

Start over at the beginning (Easter Day B) (Mark 16:1-8)

Mark's Gospel and “There's a Hole in the Bucket”

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One afternoon a few months ago, when the days were short and it was cold outside, I wanted to make my daughters smile—so I began singing one of my favorite childhood songs, “There’s a Hole in the Bucket.”

The song is a comedic model of iterative thinking. It’s a dialogue between two voices that begins and ends in the same spot, with a man (who seems rather dim-witted) wondering how to fix the hole in his bucket.

If you look for videos of the song online (which I did after my children asked me to sing it for about the hundredth time), you’ll find various interpretations. Jim Henson and Rita Moreno’s [Sesame Street version](#) has a distinctive “men are stupid” vibe. Performed on stage by [Harry Belafonte and Odetta](#), it becomes a song about cleverness, humor, and tenderness in relationships. In [Michael Franti and Spearhead’s hip-hop rendition](#), images of money and racism converge around a sense of the futility of human endeavors in a fallen world.

I’ve been thinking about this song as Easter approaches. I don’t think it’s too much of a stretch to think of Mark as the “Hole in the Bucket” Gospel writer. He has no problem admitting how dim-witted Jesus’ disciples can be, he seems to have a deep existential grasp of the futility of human endeavors, and his Gospel ends so abruptly that you’re tempted to turn back to the beginning and start it over again.

The last words of Mark 16:8 (which most scholars consider the end of the original manuscript) are *ephobounto gar*, “for they were afraid.” Not only is it rare in Greek for a text to end with the word *gar*, it seems odd that Mark would conclude his version of Jesus’ resurrection with its first witnesses silenced by their fear.

[One of my favorite Mark commentaries](#) suggests three possible reasons the Gospel ends this way:

- the author was interrupted while writing and never had the chance to complete his Gospel
- the author wrote more after *ephobounto gar*, but that part of the text was subsequently lost
- the author intentionally ended the gospel with *ephobounto gar*

I find myself drawn to the third option. Why? Because it means Mark was willing to be honest about the reality that our stories don’t always have neat endings.

Sometimes the hole in the bucket doesn’t get repaired. Sometimes we have to spend another Easter worshiping virtually. Sometimes the virus lingers, thriving in one community as another suppresses it. Sometimes we become so immobilized by the immensity of the task before us that we fall into silence, staring at the spices in our hands and wondering what will happen next. And what happens next often seems identical to what’s already happened.

It’s true that Mark’s gospel ends with the witnesses to the resurrection suspended in their moment of fear—and that this moment has repeated itself again and again through the millennia. It’s equally true that Mark’s Gospel ends with a divine event so powerful that it echoes forward and backward through time, its resonances coming to life again and again, transforming past and present and future.

Everything new seems old again. And again, and again. Still Christ rises from the dead. This is good news, even for those whose only response is to flip back in puzzlement to the first chapter and verse (which in Mark’s gospel happens to be “the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ”).

I’m guessing that Mark knew exactly what he was doing when he ended with *ephobounto gar*. He was prompting us to live out the story from beginning to end, again and again. Maybe he even wanted us to write our own endings, confident that because the tomb is empty all of our endings are also new beginnings.