

The Yale Divinity School Bible Study  
New Canaan, Connecticut  
Spring, 2010

The Gospel of Mark

VIII. Mark 16:1-8 (and 8:22-26)  
The Empty Tomb Effect

We've reached the last chapter of the Gospel now, and it's time to tie up some loose ends.

- Jesus must, as John the Baptist promised about the “one mightier than I” (1:8), begin baptizing with the Holy Spirit.
- The disciples, who have thus far been daft about Jesus' identity, must finally recognize with the narrator (1:1), God (1:11; 9:7), the demons (5:7), and a Roman soldier (15:39) that he is God's Son.
- The disciples must finally grasp what *kind* of Son of God/Messiah/Son of Man Jesus is – a serving (10:45) and dying one (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), rather than the kind that rules from a palace.
- Jesus must rise from the dead, as he has said three times he would (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34).

These are not expectations we have developed over years of Easter worship services or from reading Matthew and Luke and John. They all arise from Mark's story. So, though it is a lot to ask of eight verses, we trust our narrator to be as faithful as he has 'til now, and we read – expecting a resurrection, followed by appearances and epiphanies and Holy Spirit baptism.

Instead we get fear. After seeing Peter and the whole gang cower from Thursday on, we have hoped for a Sunday morning comeback, but we don't get it. The disciples are still cowering somewhere. And the women come not to greet Jesus, but to embalm him. When they arrive, the tomb is empty and a messenger has splendid news: “Go tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Instead, “they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Period. The end.

The end is so abrupt – the Greek sentence stops almost before it's started – and lacks so much that we've been prompted to expect that later copyists tried to help Mark out (8:9-20). But the original just stopped. Fear was the last word.

If you think this ending is bad for *us*, imagine how it shocked its original audience. For them the stakes were huge! An early-second-century Christian named Papias tells us that Mark wrote in Rome, using notes he'd taken while Peter talked. If he's right, then the group hearing the Gospel has chilling recent memory of terror under Nero: Peter and Paul both brutally executed by a petty and insane emperor (see Suetonius' description). But even if the audience isn't in the city of Rome, the text hints that they've encountered opposition and threats (13:9-13).

This audience, threatened and scared by persecutors next door, is looking to Mark's story for heroes who will inspire – courageous men and women who keep the faith in the face of danger. But Mark's disciples have been anything but courageous. They fell apart on Thursday night, when Judas betrayed Jesus and Peter denied him and all the others “forsook him and fled.” Worse, no one has seen them since.

Their problem is our problem: if Peter and the gang that hung around with Jesus can't bear up, how are these scared Christians in Mark's audience going to do it?

Their last hope was these Sunday morning women. With Peter and the boys behind locked doors, the women have ventured out to tend the body. But they, too, scatter in fear...and the story ends...and now everyone in the room is suddenly afraid.

They may even be a bit angry with Mark.

Then I imagine someone in Mark's roomful reminds everyone of what they all know by now: “Wait a minute! Peter wasn't a coward. He was a hero. We've heard the brothers and sisters tell it. Nero's thugs came after Peter and he didn't run away. He didn't deny Jesus. He died a martyr's death.” Soon the room is abuzz with stories about the courage and heroism of the other disciples. “Didn't James die...” “I heard Andrew...”

Having passed now from disappointment to relief, this roomful of fearful faithful slowly make their way into a third state: perplexity. How in the world did the weaklings in Mark's Gospel become the heavy lifters we honor in our churches? What turned a denier into a martyr? A lot of cowards into the courageous?

And as soon as the questions dawned, so did the answer: They DID see Jesus. They DID get the Spirit. They got it all. He changed them! Had to!

Maybe when the coast cleared in Jerusalem the shamed disciples all trudged back home to Galilee, tails between their legs, and he found them. Or maybe they

traced old sentimental steps to one of their favorite haunts and they found him. Somewhere, somehow, all his predictions finally sank in: “On the third day I’ll rise.” And they saw him.

In the euphoria, one of Mark’s crowd may have recalled Caesarea Philippi. Just before Peter’s big recognition scene, Jesus heals a blind man (8:22-26). But the story has a strange twist: the healing takes two tries. Jesus’ first touch opens the blind man’s eyes, but he only “see[s] people like trees walking around.” It is not until a second touch from Jesus that the man finally sees clearly.

Could it be that Peter’s famous answer to Jesus – You are the Messiah! – is also half-sighted? It seems so when Jesus says, “I’ll die,” and Peter says, “No! Messiahs don’t die!” At 16:8 Peter still hasn’t understood. There must have been a “second touch.” Jesus helped Peter to see!

Suddenly that whole ancient room imagines once-scared disciples shouting back and forth to one another, “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!” And Mark’s people can’t help joining the raucous scene. So they shout their own celebration: “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!”

So what about us? As you and I walk the road to our own Galilees we may do well to hear the very first line of Mark’s Gospel echoing in our ears: “The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” “The BEGINNING of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” The first time we read it, we thought it described a chapter, or a paragraph - John the Baptist announcing Jesus at the start, or the first chapter of this book. But now we can’t help but wonder: Could that be the name of the whole book? Sixteen chapters of “The BEGINNING of the good news...”?

Maybe there’s more there for you and me after 16:8, too. Maybe Jesus is just getting started. Maybe fear is not the last word for us either.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!



3. The resurrection stories in the Gospels vary.
- In Matthew, Jesus appears to Mary and Mary Magdalene near the tomb, then to the disciples in Galilee (chapter 28).
  - In Luke, Jesus appears to no one at near the tomb, but to a pair of his lesser-known followers on the Road to Emmaus and then to his disciples in Jerusalem (chapter 24).
  - In John, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene near the tomb, then to the disciples in a locked room and on a beach (chapters 20 and 21).
  - In Mark, of course, Jesus appears to nobody.

If you were on the planning team for this year's Easter worship service, which of the four would you choose for the preacher? Why? How would you preach to an Easter congregation that had just heard Mark 16:1-8?

4. The variety of resurrection appearance stories indicates mystery. But the differences between the accounts that we saw in the last question have caused some to doubt that Jesus rose. What do you make of the differences?

5. Mark implies that an encounter with Jesus changed the feeble and cowardly disciples of his Gospel into the heroic martyrs they become. That encounter was very transformative for them. What does “meeting Jesus in Galilee” look like for you? Has the presence of the living Christ impacted your life? How?

*For Further Study:*

- Norman Peterson, “When Is the End Not the End? Literary Reflections on the Ending of Mark’s Narrative,” *Interpretation* 34 (1980) 151-66.
- David J. Hester, “Dramatic Inconclusion: Irony and the Narrative Rhetoric of the Ending of Mark,” *JSNT* 57 (1995) 61-86.
- Gerald O’Connor, “The Empty Tomb: Reflections on the Resurrection”, from *America*, April 21, 2003; 13-15.
- Helmut Thielicke, “Time and Eternity”, reprinted from *The Silence of God*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co.) (1962), 77-88.