

The most traumatic part of seminary for many students is not the biblical languages, systematic theology, clinical pastoral education, or the field work. No, it's the first sermon in preaching class.

It sure was for me. We were assigned a passage, given a week to prepare a sermon on it and preach it to the class. Then we got to listen to them respond.

Fortunately, I wasn't first. But I remember what happened to the guy who was. After he'd "preached," we gathered to debrief. As "the preacher" sat there, sweat dripping from his brow, one student said, "I thought it was a good sermon." Another, "I thought you struggled a bit with bringing it to an end." Then the professor said, "I thought you had a good sermon, too. In fact, I thought you several good ones. In fact, I thought you missed about three good stopping places in your sermon."

So, with my turn was coming the next week, I made a note to myself. "Pay attention to the ending."

Over the years, I've learned that one of the toughest challenges for a preacher is how to end a sermon. Sure, it's a challenge to stand up here and try to say anything at all about a passage of scripture. But it's even harder to know how to end what I say. We like endings to tie things up, to be a fitting conclusion, the "happily ever after," to the story, to say "The End" so we can get on with our lives as they are, after a brief distraction that's both over and completely disconnected to our life and future.

A preacher may have that same desire about ending a sermon, a desire to tie things together, sum things up, put a bow around it and present a nice package to the listeners. Trouble is, so many stories in the Bible are open-ended. The prodigal son, for instance, doesn't end with, "They lived happily ever after." And we don't know what happened to the man who'd been so brutally beaten after the Good Samaritan helped him with such care. Life itself doesn't have that many satisfactory completions, final endings.

Another thing: we preachers aren't supposed to give such a clear ending that you say, "I'm glad that's over. We're done with our spiritual time for the week and can move on to something else." The sermon's supposed to continue, bear fruit in your lives, keep going, never to be done. So they're hard to end. That's why some seem to just go on and on! (Not literally, I hope!) It's hard to end a sermon!

Now Easter ought to be the happiest of happy endings. Jesus, who's suffered rejection throughout his ministry – culminating in the horror of the cross, has been raised from the dead! Triumphed over the grave! Been vindicated! Refuted his doubters and critics! What a great time to say, "The End." Let's stand and sing the "Hallelujah Chorus," then a resounding "12-fold Amen," and claim victory. The end!

Yet, curiously, the Gospel writers seemed to have difficulty knowing how to end their Gospels, even with Easter, maybe because of Easter.

Mark has a notorious non-ending in which he never actually says that the disciples saw the Risen Christ. You heard it this morning. An angel at the tomb tells the three women who've come to anoint Jesus' body that Jesus will meet the disciples back in Galilee. He tells them to tell people about the Risen Christ. But then Mark says, they were full of fear and awe and didn't tell anybody!

Matthew says more, but when the Risen Christ appears to his disciples, he commands them to, "Go, make disciples of all nations." In other words, the Risen Christ doesn't say much of anything to the disciples except, "Stop standing around looking at me; get out of here; get to work, making disciples!"

Luke's Gospel is part of a two-volume set – Luke-Acts. So the book of Acts is a kind of long, extended ending for Luke. After Easter, it tells the glorious story of the church. But it's not all so glorious, since it includes, for example, the stoning of the first martyr Stephen, followed by the beheading of the second one James, and ends with Paul in jail in Rome awaiting his execution.

And then there's John, who also seems to have trouble ending his Gospel. After Jesus' resurrection, we find the disciples back at work, doing what they know how to do best, doing what they did before they met Jesus – fishing. They are back in the familiar, work-a-day world of routine.

That's what people often do when they've suffered a great trauma. When you're dealing with grief, well-meaning friends often say, "Get back to work. Get busy! It'll help you "get over it." Maybe this is what the disciples were doing. The Jesus Movement was a good thing while it lasted, but all good things must come to an end, so now it's back to work, to the familiar and routine. The story of Jesus has ended.

But to those who were overwhelmed by the trauma of grief, the Risen Christ appears. And what he says is, "It's not over. It's just getting started. Do you love me? Then get out of here and go feed my sheep."

And then Jesus says to Peter, "Follow me," as if he were speaking to Peter for the very first time. "Follow me?" That's what he said to his disciples when he first met them. But now he is saying "Follow me" again, as if for the first time. See? John wants us to know that we're not ending, we're starting over.

It's not easy to start over. Maybe we never start over unless we're pushed or pulled into it. Peter was content to go back to fishing. Life was safer there, hunched down in the boat, pulling in the nets. Yet the Risen Christ came out and got him, called him, pulled him, back into discipleship. The story wasn't over. It was just beginning, again.

Reynolds Price wrote a book called *A Whole New Life*. That's exactly what he describes in the book – a whole new life. It's his account of having cancer, having surgery, ending up paralyzed from the waist down, using a wheelchair. It could be the story of the end of his life, or at least life as he loved it.

But instead it's the story of how he learned not to be confined to a wheelchair or confined anywhere for that matter. He started over. He did some of his best writing during this time when his life could have been ended. He says one of the biggest mistakes we can make, when we're assaulted by some great trauma, is to think that we can brush ourselves off, and go right on living the life that we lived before. The only hope for us is to say, "The old me has died. Now there must be a new me – reinvented!"

Bob Molsberry was quite an athlete, running and biking all over, until a careless driver blindsided him, and he ended up with both legs paralyzed. His athletic life, and so much of who he was and what he loved to do, was over, dead. But his experience with the Risen Christ, led him to a whole new life, a resurrection life, a life filled with grace and meaning, a life which bore fruit in a book called, *Blindsided by Grace*, and with him becoming our UCC Ohio Conference minister.

Peter had to go back into the world, a world where he'd lost the physical Jesus forever, but a world that was bright and new because the Risen Christ was on the loose, alive in his life, and moving in people's hearts and minds, everywhere. It was also a world full of danger, far more danger than before. Peter knew first-hand that it wasn't easy following Jesus before the resurrection. But in a way, it would be more dangerous now. Peter would pay for his discipleship with his life, martyred in Rome.

What Jesus was about now was large, larger than Galilee. He was out to take back the whole world for God. And now Peter was part of it. The story of Jesus and Peter continued; it was just beginning, really. Peter's was just one more story of an Easter-birthing new beginning.

We can suffer so many deaths before the one that puts us physically in the grave. A loved one dies. A marriage begun with joy and hope, becomes empty and broken. A child nurtured with such love and care, becomes estranged, distant. A friendship, that was deep and trusting, experiences a betrayal. An illness comes. An injury creates a disability. A job is lost. A move is necessary. All of these are deaths. We can't go back to life as it was before them. All we can do is trust in the power of the one whose love defeated the power of death, and brought newness of life to Jesus, and who promises newness of life to us. That trust can give us a new life, here and now, and forever, beyond the grave.

Jenny was a gangly preacher's kid when I knew her at St. Paul's UCC, in Marthasville, Missouri. Then, for a long time, I only knew of her from references in the Christmas letters her dad wrote to us every year. But, when she was 45, she was stricken with a rare, aggressive strep infection that nearly took her life. After three months in the hospital, she came home as a bilateral amputee with very crippled hands. The life she'd known before was gone, dead. But not her faith, or her Lord, or his power for life, alive in her life and in the family and church that loved her. Four years, and 15 surgeries later she's teaching special ed, driving with hand controls, and a single parent of two teenage daughters. Her life is not over, it's only very, very new, and surprisingly joy-filled and wonderful.

That's the message of this Easter. To paraphrase Yogi Berra, "It ain't over till God says it's over." In the resurrection, the story goes on. And this sermon goes on, not just here in church on Easter, but in your life for the rest of your life. God is not done with us yet. And we are not done with God yet. This isn't the last chapter; it's the first.

Hallelujah! Christ is Risen! The story continues.

Alleluia!

Loving God, on this day you showed that the powers of sin and death,
...powers that so often and in so many ways have us in their grip, are no match for you.
You entered the domain of death and defeated death.
You took on the sins of the whole world and triumphed mightily.

We not only praise you for your victory,
...but are also bold to ask for a place within Jesus triumphant reign as Lord of all creation.
Teach us, every day, to live in the light of his resurrection,
...to follow him into the realm of life and light, of forgiveness and peace.

We thank you, O God, that the story of the Risen Jesus continues today.
We praise you for the opportunity for a changed world and a changed life.
This story, your story, is unfinished –
...because it is our story, and continues to be written in our lives even today.

What more can God say?

Praise and glory and honor and thanksgiving be given unto you, now and forever.

We pray for those who have not heard this joyous news,
...and for those who in mission and service tell this story of resurrection and new life.

We pray for those who have heard, and struggle with belief.

We pray for those who know, and fail to act on that knowledge.

We pray for those who believe, but choose not to witness to that belief by their words and deeds.

We pray for our church and ourselves,
...that we might move beyond confession to conviction, from dereliction to discipleship,
...that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
...and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

For these and for all others we pray, asking for your Spirit to intercede on our behalf,
...speaking for us and through us, that all may come to know the glory of the Risen Lord.

Trusting in the power of love and life that you have shown in his resurrection, we pray for...

Gracious God, be with these people, in all these situations, with your presence, power and peace.

We pray in the name of the Risen Jesus, and for your resurrection glory. Amen.

The Word with Children

(Take food allergies into account before telling this story. You will need enough chocolate and peanut butter cups for everyone. You will also need a chocolate bar and a jar of peanut butter to hold up while you are talking.)

Chocolate is good. *(Hold up a chocolate bar.)* You can eat chocolate as a candy bar, or it can be poured over the top of ice cream, or mixed in as part of the molê sauce to go with beans and rice. There are lots of good ways to eat it.

Peanut butter is pretty good, too. *(Hold up a jar of peanut butter.)* You can spread it on bread for a sandwich, or on crackers for a snack. You can spread it on celery for a healthy snack! My favorite thing is to put a spoon in the peanut butter and eat it that way! Some people put chocolate and peanut butter together. – two good things that make something even better. *(Hold up the chocolate and peanut butter together.)* It changes everything.

Now most churches have a cross. Can you see a cross in our church? The cross stands for a lot of things. It reminds us of how Jesus loves us. We think about how Jesus died for us. And it tells us that we can sacrifice for each other too.

But on Easter Sunday we also remember that after Jesus died on the cross his body was laid in the tomb. Then, after three days, he arose from the dead, and when his friends came to take care of his body all they found was an empty tomb! When we mix the cross with the empty tomb we get something brand new. We get new life! We get hope in Jesus Christ. And we get a new family – our church family – to share this good news with.

Today I am giving all of you a chocolate and peanut cup to remind you of good things that go together – chocolate and peanut butter, the cross and empty tomb – *and* our church and you!

And if some of you have an allergy to chocolate or peanut butter, or just don't like them, I have other treats with me as well. Thank you for coming on up for children's story.