

You Can't Live Here Anymore

Mark 16:1-8

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Duke Divinity School professor and *New York Times* bestselling author, Kate Bowler, has taught me much about the healing power of telling the full, authentic truth about how life is beautiful...and life is hard.

Kate was diagnosed with stage IV colon cancer at the age of 35 when it seemed like the life she imagined was just beginning. After receiving what felt like a death sentence, Kate began to navigate multiple identities: mother of a toddler filled with wonder, professor hoping to get tenure, and sick patient in a clinical trial in which poison was poured into a port until finally—after sifting through data and scrutinizing a series of scans, her oncologist informed Kate that she was in “durable remission.”

“Remission” is a word any person living with cancer longs to hear. But the declaration is not always enough to transform fear into hope for individuals who know that a mere 14% of people handed the same verdict are still breathing 5 years after their initial diagnosis.

Rather than immediately accepting the pronouncement that she was in durable remission, Kate went to see a famous doctor in New York, hoping the acclaimed physician would be able to read medical charts like tarot cards that tell one’s future in detail.

But the famous doctor also refused to answer the questions Kate tossed at him like a defense attorney seeking to prevent someone from being sentenced to death.

The best the famous doctor could do was look at the charts and then look at Kate before inviting her to return in six months, an invitation received as an additional layer of life’s complexity.

Kate shares this story in her book, *No Cure for Being Human*, before describing the day she processed being in remission with her psychologist who listened to Kate with a sympathetic ear and then responded,

“Fear has been a wonderful friend to you...

But you can’t stay in this state of extreme vigilance.

You can’t...live here anymore.”¹

You can’t allow yourself to remain shackled to fear.

You can’t live looking through the rearview mirror instead of embracing the road ahead.

You can’t live here anymore.

Where are you living?

Do you dwell in a space where you are afraid to remain as you are—but feel fear mounting whenever you imagine leaving?

Where are you living?

¹ Kate Bowler, *No Cure for Being Human* (New York: Random House, 2021), 154.

Has a painful loss, a shattered dream, a terrifying diagnosis pulled the rug out from beneath your feet, shocking your foundation in a way that fills you with an uncertainty that makes you walk as if there is a “Proceed with caution” sign always before you?

Have you been dealt enough adversity to mold your mind into a machine that moves non-stop to design all the worst-case scenarios you might experience?

Where are you living...even though you no longer belong there?

Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome were faithful companions of Jesus who had stuck with him to the terrifying end. Mark tells us they looked on from a distance when Jesus was dying in a public, state sponsored execution on Friday. They then watched Joseph of Arimathea wrap Jesus’ body in a cloth and lay it in a tomb.

We are not privy to what happened on the day between crucifixion and resurrection—the stories they told, the number of tears they shed, or what plans they had made for how to anoint Jesus’ body when the sabbath was over. We do know that any plan made was not fully crafted because on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, the discussion centered on the greatest obstacle they could imagine.

How would they gain entrance to the tomb with no one to help roll the stone away?

Professor Joel Marcus explains how typical Jewish tombs from Roman Palestine would have a short entryway that would lead to one or more burial chambers inside. The chambers were typically two feet wide, two feet high, and six feet deep, allowing a body to be pushed in headfirst. The tomb would then be sealed with a square or rectangular stone weighing some 500 pounds. Only a handful of tombs that have discovered by archeologists were sealed with a circular stone. These round stones were even larger, weighing 1500-3000 pounds, demanding levers to move them.

The women, then, were rather audacious to show up with spices instead of a strategy for shifting the barrier between them and Jesus’ body.

But when they got to the tomb and looked up, they saw that the large stone had already been rolled away.

The sun had risen, and the stone was rolled away.

The sun had risen—pun intended—as one can find significant background in the Old Testament for connecting the rising sun with the empty tomb. Malachi 4:2 reads, “But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”

“Early morning,” in Old Testament and Jewish texts, is the time of God’s deliverance. The Psalmist proclaims, “Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning!”²

God does great things...early in the morning. But these faithful women are seemingly oblivious to any messianic promise implied by the rising sun that illuminated their way to the tomb where they look up and see that the greatest obstacle they imagined has been rolled away.

The women proceed to enter the tomb where they do not find a dead corpse but a young man who is very much alive. The angel, or God’s messenger, is dressed in white and sitting on the right side. Just as Washingtonians have distinct definitions for what it means

² Psalm 30 :50.

to sit on the right or on the left, in Jesus' day, the right side also had significance as it was "a position traditionally associated with power, victory, and auspiciousness."³ This messenger is sitting in a position of victory! There is additional significance in Mark choosing to describe the angel as a young man as "his youthful appearance suggests the freshness and vigor of the new era that has just dawned."⁴ Mark is seemingly beckoning the reader to lean in and see how God has won victory over death—even death on a cross.

The messenger proceeds to meet the women exactly where they are. He sees how they are afraid, and the messenger says, "Do not be afraid," before naming how he knows they are looking for Jesus, who has been raised. The angel then tells them to "go and tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee."

The messenger could have simply said, "Go tell the disciples"—a group that includes Peter, the first disciple. But he specifically names Peter, the disciple who followed his confession of Jesus' messiahship with an outburst that earned him the moniker 'Satan' by Jesus and who one professed he would always be by Jesus' side only to deny Jesus three times.

God wants to ensure that Peter, the one who might be feeling more shame than others, hears the announcement of new life. The hand of reconciliation reaches for Peter before anyone else!

The women have seen the sun rising and a stone that had been rolled away. They have heard an angel telling them where to go and what to say. In response, the women flee the tomb seized by terror and amazement. They then allow themselves to be held captive to fear so potent it renders them silent and paralyzed.

The women choose to live in the terror of what we now call Good Friday instead of embracing the dawn of a new day.

They cannot imagine living anywhere other than the place where
sins are tallied like a scorecard,
fear consumes like a fire,
the injustice of empire reigns,
and death wins.

What about us?

Where are you living?

Are you living as though the tomb still holds Jesus' corpse?

Or are you living as one who can summon the faith to believe that God devised a plan in which God took on flesh and became one of us, showed us how to live a life of radical love for which Jesus was crucified, died, and placed in a tomb until God said, "Jesus, you can't stay there anymore because my people cannot live in fear anymore!"

Beloveds, I do not know the fullness of what your lives hold today.

But you can't live here anymore if you are filled with fear because God is still meeting people right where they are and saying, "Do not be afraid."

³ Joel Marcus, *The Anchor Yale Bible, Mark 8-16* (New Haven: Yale, 2009), 1085.

⁴ Marcus, 1085

You can't live here anymore if you are bound to desolation that prevents you from embracing joy as an act of resistance against the forces of despair because weeping may linger for the night but joy comes in the morning.

You can't live here anymore if your grief is so deep that it refuses to allow hope to walk alongside it—hope fanned by the promise that even though we die, yet shall we live, and one day be reunited with our loved ones in our eternal dwelling place.

You can't live here anymore if your shame shackles you into believing you are the sum total of your mistakes. We can be forgiven no matter what!

You can't live here anymore if you are tempted to believe you are unlovable when God wants to meet you right where you are—just like Peter—and unstop your ears until you're able to hear, "You are my child, my beloved, with you I am well pleased."

"Time really is a circle; I can see it now," Kate Bowler writes. "We are trapped between a past we can't return to and a future that is uncertain. And it takes guts to live here, in the hard space between anticipation and realization."⁵

Beloveds we do not live in the hard space alone, and we do not live in this space without hope.

Look up.

See the dawn of this new day and courageously step into the life that is really life as you leave behind all that is no longer serving you.

Fear, hopelessness, shame, sadness, or regret might have become one of your good friends.

But you can't live here anymore.

⁵ Bowler, 193-94.