

Above and beyond: Mark 16:1-8

Is this any way to run a resurrection? Is this enough to persuade, to stir new life in the followers of Jesus?

by [Fred Craddock](#) in the [April 5, 2003](#) issue

We will have to deal with the question sooner or later, so we might as well get it over with: Where does the Gospel of Mark end? There are four possibilities. The ending with the least support among ancient Greek manuscripts of Mark is the one comprising 16:8 and a short summary statement. This “shorter ending” is obviously non-Markan. The longest ending, verse 8 plus verses 9-20 plus a lengthy insert, is also suspect (the insert after verse 14 is especially lacking in manuscript support). The third candidate, verse 8 plus verses 9-20 without the insert, has more manuscript support, but the verses are not in the oldest and most reliable texts of Mark, and some of them are found in the other three Gospels and Acts. These verses can best be read as the work of a Christian scribe seeking to overcome the awkwardness of ending at verse 8.

That leaves Mark 16:1-8, with its awkward Easter ending. “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” is hardly a shout of victory over death. There is no appearance of the risen Christ to the women or anyone else. In the Greek text the final word in verse 8 is “for.” Granted, this is a conjunction, which in Greek is not normally placed at the beginning of a clause, but even so it is an unusual final word in a narrative. Some scholars are convinced that the original ending, being the outermost part of a scroll, was worn off or broken off. Our task is to accept this text as Mark’s Easter account and to hear what it says and does not say.

Following a death, there is nothing to do, and there is much to do. There is nothing to do: nobody goes to work, nobody goes to school, nobody is hungry, nobody has anything to say. Helpers are helpless, and in the way. There is much to do: legal matters need attention, the body must be prepared for burial, a tomb must be located. Fortunately for the family and friends of Jesus, a nearby tomb has been

provided by one Joseph of Arimathea who himself placed the corpse in the tomb and rolled a stone against the door. Mark does not indicate that the body was prepared with spices since the burial was in haste, the Sabbath day being very near. However, two Galilean women, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph, saw what Joseph did, and after the Sabbath came, along with Salome, to anoint the body.

What happened at the tomb is told in five verses. The stone has been rolled away, a young man in white (an angel?) is seated inside on the right, and as would be expected when experiencing a divine revelation, the women are alarmed. The Easter message they receive is brief: do not be afraid; Jesus was crucified; he was placed here; he is not here now because he has been raised. Then they receive an Easter commission: go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee; in Galilee they will see him. This is the message Jesus had told them earlier. The response of the women is to run in terror, amazement, fear and silence.

Is this any way to run a resurrection? Is this enough to persuade, to stir new life in the followers of Jesus? First, let it be said that none of the Gospels provides an unambiguous, totally convincing account. Matthew says the disciples worshiped Jesus but some doubted; Luke says that in their joy they were disbelieving; and John says one of the Twelve refused to believe until he touched and felt. Faith is not coerced, even on Easter. In the New Testament, faith is response to divine revelation, and Mark provides that from the mouth of the young man in the tomb.

Second, Mark did not need an appearance of the risen Christ to affirm his faith in the resurrection. Faith can be expressed by adding an appearance after death and burial or it can be expressed by remembrance of Jesus' repeated promise of a resurrection. Mark chose the latter. Descending the Mount of Transfiguration, he told Peter, James and John not to speak of their experience until after the resurrection; each of the three predictions of the passion included a prediction of resurrection; and on the way to Gethsemane, Jesus said, "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." At the tomb the angel said to tell his disciples and Peter that he would meet them in Galilee, "just as he told you." The recollection of the words of Jesus is the stuff of faith.

Third, the question of why Mark, who obviously believed in the resurrection, included no appearance of the risen Christ is a natural one raised by the text itself. We can only speculate, but a reasonable answer may lie in Mark's accent on the cross. He has told the story of Jesus from baptism to crucifixion. The journey to Jerusalem was

a journey to the cross, and all who would follow him must take up the cross. Perhaps for Mark, ending the story with a glorious resurrection would have reduced the cross to a stop on the way to resurrection and have turned the tomb cave into a tunnel with light shining through. Perhaps.

Fourth, even Mark's brief Easter account is full of Good News. To disciples who had abandoned him and to Peter who denied him, Jesus' word was, "I will meet you in Galilee. There we began together; there we will begin anew."

And finally, of the women, afraid and silent: what can be said? When such persons find their voices, what powerful witnesses! No glib and easy Easter words here. They had been to the cemetery.