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# Easter Sunday: Mark 16:1–8

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In Year B of the lectionary cycle, preachers may be tempted to choose the alternate Gospel reading from John 20:1–18 instead of reading and preaching from Mark. After all, John’s story has Mary Magdalene telling Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple about the empty tomb, the two men running to the tomb to see it, Mary speaking with the risen Jesus in the garden (and how we love to sing, “I Come to the Garden Alone”), and finally Mary reporting to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” It has everything a preacher (and a congregation) looks for in an Easter Sunday narrative!

What can Mark offer to compete with all of that? Fear. Trembling. Silence. Yes, the tomb is empty, but there is no resurrection appearance like those in the other Gospels. No disciples touching Jesus’ wounds. No recognizing Jesus in the breaking of the bread. No miraculous catch of fish followed by the command to feed Jesus’ sheep. No Great Commission on the mountaintop. Fear. Trembling. Silence. It is hard to find an uplifting hymn based on the women fleeing the tomb. The text hardly seems worthy of a congregation’s attention on Easter Sunday.

Perhaps, however, Mark’s use of an anti-ending for the conclusion to his narrative is exactly what the church needs on Easter. People come to worship on Easter Sunday because they know the story of the resurrection and know it is central to the Christian faith. While that is a good thing, it is hard to surprise those worshippers, to offer them an “Aha!” on this day of all days. Mark’s odd ending, though, invites an odd sermon that has a good chance of helping the hearers experience something of resurrection anew.

## Mark as parable

By now it is commonly known, but bears repeating, that the original conclusion to Mark’s story is neither of the “shorter” (added to vv. 8) or “longer” endings (vv. 9–20) included in most translations, nor some long-lost manuscript. While there are a few divergent voices in New Testament scholarship, there is a strong consensus that Mark intended vv. 1–8 to be the ending for his narrative.

It is, of course, understandable why scribes felt the need to edit the ending. After all, they were copying Mark from the other side of Pentecost. They knew the stories of Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances and had experienced something of his resurrection in their own individual and ecclesial lives. In other words, they

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knew Mark’s story was wrong.

But, so did Mark’s original readers, and that is likely the point. They were a church built on the witness of the disciples. Mark tells his readers a story that intentionally varies from the tradition his community of faith holds—a variation he expects them to recognize. In other words, he composes this odd ending for effect. It is a literary device. Mark is not writing a journalistic piece. He is writing a theological, kerygmatic narrative hoping to shape, indeed change, the faith and lives of his intended readers. It is not just an odd ending. It is a surprise ending.

It can be argued that Mark’s surprise ending makes the whole narrative into a parable of sorts. To help us get a handle on this claim, we can adapt C. H. Dodd’s classic definition of parables:

A parable is a narrative metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, which arrests the hearer by its vividness or strangeness and leaves the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise interpretation or application to tease it into active thought even to the point of altering one’s worldview.<sup>1</sup>

A parable is, by its very nature, vivid and strange, to make the hearers question its interpretation and, in turn, to question their relation to whatever the parable is meant to shed light on. The Gospel of Mark ends in such an odd manner that its readers can-

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1. For an adaptation of Dodd’s original definition from *Parables of the Kingdom of God* (New York: Scribner, 1961), see O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Reading the Synoptic Gospels*, revised and expanded (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2013), 73.

not help but wonder what the story as a whole—a skewed version of the story they thought they knew—is supposed to mean for their faith and lives.

To Dodd’s lens for viewing Mark as a parable we should add Mark’s own description of the purpose of parables. In Jesus’ parables discourse (Mark 4), the twelve ask him about the parable (v. 10). Jesus responds by quoting from Isa 6:9–10.

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that “they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven” (vv. 11–12).<sup>2</sup>

For Mark, parables are not like sermon illustrations that clarify abstract and complicated concepts.<sup>3</sup> Instead, they prevent outsiders from perceiving and understanding what insiders already understand. In other words, for Mark Jesus’ parables are used in the narrative to draw lines between those inside God’s reign and those outside.

### Markan insiders and outsiders

Because parables twist things around, we should not be surprised to find that Mark, as a parable, twists around who are insiders and outsiders. The book opens with a line that probably serves as the title of the story: “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (1:1). Readers can evaluate the insider status of various characters in the narrative based on their recognition of this christological claim.

The disciples, of course, appear to be the ultimate insiders. Jesus first appears in this Gospel when he was baptized by John and hears the heavenly voice declare, “You are my Son the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (1:9–11). Without having witnessed this epiphany, seen Jesus perform any miracles, or heard any of Jesus’ teaching, the disciples obediently and immediately follow when he calls (1:16–20; 2:14). Readers who already know the story of Jesus and his disciples are led to identify with these faithful followers from the beginning. The first few chapters strengthen this identification, climaxing at the point where Jesus appoints the Twelve (3:13–19) and declares those “around him” doing the will of God are his true family (3:21–35).

Mark, however, then goes through a parabolic, yet systematic, character assassination of the disciples through the narrative.<sup>4</sup>

- It begins during the Parables Discourse. Having declared that those inside God’s reign understand parables, while those outside cannot, Jesus must explain the meaning of the parables to his disciples (4:13–14, 33–34).
- In the scene immediately following the Parables Discourse, the

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disciples awake Jesus in the boat out of fear of a storm. Jesus questions why they have no faith; and following the miraculous calming of the storm, they ask, “Who is this...?” (4:35–41).

- Jesus foretells his death and resurrection to his disciples three times. Each time they respond inappropriately. The first time, Peter tries to rebuke Jesus and is in turn rebuked by Jesus and called “Satan” (8:31–33). The second time, the disciples begin arguing about who is greatest, in other words about who should succeed him after he dies (9:33–37). The third time, James and John ask to sit on Jesus’ right and left when he comes into his glory, at which point the other disciples get angry (10:32–45).
- The disciples demonstrated the above misunderstanding of Jesus and his purposes even though Peter, James, and John had witnessed the transfiguration, in which a heavenly voice declared to them, “This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!” (9:2–8). It is little wonder that, as Jesus and the three disciples came down the mountain, Jesus instructed them to tell no one about what they had witnessed until after his resurrection (9:9).
- At the Last Supper, Jesus predicts that all the disciples will desert him. But Peter and the others swear that they would not do so even if it meant their deaths (14:26–31). But then Judas betrays Jesus (14:43–45). At the arrest, all the disciples flee (14:50). And finally, Peter denies being a follower of Jesus, even to the point of saying, “I do not know this man you are talking about” just before the rooster crows for a second time (14:66–72), fulfilling Jesus’ prediction (14:30). As Mark portrays the scene, Peter thinks he is lying, but the reader knows that the disciples really do not know who Jesus is, even though they have been following and serving him. Mark has thoroughly transformed the models of “insiderness” into outsiders.

Since this is the last appearance of any of the disciples in Mark’s narrative, the readers who identified with them are left in a quandary. The oddness of the parable has twisted in such a way as to leave them (us!) wondering whether we really know who Jesus is. Mark has accused us, in the sense of making it clear that the fact that we have been following and

2. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of biblical texts are from the NRSV.

3. They serve this type of function more in the Gospel of Matthew (cf. 13:10–17).

4. We will attend to enough items to be illustrative, not exhaustive.

servicing Jesus is no assurance that we understand who he truly is. Are we the most outsider of outsiders?

Jesus dies alone, without any of his disciples, without any of us, “around him” doing God’s will. But then, in great parabolic fashion, Mark adds another twist. The character the readers would have expected to be paradigmatic of outsiders, the most outsider of outsiders, the representative of militaristic-oppressive rule, the very one who crucified Jesus, becomes the only human in Mark’s story to recognize and declare Jesus to be God’s Son (15:39). Insider and outsider status have been turned on their heads in relation to witnessing the crucifixion. One could not (cannot!) fully understand what the declaration of Jesus as the Son of God means except by viewing the christological claim through the lens of the cross. Many scholars see this literary device as Mark’s way of correcting a Christology that too easily or strongly focused on the resurrection over against the cross. Mark has left the minds of the original hearers and readers today in sufficient doubt about the precise interpretation or application of the story of the cross and resurrection to tease it into active thought, even to the point of altering our worldview.

### ***What’s an outsider to do with an empty tomb?***

We have noted that Mark earlier foreshadowed that what was unclear to the disciples during Jesus’ ministry should be clearer after his death and resurrection. Coming down from the mountain of transfiguration, Jesus instructs the disciples to tell no one of what they have seen until *after* the resurrection (9:9). We should expect, then, for Mark to redeem the disciples at the conclusion of his story. We expect the disciples to finally “get it” and go forward proclaiming the crucified and risen Son of God.

Mark, however, seems to have misled us, in parabolic fashion, once again. The disciples do not reappear at the empty tomb or following the story of the empty tomb. It would appear the foreshadowing is left unfulfilled. Instead of letting readers off the hook, Mark continues in parable mode right until the very last line of the narrative. Mark has accused and convicted us of being outsiders, and it would seem he leaves us in that status even as he puts the last strokes of the stylus on his papyrus.

However, if we walk through 16:1–8 carefully, willing to view it as the parabolic exclamation point on a narrative that is a thoroughgoing parable, we may find a new way for preachers to proclaim the resurrection. Indeed, we may find Mark offering a surprise route toward “insiderness” after all.

### ***Are the women insiders? (16:1–3)***

The scene opens without any male disciples coming to the tomb. Instead, there are three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (v. 1). Readers might expect the women to be the surprising way Mark redeems the disciples (and us!). After all, even though the disciples all scattered after Jesus was arrested and did not witness the resurrection, the women were there. Mark notes their presence in an odd manner, which should have signified its

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parabolic import. But with the readers’ attention on Jesus’ death, and especially on the centurion’s declaration, we might miss the foreshadowy nature of the declaration. Mark writes:

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!”

There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem (15:39–41).

Then in v. 47, concluding the scene in which Joseph of Arimathea buries Jesus, Mark notes: “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.” The fact that these specific three women reappear at the empty tomb is no coincidence—coincidences do not occur in well-told parables! These women witnessed the crucifixion and saw where Jesus was buried; so, when readers hear them mentioned again in the very next verse, it would be a natural conclusion that they have come to witness and bear witness to the cross and resurrection as insiders of God’s reign.

Alas, Mark portrays them in a different light as the scene opens. They have come to the tomb, not to meet the risen Son of God, but to finish the burial. Joseph had not anointed the body properly: he just wrapped it in a linen cloth and stuck it in the tomb. Out of sight, out of mind. So the women bring spices to anoint the body (v. 1). And they were worried about how to get into the tomb to do this task, given that the stone would be very heavy (v. 3). In other words, the women assumed Jesus was dead.

At this point it might be helpful for the reader to remember that, while Mark does not include a resurrection appearance and is attempting to emphasize the cross for his readers, he clearly affirms the resurrection. Jesus spoke of it numerous times during his ministry. We often speak of Jesus’ passion predictions during his ministry, but that is an inadequate label for those pronouncements. In each one, Jesus predicts not only his death but also his resurrection:

Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, *and after three days rise again* (8:31).

. . . for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, *he will rise again*” (9:31).

“See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles; they will mock him, and spit upon him, and flog him, and kill him; *and after three days he will rise again*” (10:33–34).

In addition, we have already seen that Jesus mentioned his resurrection as he came down from the mount of transfiguration:

As they were coming down the mountain, he ordered them to tell no one about what they had seen, *until after the Son of Man had risen from the dead*. (9:9)

Finally, when Jesus predicts that all his disciples will abandon them, he offers hope. Their desertion is not the last word—his resurrection is!

And Jesus said to them, “You will all become deserters; for it is written, “I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.” *But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee*” (14:27–28).

This reference expands on the other times Mark mentions Jesus’ resurrection. It explicitly mentions that the disciples will be able to find the resurrected Jesus in Galilee.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth listing these references in detail to demonstrate that, not only is Mark in no way anti-resurrection in his theology, but also to show that the women who followed and provided for Jesus should have known he would not be found in the tomb. But perhaps they were looking on the crucifixion from too great a distance. Readers hoping to transfer their identification from the disciples to the women are disappointed. Mark has also shaped these followers of Jesus as outsiders who do not “get it.”

### ***Can the women become insiders? (16:4–8)***

That said, Mark seems to give the three women (us!) a second chance. Yes, they come to the tomb filled with misunderstanding, but once they find it empty they can become faithful witnesses.

When they find the stone rolled away (v. 4), they enter the tomb and find that Jesus is not there, but it is hardly empty. For a writer who is often sparse on details, Mark describes what they see inside the tomb with insignificant detail: a young man, in a white robe, sitting on the right side (v. 5). And the place where Jesus was laid is bare (v. 6).

As the young man speaks, he names what the women (and we!) should have already known: the crucified Jesus has been raised (v. 6).<sup>6</sup> Having noted where Jesus is not, he goes on to say where the crucified and risen Jesus is: “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” (v. 7).

It is important to note that the young man provides the three women with no new information. He is simply reminding them of what Jesus had already said (especially in 14:28), which they should already know. Such a reminder coupled with the visual image of the bare place where Jesus had been laid should surely, finally, make everything click for them. Surely now they (we!) will “get it.”

Alas, Mark then ends his narrative with the oddest of odd and parabolic lines: “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” (v. 8). Mark’s Greek in describing their silence is emphatic. It reads like a double negative in English grammar: “they said nothing to no one.”

Why, even now, do they (we!) not get it?! Mark explains that their failure to comply with the young man’s (with Jesus’) instruction is due to fear. Mark could not have emphasized their fear more strongly. In v. 5, he says the women were “alarmed” (*exethambēthēsan*). In v. 6, the young man reassures them that they need not be alarmed (same Greek verb). In verse 8, Mark uses two expressions to emphasize their emotional state. First, he says, “terror and amazement (*tromos* and *exstasis*) seized them.” In the last phrase, he says, “for they were afraid” (*ephobounto*).

Anyone who had read through Mark from beginning to end would recognize how troubling this description of the women is. As we saw earlier in the scene in which the disciples ask Jesus to calm the storm, Jesus equates their fear with a lack of faith (4:40).<sup>7</sup> So the women follow the pattern of others with fear overcoming their faith, even after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

### ***Can we become insiders?***

The disciples served readers well as a point of identification that would challenge our understanding of Jesus as the Son of God and lead us to question how faithfully we follow Christ. But in good parabolic fashion, they failed in the end to be redeemed as role models for us, so that we might see ourselves as inside the reign of God.

At the scene of the crucifixion, the women look on from a distance, see where Jesus is buried, and then come to the tomb after the Sabbath. It is natural for readers to extend their identification with the disciples to these other followers and supporters of Jesus. But they also fail us, leaving the tomb in fear and failing to tell the disciples that the crucified and risen Son of God would meet them in Galilee.

Does Mark, then, want the readers to leave the narrative in

5. For other places in Mark where belief in resurrection is affirmed in general, see 6:14, 16; and 12:18–27.

6. For Mark, the two events—crucifixion and resurrection—are inseparable.

7. See also Mark 5:15; 6:50; 9:6, 32; 10:32; 11:18; 13:7.

despair? This might seem the case if we didn't recognize the narrative is an extended parable. We need to consider two elements of the story that will yet show us Mark's unique version of Easter hope.

First, there is the young man in the tomb. Matthew 28:2–7 and John 20:12–13 have angels at the tomb. Luke 24:4–7 speaks of two men in dazzling clothes appearing at the tomb, likely an echo of Moses and Elijah appearing at the transfiguration (cf. 9:29–30).

Mark 16:5, in contrast, has a young man (*neaniskos*) dressed in a white robe appearing at the tomb. Who is this young man? While some might interpret Mark's language to be a figurative description of an angelic figure, another possibility is that he appeared earlier in Mark's extended parable. When Jesus is arrested, the narrator notes that all the disciples flee and adds a very odd line:

All of them deserted him and fled. A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked (14:50–52).

Those wanting to read Mark historically will try to see this reference as being to some historical person known to Mark's community. But those willing to read Mark as a parable expect odd elements in the story. The quick appearance and disappearance of this young man need to reflect historical reality no more than seed producing thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold (4:8), or a mustard plant sprouting branches to house the birds of the air (4:32). Instead of dismissing odd details as historically unimportant, we should focus on them as central to the meaning of the parable.

It is arguable, then, that the young man who flees the arrest naked returns<sup>8</sup> wearing a white robe to deliver the good news of the crucified and risen Son of God. He represents the post-crucifixion, post-resurrection redemption for which we have been looking. Yes, he fled with all the others, but he returned to the tomb, not to bury the dead, but to proclaim and invite others into the resurrection hope of Easter morning. The young man is the key player in Mark's story of Jesus' continuing past 16:8. Preachers can invite hearers to identify with him in moving from misunderstanding to understanding, from fear to faith, from outside to inside the reign of God.

A second element of Mark 16:1–8 we need to consider shows us Mark's unique version of Easter hope—that being the location where the young man says the disciples can meet Jesus. Echoing Jesus' promise (14:28), the young man declares that the crucified and risen Jesus will meet the disciples, who deserted him, and Peter, who denied him, in Galilee (16:7). Is this promise hope of redemption for the deserter-disciples and the denier-Peter (and us), and of their move from outsiders to insiders of God's reign?

Mark, however, does not narrate such an encounter. He leaves the ending open for the readers to determine whether it will happen. When considering the response of the women, the odds seem to be against it. But when considering the transformation of the young man, it seems possible.

**J**esus' promise—which the young man in the tomb echoes—that the disciples (we!) can meet Jesus in Galilee, in effect says that the crucified and risen Jesus is found in the everyday world, where there is illness, demons, oppressive political powers, poverty, and the need for a transforming word.

During the narration of Jesus' Galilean ministry, Jesus consistently tells people not to spread the word about him. This instruction climaxes at the transfiguration, where Jesus expands that command to specify *when* they (we!) can begin spreading the word: after the resurrection (9:9). Before the crucifixion, Jesus looks like a powerful teacher and a wonder worker. In his crucifixion, Jesus appears as one who shares the suffering of the people to whom he ministers. After his resurrection, when the disciples see him in Galilee, he will appear as one who shares the suffering of the disciples and the rest of the people to whom he will continue to minister, because Galilee (their world and ours) continues to suffer from the effects of imperial power.

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It is difficult to see the crucified and risen Son of God in this everyday world. Indeed, the nightly news seems to make a nightly argument against it, with news of political scandals, international skirmishes, refugee crises, mass gun shootings, and the like. But, into this everyday world, the young man in the white robe says, "This newscaster is unable to tell the end of the story." To see what Mark saw, we must look at the world through the lens of a christological parable that has the ability to turn our worldview on its head. Then, standing upside down and twisted all around by Mark's narrative, we can see the Son of God anew and move a little closer to the boundaries of the reign of God.

Mark may seem an odd choice for Easter Sunday when the lectionary offers John's version of the empty tomb as an alternative. But, explored in the context of the wider parabolic narrative, Mark 16:1–8 has the potential to have the congregation standing up in the pews, proclaiming with the young man in the white robe, "The crucified Christ is risen. He has gone ahead of us, and we see him in our midst, at our side! The crucified Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!"

8. The same Greek word (*neaniskos*) appears in Mark only here and in 16:5.