

“He Is Risen! He Is Not Here”

The Forty-Sixth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 16:1-8; Isaiah 25:1-12

No one thought it would end like this. Jesus was the hope of all of Israel. It looked as though Jesus was Israel’s long-expected Messiah. He healed the sick, cast out demons and raised the dead. He preached about the kingdom of God, spoke like a prophet and quoted the Old Testament as though he had written it. Now to everyone’s shock and dismay, Jesus was dead and buried. The city of Jerusalem must have been in a state of shock! When Jesus breathed his last, the skies turned dark as night and the earth shook. No doubt, everyone was afraid. The Sanhedrin must have been terrified when they learned that at the very moment Jesus died, the temple veil—which divided the holy place from the most holy place—was mysteriously torn from top to bottom. The signs in the heavens surely indicated that God was angry at what the Sanhedrin had done—but it was too late now. Jesus was dead and buried. But the people who witnessed these things did not know that God’s anger was also directed toward his own son, who was bearing the guilt of our sins in that horrible moment when Jesus was forsaken by the Father while hanging upon the cross.

After forty-five sermons, we have finally come to the end in our series in the Gospel of Mark. In this remarkable gospel we have covered Jesus’ messianic ministry from its beginning in the days when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, until some three years later when Jesus and his disciples made their way south from Galilee to Jerusalem for that fateful and final trip to Jerusalem. During this journey, Jesus predicted his betrayal, arrest, death, and resurrection three separate times. He told his disciples that this was the will of God. The disciples struggled with these words, not knowing what to make of them.

The disciples—like most of those living in Israel during the days of Jesus—believed that if Jesus really was Israel’s Messiah, then the messianic kingdom would dawn right then and there in conjunction with Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem. And so when Jesus spoke of his death and resurrection, the disciples heard what he said, but certainly did not understand what he meant because their expectations were of a national, earthly kingdom. But Jesus was not interested in liberating Israel from Rome or in restoring Israel’s national fortunes. Instead, Jesus came to save us from something far worse than political oppression and military occupation. Jesus came to save us from the guilt of our sins.

When they finished the Passover celebration and Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper, Jesus and his disciples went to Gethsemane to pray. Jesus was arrested while his disciples fled in terror. But the women who had been with Jesus from the beginning remained at the foot of the cross as Jesus died, faithful to the bitter end. Peter boldly declared that he would be willing to die for Jesus. Then Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, just as Jesus had predicted. Because of fear, shock and grief, Peter and the rest of the disciples were nowhere to be seen when Jesus stood before Pilate at first light, was then flogged, and finally taken to Golgotha where he was crucified. When Jesus died about 3:00 PM on Friday, it was the women and a believing member of the Sanhedrin, Joseph of Arimathea, who provided Jesus with a tomb and ensured that Jesus was buried before sundown in full accordance with Jewish law.

As we saw last time, Joseph was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. He boldly approached Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Because Pilate was surprised that Jesus had died so quickly, Pilate summoned the centurion—the officer responsible for ensuring that the crucifixion of Jesus was carried out. The centurion confirmed Joseph’s report. Ironically, Mark tells us that Joseph was waiting for the kingdom

of God, which implies that he was a believer (or at least nearly so). But the centurion was likewise changed by what he saw. Even as Jesus died in agony upon the cross, it was apparent to this battle-hardened soldier that Jesus was the Son of God. Thus he too may have been a believer (or nearly so).

In any case, the disciples, who should have been there were nowhere to be seen. Thus it falls to Joseph and the women to prepare Jesus' body for burial. And so as we read in Mark 15:46-47, "*So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.*" This is important information because Mark makes it clear the location of the tomb was well-known—some critics have argued that Jesus didn't rise from the dead and that the disciples went to the wrong tomb, so they mistakenly thought Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus's body had been placed securely within before the tomb was sealed and under guard. Jesus was now dead and buried. It looked to all that his messianic mission had come to a tragic and quite unexpected end.

Before we turn to our text this morning, you have undoubtedly noticed that I am ending our study of Mark's Gospel at verse 8 of chapter 16. The reason for this is that the so-called "longer ending" of Mark is very likely not canonical—that is, it is not part of the original gospel.

A sermon is not an appropriate place for a lesson in textual criticism, which is the science of determining the original text of the various books of the New Testament, but we need to talk about this briefly. When a gospel or epistle of the New Testament was first written, the original text of that document is called the autograph. This is the document which we believe was given under divine inspiration. That original autograph was then carefully copied by hand because of the need to read these letters in the churches, scattered around the Mediterranean world and elsewhere. Professional scribes were often employed, but over time copy errors crept in, and a later scribe who copied a manuscript already containing an error, would quite naturally copy that error into his own manuscript. These copyist errors are called "textual variants." The older and better manuscripts are much more likely to be free of such errors.

While this sounds like this would undercut the authority of the New Testament—it does just the opposite. The early church placed great emphasis upon the preaching of the biblical text, so that literally hundreds of manuscripts were prepared and circulated everywhere Christianity spread. The problem is not a lack of biblical manuscripts, but too many manuscripts, many of them quite early. Textual criticism seeks to identify the earliest and best manuscripts and almost always gets us back to the original wording of the autograph. Furthermore, in no case is any doctrine affected by these variants and in any good English translation of the Bible, wherever there is a known textual variant it is clearly marked off as not being in the best and earliest manuscripts. That's the case with Mark 16:9-20.¹

While the longer ending of Mark first appears at some point in the fourth century, Mark's gospel ends at verse 8 in the best and oldest New Testament manuscripts. A number of church fathers (Clement and Origen) who quote from Mark, never mention the longer ending and wrote as though verse 8 was the end of the gospel. The two most famous biblical scholars of the early church (Eusebius and Jerome) were both aware of the longer-ending, but believed that it was not in the best and earliest manuscripts available to them. They rejected the longer-ending as a scribal addition and not part of the original text of Mark.

¹ See the discussions in: Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 601-605; France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 685-688; Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1975), 122-128.

There are a couple of reasons why this longer ending began circulating. Mark either abruptly ended his gospel at verse 8, or the original copy of Mark, which was written on a scroll, may have been damaged (and the end torn off) so that the original ending was lost. Given the abrupt ending, a copyist then wrote a summary of what happened after verse 8, and based this upon things mentioned in the other gospels. There is also a one verse ending in some manuscripts, but it never got the support the longer ending did. Over time, this 11 verse summary was appended to the end of the gospel, and after several hundred years went by, it was simply included as a part of the gospel. So, our modern English versions include it, as they should, but mark it off as not included in the best and earliest manuscripts. So it is not as though Christians are hiding a corrupt text of the New Testament. On the contrary, textual criticism has proven that we have at least 99% of the autographic text, and in those few places where there are any questions (like Mark 16:9-20), the variants are included so that people can make up their own minds.

In any case, I think that the evidence is very clear that the canonical gospel ends at verse 8, and that longer ending is highly unlikely to have been authored by Mark.

So, with that background in place, we turn to our text, the eight verses of Mark 16.

With the city of Jerusalem still in a state of shock and mourning, Mark sets the time reference for us for that event which completely changed the world—the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “*When the Sabbath was over . . .*” This means it was now after Sundown on Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath). Jesus had been buried for two days (Friday and Saturday). The women were concerned about the decomposition of Jesus’ body, so “*Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body.*” That the women were worried about the care and condition of Jesus’ body meant that they had no expectations whatsoever that Jesus would rise from the dead. But it is clear that they truly loved Jesus greatly and wanted to make sure that his body was properly anointed (which was the Jewish equivalent of embalming).²

That great historical event upon which Christianity was founded had not yet occurred. Had Jesus remained in the condition which the women expected to find him on Sunday morning, Jesus would be nothing more than a curiosity of history, who may or may not have made his way into Josephus’ *Antiquity of the Jews* as but one in that string of zealots and prophets who opposed Roman rule.³ Christianity would have ended, well before it began. Let’s be clear here. If Jesus did not bodily rise from the dead then Christianity is not and cannot be true. Everything hinges on this. As the recent dust-up over the supposed archaeological find of the “Jesus family tomb” demonstrates, if indeed the body of Jesus was found (and it could be verified as such) then we should not be Christians. But as we will see this morning, Christianity is founded upon an empty tomb because Jesus was raised from the dead. The resurrection is presented as an historical fact, every bit as much as is Jesus’ crucifixion. If this account is true and Jesus was raised from the dead, then Christianity is true whether you believe it or not.

According to Mark, it was early the next Morning (Sunday), just after daybreak that everything changed. “*Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, ‘Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’ But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.*” These dear women were on

² Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 585.

³ Lane, [The Gospel According to Mark](#), 584.

their way to anoint Jesus' body with the spices they had bought the night before. Matthew reports that the tomb had been "sealed" by the Sanhedrin and placed under Roman guard because of all of the rumors that Jesus would rise from the dead (Matthew 27:62-66). The authorities did not want anyone stealing the body and then claiming that Jesus rose from the dead.

These women had witnessed Jesus die. They had helped to bury him. They had bought spices to anoint his body. As they made their way to Jesus' tomb, it suddenly dawned on them that after Jesus' body had been placed in the tomb, a large stone had been rolled across the entrance. Since Joseph was a wealthy man, his tomb was probably typical of those first century tombs since discovered in the same general area. These tombs held an entire family (sometimes an extended family)—with remains going back many generations. These tombs were cut deep into the rock, and a deep groove (or trench) was cut just outside the tomb. A large flat stone (like a large stone wheel) was placed in the trench so that the tomb could be sealed tightly. With enough man-power the stone could be rolled away to open the tomb to anoint the dead, or when the tomb was to be used again for another burial. In this case, as the women made their way to the tomb, it suddenly dawned upon them that they could not possibly move that stone by themselves. It would be way too heavy for them.

But to their great surprise, when they got to the tomb, it was wide open. The seal was broken, the heavy stone was rolled away, and the soldiers were nowhere to be found! While Mark does not say so, it is certainly implied that the tomb was empty—i.e., Jesus' body was not there.⁴ Inside the entrance to these tombs was a small anteroom, with a tunnel opening into that portion of the tomb where the bodies were placed into cuts in the wall, or in stone boxes (a sarcophagus) stacked on top of one another. According to Mark, "*as [the women] entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*"

The presence of this individual startled them. Mark's reference to this individual being dressed in white means that this "young man" was actually an angel—white is symbolic of absolute purity and probably refers to the radiant glory that was present. Throughout the Old Testament and at the birth of Jesus, angels serve as messengers who announce God's purposes.⁵ The very presence of an angel in the open and empty tomb of Jesus is the sure sign that something amazing and wonderful has already happened. These women were not just merely "alarmed," they were terrified by the angel's presence. Even worse, Jesus' body was missing from the tomb.⁶

Put yourself in their place for a moment. The scene before them is certainly not what they expected. The fact that the tomb was wide open and Jesus' body was gone was alarming in and of itself. What had happened? And who was this strange "young man" clothed in a radiant white garment sitting inside the tomb. Things were positively "spooky."⁷ What on earth was going on? What could have happened? These same women who had stuck with Jesus until the bitter end were about to find out that the greatest event in human history had just occurred—perhaps moments before. The three times that Jesus had

⁴ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 586.

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 586-587.

⁶ France, The Gospel of Mark, 679.

⁷ France, The Gospel of Mark, 679.

foretold of his betrayal, arrest, and death, he had also foretold of his resurrection. But then that was the promise that everyone had seemed to forget—until now. The empty tomb should not have been a surprise, and yet under the circumstances of Jesus’ betrayal, arrest death and burial, it is easy to understand why no one expected what just transpired.

According to verse 6, the angel said to the terrified women, “*don't be alarmed . . . You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.*” Without an explanation as to had happened to Jesus’ body, an empty tomb can only mean that something horrible had happened—Jesus’ body had been stolen or desecrated. Instead, the angel reveals to these women the most glorious news imaginable. The tomb was empty because Jesus had been raised from the dead. He was not there, because he has risen! Human eyes were not permitted to see this event, but the angels witnessed it. And one of those angelic witnesses now testifies as to what had transpired.⁸ Amazingly, this news was given to the women, who were, under Jewish law, forbidden from giving testimony in a court. The fact that the women were told of Jesus’ resurrection first is not only due to the loyalty they showed to Jesus while the male disciples had fled, but clearly indicates the factual nature of the report. The early church would never make up the story of Jesus’ resurrection with the women being the first to have been told of it, since they were not legal witnesses!⁹

Once the women were assured that Jesus was alive, the angel reminds them of another promise Jesus made—recorded in Mark 14:26-28, which the disciples no doubt heard, but did not comprehend at the time. “*You will all fall away, Jesus told them, for it is written: I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.*” In their sleepy and disoriented condition in Gethsemane, Jesus spoke these words, but they made no sense then, other than to let the disciples know that at some point in the future they were all going back to Galilee. Now the true meaning of these words is made clear to the women in verse 7. “*But go, tell his disciples and Peter, He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.*” Not only was Jesus alive—having been raised from the dead, the angel now says that the disciples will see him again. This was the most glorious and comforting news imaginable. It is hard to imagine what they were thinking and what joy they experienced. No doubt, there was still a certain measure of disbelief. For this was news that was too good to be true and no human ear had ever heard such news before.

The very fact that these instructions were given to the women to take to Peter is utterly remarkable. Three times Peter denied knowing Jesus. Peter abandoned Jesus in his hour of trial. And yet, here’s the angel informing the women that it is Jesus’ intent to reunite with Peter and the twelve where it had all started, in Galilee. The very fact that Peter was not cast away is the sure sign of God’s grace toward sinners. After all this is why Jesus died and then rose again from the dead, to save sinners like Peter who always blow it at the worst possible time. Jesus had given his life as a ransom for many. He was raised from the dead as the sign that his death turned aside the wrath of God toward sinners. The empty tomb was the proof that Jesus was not just a messianic pretender as Pilate pronounced, nor a blasphemer as the Sanhedrin had declared. No. Jesus had just given proof that he was everything he claimed to be and more! Jesus is the Son of God! Jesus is Israel’s Messiah. He has just proved it!

The response from the women to this news is exactly what we would expect. “*Trembling and*

⁸ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 465-466.

⁹ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 589.

bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” These women were not just afraid, they were understandably terrified. Who wouldn’t be? And for a time they kept silent, because of the fear that no one would believe them. When Peter had seen Jesus transfigured on the Mount his reaction was similar. *“He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.”* It is the same for the women. What had just happened? Who would have believed them? And so it is here that Mark ends his gospel with news of Jesus’ resurrection—the perfect conclusion to Peter’s confession in Mark 8:29 that Jesus is the Christ, the very turning point in the Gospel. Because Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God, of course, he is not in the tomb. Why? He is risen!

What, then, can we say as we come to the end of this remarkable Gospel?

WFirst, the death of Jesus was not the end. The Sanhedrin was not rid of Jesus. As the opening chapters of Acts tell us, soon Peter and the rest of the disciples will return to the temple and preach the gospel of the risen Christ. On Pentecost alone, some three thousand were converted. As for Jesus appearing to the disciples in Galilee, in his first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul tells that Jesus made good on his promise. *“Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”* Jesus is risen. Peter saw him, all the apostles saw him. Over five hundred people saw him. And this is why our gospel is true.

Second, some 700 years before Jesus death and resurrection, the prophet Isaiah foretold of a great event that would occur within the city of Jerusalem—on God’s holy mountain (Calvary). As we read in our Old Testament lesson, we read *“On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. In that day they will say, ‘Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.’”* On Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday of that first Holy Week, Jesus fulfilled Isaiah’s glorious prophecy to the letter. The power of sin and death has been broken. The shroud of death, which covers our fallen race has been lifted.

On Mount Calvary Jesus has destroyed the power of death and removed our disgrace. As we have seen throughout Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is the Son of God and Israel’s Messiah. If we trust in him, he will save us from our sins. Therefore, beloved, because Jesus is risen and alive forevermore, we say of him, *“this is the LORD, we trusted in him.* He is Risen. He is not in the tomb. And what is more, that same Jesus is here with us this morning through his Word and Sacrament. And so as we go forth from this place, let go with the greatest of joy. *“Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”* Why? He is risen!