

Every Easter, I think of a cat Joan and I used to have, named Whittier, after John Greenleaf Whittier, the Quaker poet. It was a feral cat and very skittish around people, wouldn't come inside, so we made a little house for him on our back porch. We were just getting Whittier domesticated when he was struck by a car. We buried him behind our farmhouse, in Frank Gladden's sweet corn patch where the ground was soft. I knew Frank wouldn't mind, and I buried him especially deep. So you can imagine my trembling and astonishment when I was sitting on the porch swing a few evenings later, and Whittier rubbed against my legs. I went to the sweet corn patch to inspect his grave, which was still intact. After a little detective work, I discerned I'd buried our neighbor's cat. One does not inspect flattened cat too closely, hence the mistake in identification.

I think of that cat every Easter, when I read the gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel account we have of the Resurrection. When I read it just now, I stopped at the eighth verse, because that's where the text originally stopped, with those ominous words, "And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid." (Mark 16:8) But that's the English version.

The original Greek read, “And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, they were afraid for...” Mark ended his gospel in mid-sentence. The reader was left to wonder what the women were afraid for. Afraid for Jesus? Afraid for their futures? We don’t know. The story stops in mid-sentence, so we have to guess at it. We have to supply the ending. Years later, that ambiguous ending seemed out of place, and a new ending was added to conclude the story on a more positive, more confident, note. But I like the original ending, with things kind of up in the air, knowing the story could go either way.

It’s been true of my life, and probably yours too, that life has an uncertain quality about it, and that our futures are being re-written every day, with every decision we make. Our lives are always being edited. We know how we’d like the story of our lives to end, but it’s never a sure bet, and we really don’t know how things will turn out until the last chapter is written. The cat could be gone, or it could show up again. We never know. *Mark’s gospel reminds us that we’re living in mid-sentence, and life can go either way.**

* I am indebted to Dr. Cynthia Campbell, president of McCormick Theological Seminary, for this sentence, in her sermon “When Is an Ending Not the End?” which was delivered at the Chicago Sunday Evening Club on April 15, 2001.

One of my favorite writers is E.B. White. He wrote many books, but the first one I read was *Stuart Little*. It was recently made into a movie, but the movie bore little resemblance to the book. If you've read the book, and I suspect many of you have, you'll remember Stuart had a bird named Margolo for a girlfriend. One spring day she flew away to the north, as birds do in spring, and Stuart went in search of her. The book ends with the reader never knowing whether they were reunited. For that reason, the book was heavily criticized when it first came out. The children's librarian of the New York City Public Library begged White not to publish the book, believing children would find the uncertainty troubling. I've found children handle ambiguity well. It's we adults who need everything clear.

Responding to one of his critics, White wrote, "I think many readers find the end inconclusive, but I have always found life inconclusive, and I guess it shows up in my work." (Letters of E.B. White, Harper and Row Publishers, New York, p. 273, 1976.

That's the reason I liked the book when I first read it in the fourth grade. I liked imagining Stuart heading north in his little car, into the deep woods, seeking his lost love. His story wasn't finished yet. And neither is mine, and neither is yours.

I overheard a young mother and father not long ago talking about their daughter's kindergarten and whether it was sufficiently rigorous. I could tell they already had their sights set on an Ivy League college. Had their daughter's life all worked out. I wanted to tell them to relax, that her story was just beginning, and to enjoy it, without rushing ahead to write the last chapter.

We're all living in mid-sentence, and our lives can change so quickly. That is at once frightening and exhilarating. It is scary, and it is hopeful.

Two people lose their jobs. One sees only catastrophe, another sees the opportunity to grow and learn and expand her life.

Two people struggle with alcohol and drugs. One sees a bleak future, bound to a habit he can not break; the other sees the possibility of getting help and getting well, of life breaking open in wonderful ways.

Two people divorce. One sees loneliness and pain, the other sees the prospect of a richer, deeper love.

We're all living in mid-sentence. Where's your story headed?

When the women went to the tomb and couldn't find Jesus, the young man told them to go to Galilee, that Jesus was going there ahead of them. (Mark 16:7)

We can't always be sure where our story is headed. Sometimes it feels like we're headed north into the deep woods, seeking things we can not name, but know we need. Mark tells us not to look for Jesus in the past, not to look for him in the grave, but to look for him out front, that Jesus is always working ahead of us.

That's where we find Jesus today. Out in front of us. Out ahead of us. We Quakers need to learn this again. We used to know it, but over time have forgotten. Have you ever noticed what happens when two Quakers get together today? We always want to dial back the clock. We go to yearly meeting and read the names of the dead, but never hear who's been born. We talk about our past, but seldom about our dreams. We're looking in empty holes, when we need to be moving toward Galilee, where Jesus has gone ahead of us.

"Where is Jesus?" the women asked the young man at the tomb.
What a question!

Where is Jesus?

I'll tell you where he is.

He is wherever understanding prevails over ignorance.

He is wherever compassion prevails over indifference.

He is wherever loving acceptance prevails over intolerance.

Jesus is wherever optimism prevails over cynicism, wherever faith prevails over fear.