

Middle East peace: Mark 16:1-8

## **If Mark's ending creates discomfort and uncertainty, it is partly due to our knowledge of how the Easter story is told in the other Gospels.**

by [Thomas G. Long](#) in the [April 4, 2006](#) issue

Most New Testament scholars say that the Gospel of Mark originally ended with the story of the women who go to the cemetery, only to encounter a mysterious young man pointing to Jesus' empty tomb and announcing the resurrection. One of the challenges of this view is that if Mark truly ended his narrative here, he seems to have concluded by deliberately not concluding, by dangling something incomplete and unsatisfying before the reader in the final verse: "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." Not only does this verse fail to provide proper narrative closure, it also lurches to an awkward grammatical stop. A more literal translation would read, "To no one anything they said; afraid they were for . . ." It is almost as if the author of Mark had suddenly been dragged from his writing desk in midsentence.

In his commentary on the Gospel of Mark, the late Donald H. Juel tells the story of one of his students who had memorized the whole of Mark in order to do a dramatic, Broadway-style reading before a live audience. After careful study, the student had decided to go with the scholarly consensus regarding the ending. At his first performance, however, after he spoke that ambiguous last verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other, the audience waiting for more, waiting for closure, waiting for a proper ending. Finally, after several anxious seconds, he said, "Amen!" and made his exit. The relieved audience applauded loudly and appreciatively. Upon reflection, though, the student realized that by providing the audience a satisfying conclusion, his "Amen!" had actually betrayed the dramatic intention of the text. So at the next performance, when he reached the final verse he simply paused for a half beat and left the stage in silence. "The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious," said Juel, "and as

people exited . . . the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the nonending.”

If Mark’s ending creates discomfort and uncertainty, it is partly due to our knowledge of how the Easter story is told in the other Gospels. Easter is supposed to have postresurrection appearances, joyful seaside meals, scenes of reconciliation and forgiveness, garden embraces of the risen Lord, and the disciples’ excited shout, “He is risen!” But Mark offers us none of these, choosing instead to end his story with frightened women fleeing from a cemetery in silence. That’s no way to run a resurrection.

But Mark was trying to impart a different kind of Easter joy, trying to reveal another dimension of the Easter faith. As you come to the last verse and contemplate the unfinished ending, fretting that the Jesus story ends in mute fear and wondering where to go from here, suddenly an insight shatters the silence. “Go tell his disciples,” the young man at the empty tomb said. “He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” Who are his disciples? Peter, James, John and Andrew . . . yes, but also you. You are a disciple too. Where is Galilee? North of Jerusalem . . . yes, but also located in the opening chapter of Mark: “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God.” In other words, reader, the story isn’t over. Leave the empty tomb now and go back and read it again. Like the disciples, you did not understand this story the first time. Now that you have been to the cross and to the cemetery, read it again.

What do we see when we read the Gospel of Mark again, this time with postresurrection eyes? We see Jesus healing and teaching and casting out demons, but always being misunderstood, even by those closest to him. In other words, Mark is telling us that the saving action of God in the world is always hidden, ambiguous, sealed off from the obvious explanation. Reading Mark a second time, we see Jesus breaking through into human life as one who is powerful, but also as one who will suffer and die. In other words, we see a God whose power is a strange, suffering power. We go back to Galilee, and the second time around every story in the Gospel of Mark is a postresurrection appearance. What we see is a God who surprises us at every turn in the road, a God whose power is expressed finally in weakness.

One biblical scholar has suggested that if we really understand Mark’s muted resurrection story, we cannot easily sing Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” on Easter. Perhaps. But recently the Viennese chorus Concentus Musicus recorded an unusual

version of Handel's *Messiah*. Instead of giving a thundering, triumphant, cymbal-crashing rendition, it offers a modest, tentative version. When the chorus sings "The glory of the Lord is upon thee," the word *thee* is hardly sounded, as if the human creature can scarcely bear the weight of God's glory. And when the singers come to the climax of the oratorio, the grand "Hallelujah Chorus," the hesitant style conveys the truth that human beings can only dimly see and longingly hope that God is even now wresting victory from suffering, chaos and captivity. As music critic Porter Anderson put it, it is almost as if the singers "were in a dream, sometimes sitting bolt upright with the memory of a fine thought—King of Kings—then drifting again . . . back to a pianissimo of heartbreaking faith. . . . Something here aches, longs, needs."

Mark would approve. Go back to Galilee and read again. There you will see him, the risen but still hidden Christ, his saving hand extended to all human aching, longing and need.