

LOOSE ENDS

The Resurrection and Mark's Gospel

Introduction

What do you consider a good ending to be? My children always ask me, when we start watching a film, whether it has a happy ending. If I say it doesn't, they refuse even to begin, and I must say I have a certain sympathy for them. I find it phenomenally hard to watch a film or read a book that doesn't promise a satisfyingly good ending (whether that be a happy one or simply one that ties together well the loose ends of the story). Mark's ending cannot by any stretch of anyone's imagination be called a 'good' ending. The narrative just peters out. It feels almost as though the author has run out of words and simply given up: the women ran away because they were afraid . . . In fact the existing ending seems so odd that later Christian tradition has supplied additional endings to make up for it. There is a shorter one (not given any verse numbers), a longer one (16.9–20) and endless supposition about lost endings and what they might have looked like.

Given my liking for a good ending, it is perhaps rather odd that I find this somewhat truncated ending to be entirely satisfying. There are many reasons for this, but the most important is that, in my view, the good news

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of Mark has not yet ended. Mark's Gospel is simply the prologue to the 'good news of Jesus Christ, son of God' (Mark 1.1), the story rolls on, borne out in the lives of each of us. The ending of the good news of Jesus Christ will not come for quite some time yet; whether it is a good ending or not depends on us as much as on Mark.



And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

Mark 15.38-9

For further reading: Mark 15.27-47

Before you think that I have lost the plot, I know that this verse comes from the account of the crucifixion and is not a part of Mark's resurrection narrative, and yet, as with a number of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' death, it begins to give us a hint of what is to come. Up until this moment, the story of Jesus' death has been unremittingly bleak: his disciples have all run away, he has been scourged and mocked, soldiers have gambled for his clothing and now Jesus has died, abandoned and alone.

At this moment, however, a glimmer of light appears. Imagine a beam of sunshine breaking through heavy, black clouds on a stormy day. The clouds are still heavy, the atmosphere is still oppressive, the weather is still stormy but the beam of sunshine intimates that there may be more going on than we can see, and that above the clouds the sun shines. In the same way here, on one level nothing

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changes. Jesus is still dead – abandoned and alone – but then the most unlikely of people makes the pronouncement that Jesus was the Son of God (Mark 15.38–9) and we also discover that he wasn't entirely alone. Far off in the distance stood some women, who had followed him during his ministry, and had followed him even here – albeit at a distance (Mark 15.40–1).

In Mark's Gospel there are three moments where Jesus is declared to be God's son. At his baptism (Mark 1.9–11) when Jesus came up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened and heard God's voice proclaiming him to be the beloved Son of God; very similarly, at the transfiguration the three disciples who accompanied Jesus saw a cloud and heard a voice declaring him to be God's beloved son. The opening of heaven and the appearance of a cloud were both signs that this was a moment of divine revelation (see Acts 7.55 or Exodus 13.21 for other examples of these). Here the veil in the temple, which separates the Holy of Holies – the part of the temple where God dwelt in the midst of the people – from the rest of the temple, was ripped apart and we receive another revelation. This time, however, it is not God who speaks but a despised Roman centurion, one responsible for overseeing Jesus' death, who proclaims divine sonship for the Jesus who suffered and was crucified. Whether the centurion said that Jesus was *a* son of God or *the* Son of God (either is a possible translation of the Greek, as various scholars have pointed out), he recognized more in Jesus than the disciples had ever noticed during his life. His statement hangs before us as a challenge – whatever the centurion recognized in Jesus, whether it be that he was a special man or the Son of God, who do you say that he was?

At this moment, even while Jesus hangs on the cross, a corner is turned. We travel with Jesus down to the very pits of despair, but then, when all seems lost, a beam of

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sunshine gleams, temporarily, through the gloom, suggesting that this is, perhaps, not all there is to see: the despair is no less acute, the hopelessness still hangs in the air but perhaps, just perhaps, there is more. It is this sense of something beyond the hopelessness that is, for me, a vital part of our faith. It doesn't necessarily make the despair any less bleak, but it does give us a reason for trudging on.



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.'

Mark 16.6-7

For further reading: Mark 16.1-7

One of the things that most irritates me when I am upset is someone saying to me: 'Don't be upset.' This has to be one of the least helpful things that anyone can say and brings to mind that song, 'It's my party and I'll cry if I want to', or as the case may be, 'It's my life and I'll be upset if I want to.' The only value of someone saying this to me is that I get so irritated that I forget, at least for a while, why I was upset in the first place.

It strikes me that the angel's command to the women not to 'be alarmed' falls into this particular category of sayings. The Greek word has the resonance of being so utterly amazed that you actually feel disturbed or alarmed.

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I rather think that this is entirely the appropriate response to turning up at a tomb in order to grieve for a loved one who has died in the most gruesome of circumstances, only to find the tomb empty of everything but an angel. In fact, my emotions would be a lot stronger than amazed to the point of alarm. Why then does the angel tell the women not to be alarmed? I suspect that this is due to the second command that the angel gives the women, that they should 'go, tell' Peter and the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead. If the women spent too long in a state of amazement and alarm, the all-important message would remain unproclaimed, unannounced to those who needed to hear it most. As it happens, it is very clear in Mark's Gospel that the angel's command had as little effect on the women as the command not to be upset has on me: they remain alarmed; in fact their emotion seems to become stronger. Verse 8 tells us that they fled in terror – now not just alarmed but frightened out of their minds.

This command to 'go, tell' is hugely important in Mark, because before this moment the disciples and those who were healed were told time and time again not to tell anyone anything. Jesus' command to keep quiet, it seems, was not a permanent one but a temporary one; they were to wait until they had the best news of all to proclaim before they told what they knew about Jesus. In fact, Jesus even made this explicit at one point in his ministry when he said that Peter, James and John were not to mention the transfiguration to anyone until Jesus had risen from the dead (Mark 9.9). The reason for this was probably because they would have got the wrong end of the stick, as the disciples so often did. For example, in Caesarea Philippi, when Jesus asked Peter who he thought Jesus was, Peter responded 'You are the Christ', but then went on to rebuke Jesus when Jesus declared

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that he must therefore suffer and die. Peter's understanding of who Jesus was, was at best partial. If he had gone out proclaiming Jesus too early then he would have made Jesus into someone that he wasn't.

They were now in full control of all the facts. They had seen Jesus' ministry, heard his teaching, seen him relate to the poor and outcasts, seen him die and now knew that he had risen from the dead. Now was the time to put the pieces together and to go and proclaim it – and somewhat inevitably, the women ran terrified from the tomb. What they now knew of Jesus was almost too much to grasp. If I had been there, I suspect that whatever the angel said, I would have run away even faster than they did.



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 16.8

I've always been intrigued by the philosophical riddle, 'If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?' because the instinctual reaction is: of course it does. A sound is a sound whether we hear it or not. Isn't it? Apparently the scientific explanation is no it isn't, since sound is the vibration transmitted to our senses via the ear. If no ear is there to receive the vibration then no sound is made.

The ending to Mark's Gospel begs a similar question. If Jesus was risen from the dead and no one said anything about it, would that undermine the power of his rising from the dead? Of course, we – the readers of Mark

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– know that this is an entirely hypothetical question. The fact that we are reading that the women ran away and said nothing, tells us that at some point they did say something to someone; otherwise we would know nothing at all of what happened at the tomb.

Nevertheless, the question remains. If the women had never said anything to anyone, would the power of the resurrection be undermined? Hardly surprisingly, there is a yes and no answer to give here. Yes, it would reduce the power of the resurrection because God in his great and unfathomable generosity has seen fit to trust us to communicate the things of God in the world. If we choose not to then of course this will detract from the wonder of the event. This is something that lies particularly heavily on the mind of Paul the apostle, who in Romans 10.14 asks how people will believe if they have not heard. For Paul there is an appropriate urgency and importance about sharing the good news of Jesus' death and subsequent rising from the dead.

On the other hand, however, it is important to recognize that even if the women had said nothing, ever, to anyone, Jesus would still be risen, the resurrection would still have happened, death and sin would still be defeated. Even if the women had said nothing, the disciples would have learnt of Jesus' resurrection when he appeared to them in Galilee; even if we decide never to take up the challenge to 'go, tell', God will still be God and Jesus will still be risen. God invites our engagement in his divine plan but does not need it. Failure of nerve on the part of human beings does not ruin God's presence in the world.

I am reminded here of a passage from Steff Penney's wonderful novel, *The Tenderness of Wolves*, in which one of the characters speaks of her time in a mental hospital where she had met a man who believed that he had been spoken to by God and told to invent a steam engine

that would save the world from sin. This became his life's obsession and what tormented him most was the knowledge of his own significance: if he did not complete the engine the world would come to nothing. The character says: 'He knew how important he was in the scheme of things, and would seize each of us in the grounds and beg us to help him escape, so he could continue his vital work. Amongst those tortured souls, almost all of them bewailing some private anguish, his beseechings were the most heartbreaking I ever heard . . . Such is the torment of knowing your own significance.' It is very easy to fall into the trap of believing in our own significance. In my view, the ending of Mark's Gospel puts everything beautifully into perspective. We are invited to join in with the proclamation of some of the best news possible – that Jesus is risen from the dead – but even if, like the women at the tomb, we are overcome with terror and run away, Jesus will still be risen. God has made us far more significant in his divine plan than we deserve to be, but not so significant that we should ever be in danger of losing our sanity because it all depends on us.

Concluding reflections

The oldest manuscripts of Mark end with 16.8 and, as I said above, for me this works as an ending. Some people point out that if we end with verse 8 then the Greek text finishes with the word 'for', since the Greek literally says, 'They ran away. They were afraid for.' To people schooled in good English grammar this is a terrible ending: you may have had drummed into you, as I did, that you should *never* end a sentence with words like 'for'. This may be a rule of English grammar, but it is not a rule of Greek grammar, where the word 'for' must always come second in a sentence. If you should want to have a

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two-word sentence that includes the word 'for', the only place for it to go is at the end.

The ending of Mark's Gospel fits the rest of the Gospel. It ends on a knife edge: will the disciples finally realize who Jesus is and live up to the high calling to which he attempted to point them throughout his life? Or will they, as so often before, fail him, running away at the key moment when they are most needed? The answer seems to be yes to both questions: yes they do fail him again but the fact that we are now reading the Gospel, written probably about 40 years after these events, tells us that ultimately they did not fail and did live up to Jesus' expectations of them. We so often want to make a clear-cut decision on whether the disciples were good or bad, successes or failures. The answer seems to be that they were a mix of both good and bad, successful and failing, and this should surely be very comforting to all of us who struggle along the way of discipleship today.