? And if they could do that, why did they leave the burial cloths neatly wrapped up? John tells us in his Gospel that it was as if His body just left the cloths where they were rather than them being unwrapped off His body. But even more for the disciples to have stolen the body would have taken solid planning. From what we know of Jesus' arrest and death, the disciples had run away. They were totally demoralized. They didn't have the time to regroup and organize such a plan. It might have been different if they knew ahead of time that Jesus would die, but they refused to believe that even when Jesus warned them several times. We also look at the very discrepancies in the accounts of Easter. Matthew and Mark have one angel at the tomb; Luke has two. Different lists are given for the women who went to the tomb. If you were going to make up the story, then wouldn't you have everyone agree to make the same story? This is a story that was *witnessed*, like the different stories police investigators will get about a crime, not because someone is lying, but because they each have a different viewpoint of the same thing. Also Jesus first appears to women. This might sound sexist, but in that world if you were going to make up the story of Easter, you would not have female witnesses because they were not seen then as credible witnesses.

Easter is not a happy ending, but God's ending.

“One of the best antidotes to toxic positivity is reexamining your value system and understanding that some of the best moments in life, when you truly feel good, are full of mixed emotions.”

Happiness is something that happens to us in response to conditions. Our emotions, like happiness, go up and down. The solution is not to be always up. The solution is not to look inside of ourselves with our emotions, but to look to the constant of God and His love. The Bible refers to that as “joy.” Joy does not mean that I am happy at that moment. That is what makes Easter so special, not because it is happy, but because it is from God, it is a real, lasting joy.