

Will You Believe and Respond?

The Gospel of Mark: Mighty and Mild / Mark 15:40-16:8/ September 1, 2024

Introduction:

This morning, we conclude our study of the gospel of Mark. You may be thinking, wait we stopped at verse 8 of chapter 16. What about verses 9-20? Most scholars agree verses 9-20 are likely not part of Mark's original manuscript but added by later copyist. Let me share a few reasons why. First, verses 9-20 are omitted from the earliest dated manuscripts and translation copies discovered, and specifically from the two oldest and most important Greek manuscripts available. Also, the early church fathers Clement of Alexandria and Origen don't mention the longer ending in their writings, while Eusebius and Jerome report they were absent from the Greek manuscripts they used (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 497). Second, verse 9 is an odd transition as Mary Magdalene is introduced like she is new to the reader even though Mark mentioned her multiple times prior to this. Finally, and most significantly, there are many differences between the syntax, grammar, and terms used in verse 9-20 compared to the rest of the gospel. As one commentator notes, Mark never refers to Jesus as Lord prior to this, there are eighteen new words found nowhere else in the gospel, and "several unique word forms and syntactical constructions," along with a notable absence of Mark's typical style (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 498). These things, along with others, lead me to believe verses 9-20 were likely added to smooth out the ending of this gospel. What does this mean for verses 9-20? Well, we should note that most what is written is found in the other gospels, so we can read it and still be edified. However, because it likely wasn't included by Mark, we should be careful not to develop any specific theology in light of a teaching in these verses that we don't find elsewhere in scripture. Now, there is one more question to answer before we dive in. Did Mark intend to end his gospel at verse 8? We don't know for sure. Some suggest he may have not had time to finish it because of the odd way it ends. However, I am persuaded he purposefully ended it this way to leave the reader asking ourselves if we will believe and respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ. I will teach from that understanding this morning but encourage you to study on your own. As we dive in, note another use of Mark's literary sandwiching technique. Notice how, in verses 40-41, we see three women named as witnesses to the crucifixion, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome. Then, in verse 47, both Mary's witness His burial, and in verses 1-8 of chapter 16 all three women are mentioned again as witnesses of the resurrection. In between, Mark inserts the story of Joseph of Arimathea. In this sandwich, he appears to be suggesting a contrast between these characters to highlight his main point. To work through this, I want to ask 3 questions. The first comes from verses 40-47,

Will You Believe the Witness to Christ's Death and Burial?

Following the amazing confession of a centurion, Mark shifts our attention to some who were also watching everything take place. Look at verses 40-41, "There were also women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. When he was in Galilee, they followed him and ministered to him, and there were also many other women who came up with him to Jerusalem." Some suggest the presence of these named women serves to highlight a change in the spiritual economy by Jesus that signals the equality of men and women as disciples. While that is part of what Jesus brought about, I don't think it is Mark's intent here. Pay attention to how he describes them. First, they were "looking on from a distance." The term for "looking" carries the idea of merely observing as a spectator. It is a different term from the ones Mark has commonly used "watching" and "seeing" which indicate perceiving. So, while they are shown still present at the crucifixion, they are merely observing from afar. However, note as well how they are described as "those who followed Jesus and ministered to Him" from Galilee to Jerusalem. This implies they are followers of Jesus who had been with him and stayed with Him to the very end. When you combine these things, I believe Mark is establishing them as distinctly more faithful than the twelve who abandoned Him, but still only following with an inquisitive faith instead of full faith at this point.

Notice the change in the next scene in verses 42-43, “And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.” Note the details here. Mark starts by setting this moment in the evening of the same day as the crucifixion. Then, he identifies Joseph of Arimathea as “a respected member of the council,” indicating he held a prominent position in the Sanhedrin. More significantly, he was “looking for the kingdom of God.” Though all Jews were certainly longing for God’s kingdom, for Mark, the kingdom of God has been decisively linked to Jesus Christ from the moment Jesus declared the “kingdom of God is at hand.” Church, this is indicating a prominent member of Jesus’ strongest opponents is the one seeking to honor Him with a proper burial. Now, note the final detail that contrasts his response to the women before him. He “took courage” when he asked Pilate for the body. He is not a spectator but courageously places himself a precarious position. In Roman law, it was forbidden to bury a crucified person. Instead, they left them hanging on the cross until decay set in or they were eaten by animals for everyone to see. Permission to take the bodies down was granted at times due to the customs and piety of the Jews, but it took courage to ask for that. In this situation, that courage is multiplied because it would expose him to his contemporaries, yet he boldly moves to honor the crucified Messiah. Look at verses 44-46, “Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died. And summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph. And Joseph bought a linen shroud, and taking him down, wrapped him in the linen shroud and laid him in a tomb that had been cut out of the rock. And he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.” Pilate’s surprise shows the death of Christ was uniquely fast. A typical crucifixion would last for several days, and this was only hours. Pay attention to who confirms the death of Jesus for Pilate, it is the centurion who called him the Son of God. After confirming Jesus is dead, Pilate releases the body, Mark details Joseph’s hasty acts of burying Jesus because it was late. The crucified King is buried, and a stone was rolled against the tomb cut out of the rock. Now, notice how Mark ends this scene in verse 47, “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.” Not only are these women witnesses to Jesus’ death, but they are also witnesses to His burial, albeit still from a cautious inquisitive observation. All of these witnesses to the death and burial of Jesus are interesting. If you are counting, we have a prominent figure of the Sanhedrin, a centurion, and 3 women. These are unlikely sources for eyewitness testimony if you are making this up. The record of their witness points to authenticity, and family, believing in the actual death and burial of Jesus Christ are crucial to the faith. These events comprise two of the three things of most importance Paul relays in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, “that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,” and “that he was buried.” Will you believe this witness to Christ’s death and burial? I won’t assume everyone in this room believes these things or there aren’t some who question them. Look at the choice Mark makes in what he relays and trust that he is relaying the truth. It isn’t the prominent leaders of the early church whom he reports as the first witnesses. It is unlikely sources who provide the testimony we need to believe. The next question comes as we jump ahead three days in the story,

Will You Believe the Witness to Christ’s Resurrection?

Just like the previous story, Mark anchors this moment to a precise time and brings all three women back as witnesses to the most glorious moment. Look at verses 1-4, “When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?’ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large.” It is the first day of the week, Sunday, after the Sabbath. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome leave early in the morning to properly anoint the body of Christ. They discuss how to get the stone rolled away before looking up and see the large stone rolled back and the tomb open.

Note how all these details reveal they had no expectation Jesus would be alive. Even though they heard His promise of resurrection, there wasn't faith in that promise yet. Continue in verses 5-6, "And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.'" The term for "alarmed" invokes the idea of fear, astonishment and distress. The white dress is a clear reference to an angelic presence and their response confirms that. The fact that all three respond this way means it isn't a hallucination. As they stand there in distress, the angel utters words that should bring comfort. He says, "Don't be afraid. You are seeking the one crucified, He isn't here because He has risen," and invites them to see where they laid Him. James Edwards notes, "The women are not directed to a mystical or spiritual experience... They are directed specifically to Jesus, who died by a crucifixion they witnessed, was buried in a place they witnessed, and now has been resurrected" (James R. Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, 494). Now, our translation may not capture an emphasis of the Greek. A more literally translation would be, "He was raised," proclaiming God raised Him from the dead. Family, never forget that the very human Christ, died a very real death, and experienced a very definite resurrection. As Paul relays in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, this is of first importance, "that Christ died for our sins...that he was buried, that He was raised on the third day." These women are eyewitnesses to each of these important truths. Again, this is striking because this was not the way to make this more convincing. In fact, a pagan antagonist of the early church father, Origen, once called this "the gossip of women about the empty tomb" to counter its truth (Origen, *Contra Celsum* 2.55). Yet, this is who God chose to first witness these things. Will you believe this witness to Christ's resurrection? Consider the story Mark doesn't fabricate and trust that he is relaying the truth. It isn't the prominent leaders of the early church whom he reports as the first witnesses of the resurrection. It is unlikely sources who provide the testimony we need to believe. This brings us to our final question for this morning from verses 7-8

Will You Walk Forward in Full Faith and True Discipleship?

The conclusion to this scene is the most surprising aspect of Mark's account. Look at verses 6-7, "And he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" After showing Christ was raised from the dead, the angel commands these women to go and tell the disciples, and especially Peter, that Jesus has risen and will meet them in Galilee just like He said He would. Think about this for a moment. This wouldn't take courage like Joseph of Arimathea. In fact, it should have elicited joy and enthusiasm. Their Messiah had risen as He promised. Wouldn't they want to tell others? Before we consider their response, do you see God's grace oozing from this command? The angel mentions Peter by name. Go tell Peter, the one who was wrecked after denying Jesus three times. Go tell him Jesus is raised and He wants to meet with you just like He promised. What astounding forgiveness! What astounding grace! Take time to consider how this is a picture of God's grace towards you. In the depths of your rebellion, Christ reached out to draw you in to Him. Now look at verse 8, "And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." What a strange way to end this gospel. These women don't obey the command. They don't respond in faith. Instead, they flee and say nothing to anyone out of fear. What a contrast to Joseph's courage. They have everything they need to boldly share the good news that Christ is risen, but they run and hide. Now, from other gospels, we know Jesus personally appears to them and they eventually walk in obedience to this command, but here they are shown not walking forward in true discipleship. Family, make no mistake about it, true discipleship is obeying the commands of God. It always involves heeding the word and promises of Jesus. One of Mark's goals in this gospel has been to draw our attention to that over and over again. Faithful discipleship isn't staying on the sidelines as a spectator with inquisitive faith. It is walking forward courageously in full faith to honor and glorify the one who gave His life to purchase your pardon.

And I am persuaded Mark intentionally ended his gospel here to leave these questions opened ended for us to consider. Will you believe the witness to Christ's death and burial? Will you believe the witness to His resurrection? And will you walk forward in full faith and true discipleship? Church, don't simply stand in awe and be astonished at these things. Walk forward in faith. Deny yourself and take up you own cross to follow Him fully in true discipleship. And as you do so, remember two important take aways from these moments,

1) Christ's Death & Resurrection Means our Faith is never in Vain

We have looked at Paul's testimony to what is of first importance, "that Christ died for our sins,...that he was buried, that He was raise on the third day." After going on to share proofs of these things, specifically the resurrection, Paul concludes in 1 Corinthians 15:17,"if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." I love to consider the reverse of this truth. Because Christ has been raised, as evidenced by all the witnesses of it, your faith is not futile, and you are not still in your sins. Faith in Christ declares you forgiven, redeemed, and righteous, and that same faith in Christ supplies you now have the power to live for Him. Power that is continually exercised by faith. This means, when you fall, get back up and keep striving to live by faith in the Son of God who gave His life for you. Ask for forgiveness, knowing He will forgive and cleanse you of unrighteousness. This means you can strive to forget what lies behind and press on towards the high calling. It means you can know these sufferings aren't worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed. It means you are and always will be secure in the love of Christ. Second, remember,

2) Christ's Death & Resurrection is the Substance of our Faith

True faith never moves on from these truths. It constantly looks at the Might and Mild Savior and drops its anchor deep in truths of the gospel throughout all of life. It runs back to this Savior when you're weak or have doubts to find a solid rock to stand on. This is one reason we celebrate communion together often, and I love that we get to do it at the end of this gospel. I didn't plan it this way, we always do communion on the first Sunday of odd months and the end of Mark's gospel fell here. God is so gracious to us. Look with me at 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, where Paul says, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." I share this often. Do you see that word "proclaim" at the end of verse 26? That has a dual purpose. It shows this act is both a proclamation to others and a proclamation to our hearts to remind us that this is the substance of our faith. When you take communion, you are declaring to yourself this is the only hope I have. Christ's death and resurrection is what I am clinging to in this life. Family, this is what it means to consider the body rightly. Some have suggested Paul's warning of taking communion without discerning the body, isn't as much about discerning our body, as much as it is discerning Christ's body given for us. I think it may be both. It means you acknowledge your sin and weakness while reminding yourself of the sufficiency of Christ's body given for you. Have you rightly discerned the body of Christ given for you? Is it what you feast on for true life? Or are you satisfied by this world and already filled with it?

Conclusion:

As the worship team is coming to lead us in a time of reflection before we take of the elements together, search your heart and ask if Christ's death and resurrection is the substance of your faith. If you have not placed your trust in Christ, today can be the day of your salvation. Today can be the day you make His death and resurrection the substance of your faith. All it takes is trusting in what it provides and asking for Him to forgive your sin and give you the faith to follow Him. If you want to pray that with someone, I am available to pray with you during this time of reflection. If you are trusting in Christ, think deeply on the truth of Christ's death, burial and resurrection, knowing that because of this your faith is not in vain. Ask your own heart if the atonement He provided is what you are clinging to for true life.

Dwell of whether you run to Christ for everlasting joy and satisfaction. Take time during these two songs of reflection to prepare your heart to partake of communion. Discern both the weakness your body and the power of the body of Christ given for you. Ask the Spirit to give you a fresh sense of the power of Christ's death for you. Proclaim to your heart that it is sufficient and bask in the grace He provides. As always you are welcome to come and kneel if the Lord leads, sit and reflect, or stand and sing. Would you pray with me as we seek God's face together?