

Easter Sunday 2021

Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The Mystery of Mark 16:8 and Easter

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled back and they entered the burial place to find it empty. A young man dressed in a white robe says to them, and I quote our Gospel reading:

“Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:6-8).

My friends, there is a great mystery here, and I’m not just talking about what happened in Jerusalem 2000 years ago that got all of this started. You just heard for a second time the ending of Mark’s Gospel -- the conclusion -- but something doesn’t sound quite right. How can a story as important and significant as a Gospel end by saying that they went out and fled, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid? That’s no way to end a story about resurrection. In fact, that’s no way to end any story at all.

This is a great mystery that has lasted for something like 19 centuries. Let’s be Gospel detectives! Here are the basic facts of the case:

1. Mark is the shortest gospel and the first Gospel written, dating back perhaps to around two decades after Jesus' earthly ministry ended.
2. Mark shows a lot of literary prowess. The stories are secretive, move quickly, and edgy, kind of like Star Wars before Disney got involved.
3. And finally, most importantly, if you were to open your Bible at home, regardless of the translation, and to turn to the very last chapter of Mark, to chapter 16, to the ending of the story, you would find not one ending, not two endings, but three endings to the Gospel of Mark, with footnotes, or asterisks, or brackets all over the place!

If you were a Christian who existed anytime before the 20th century, then you would know the longer ending of Mark, which rather than concluding with Mark 16:8 that we heard, continues on to Mark 16:20. **You would have had more Bible in your Bible.** You would find a longer ending. My question for you about this odd ending of Mark is this: what is with this ending we heard? Why are there multiple endings to a Gospel? And what does this have to do with Easter?

First of all, what is with this ending? I mean you have got to be kidding me: "So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That's no way to end an Easter story!

Well it turns out that early Christians thought the same thing. A century or two after Mark was written, there were Gospels circulating. They had Matthew with it's short but decisive ending of Jesus appearing to his disciples on the Sunday after he had died. They had Luke with a beautiful resurrection account of the Road to Emmaus. These disciples find their hearts burning within them as they talk to a stranger on the road. They had John with hungry Jesus passing through locked doors, offering peace, showing Thomas his wounds, telling Peter to feed his sheep. And then, when they read Mark, these early Christians thought, just like you're thinking right now, that's no way to end a Gospel! What was Mark thinking? Shouldn't there be an encounter with Jesus? Shouldn't there be some kind of resurrection witness?

So what these early Christians did two times was to add longer endings to the story. They went from being readers and listeners to writers and editors. They fixed the problems with Mark. They added resurrection stories and appearances by Jesus. The longer ending of Mark says that Jesus showed up to these guys walking into the country, then of course he appeared to the 11 disciples. Next sprinkle in a little bit of doubt and disbelief. Talk about signs of power like casting out demons, picking up snakes, healing the sick. And *botta bing botta boom*, finish it up with an Ascension colored bow, and it's all wrapped up nicely!

What a mystery we have on our hands!

(This is why you have probably never heard Mark read before on Easter Sunday. The lectionary, from which we take all of Sunday Scriptures, gives me options today about which Gospel to use and I know in my life I have never once heard a preacher choose Mark to be the Gospel for Easter. “They went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” No preacher is going to choose that for such a big occasion.)

It’s been a mystery. Maybe there is no resurrection in Mark’s Gospel. Is that possible? There is no birth story or infant narrative in it. Perhaps there’s no life after death in it either. But then it wouldn’t be a Christian text, would it? Christians did not go around preaching the Good News of Jesus’ death. Death, as you know, is not good news. I think we have all learned that by now. The message of early Christians was not, “Hey, we have this great news. There was this guy we knew. We were basically besties. He was smart, talented, loving, good looking, and after being mocked and tortured, he died.” That is not Good News at all!

In our Acts reading this morning, Peter -- Jesus’ right-hand man -- tells the story of what happened. Peter says Jesus appeared to them after he was as dead as could be. And it wasn’t a ghost. We ate with him and drank with him, says Peter. And he took away our fears. He filled us with love and peace again. And now, Peter says, we celebrate this thing called Easter when God destroyed death. It doesn’t rule over us anymore because Jesus has given us all life again. If it’s a Gospel, there has to be resurrection. This is Easter. This is about taking away the sting of death.

What if this mystery is actually **a literary one**? More recent scholars have compared Mark’s ending with other ancient stories of that time. They have looked at other biblical accounts also. What they have found is that Mark’s ending seems to be doing something very unique and very special but not without occurrence in the ancient world or in our present reality either. Mark seems to be doing Easter work in a creative way.

Here’s what I want you to imagine for a second. Imagine that Mark wrote this Gospel for his house church. On a Sunday morning, people squeeze into every corner of a neighborhood home in a small city. Parents with young children find a corner and sit down to listen in. Older folks are given seats of honor in the crowded space. They all come for church each week to hear the Gospel being read and to eat that spiritual food. Story by story it is told. Chapter by chapter, the Gospel is read aloud. People know these stories by heart. They have friends of friends who are in the story. They see themselves in it. When it comes to the final chapters, they cringe when the crowd demands crucifixion. They weep when Jesus is suspended on the cross and breathes his last. **But that’s not where the story ends.** Mark continues reading his Gospel account. On the first day of the week, these women go to the tomb and find it empty, the stone rolled away! They see an angel standing there who tells them Jesus is risen and will meet them in Galilee. And then Mark reads his cheekiest, most creative and brilliant literary move of all, he reads the last line of

his Gospel, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” **Mark looks up and smiles widely. He closes his book and puts it aside.** Some of his listeners are confused. Others raise their hands to ask questions. But many know what he has done.

It’s a literary mystery and a theological one. We call it Easter. Of course the women did not let fear win. They did not let death dominate. They told the disciples who told anyone that would listen that Jesus is risen. Easter has come. How else would we be reading Mark’s Gospel in the first place?

At first, Christians had no Bible besides the Hebrew Scriptures. The Gospel spread by people like Peter and Paul telling everyone they knew that they had seen the risen Lord. They didn’t point to a text. They pointed to Jesus himself and the transformed lives they were living as a result of knowing him. People were selling their possessions and giving them to the poor. They were nonviolently and joyfully facing the lions when emperors demanded that Christians sacrifice to other gods. The lives they shared testified to the resurrection more than any words on a page ever could.

The story does not end in silence and fear. The story does not end in death. The written story comes to a close in Mark chapter 16, verse 8, and the living story of the resurrection community, the Easter people, continued in Mark’s little house church in the 1st century and it continues with St. John in the Wilderness today.¹

Where the text ends, our Easter story begins. Easter begins when we continue to do the work of the church with the weight of a pandemic on our shoulders. Easter begins when the Eucharist that satisfies our spiritual hunger leads us to share our food with those who are longing for something to eat. Easter begins when the songs we sing here ring out through this old village and beyond so that the people we see and meet know what God’s joy sounds like. Our Easter story begins with the risen Christ drawing us closer one to another so that we care for each other through thick and thin, we build lives together around this risen Christ, and through this resurrection community we are made whole.

That’s Mark 16:8 -- a 1900 year literary puzzle to share the Paschal mystery with you. So remember that fear and terror and death do not win! It looks like we’ll have to write -- we’ll have to live -- the rest of this resurrection story. It’s up to us because Easter has come, the tomb is empty, and Christ is risen!

¹ J. Lee Magness, *Marking the End: Sense and Absence in the Gospel of Mark* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002). All credit for this message is due to Lee Magness for this analysis of the ending of Mark.