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## Beginning Again (Mark 16:1-8)

*Tim Geddert*

The footnotes in our Bibles are wonderful—when they help explain something puzzling in the text. But what do we do with the footnotes that puzzle us far more than the texts themselves?

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*Mark's Gospel is "The beginning of the good news" (1:1).  
Our story is its continuation.*

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Of all the footnotes to be found in modern translations of the Bible, surely none are more puzzling (perhaps disturbing) than those that comment on the ending of Mark. In the NRSV Bible in front of me, a single footnote in chapter 16 suggests no less than *four* different ways in which, according to ancient manuscripts, Mark's Gospel might have ended. "Some of the most ancient authorities bring the book to a close at the end of verse 8"—so begins the footnote, alluding to the first option found in the manuscript tradition. Three more options are alluded to when the footnote indicates that some manuscripts end the Gospel with the "shorter ending" and some with the "longer ending" and some with *both*. These "longer" and "shorter" endings are then printed in the main text after 16:8. To complicate things even more, another footnote on the same page indicates that the "longer ending" is lengthened further by an additional four sentences in yet other old manuscripts. If the full story had been told, however, still other endings would have been included in additional footnotes.

Most of us grew up reading Mark's Gospel as though the verses we call 16:9-20 belonged to the original text. There in the short space of twelve verses we read of three resurrection appearances: to Mary Magdalene, to the two "Emmaus" disciples, and to "the eleven." Not only

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that; we are also told that the disciples had trouble believing and that Jesus rebuked them for their unbelief. Then comes a form of the great commission, a series of promises to the disciples, a report of Jesus' ascension, and even a very brief summary of the missionary expansion of the church. All of that in twelve verses. It is a breathtaking panoramic survey of everything important from the resurrection onward. The only problem is it almost certainly was not written by Mark.

Even conservative scholars have gradually been forced by the evidence to reach this conclusion.<sup>1</sup> And the evidence truly is overwhelming: the earliest commentators on Mark's text make no reference to them; the first references made to them are comments that they are *not* authentic; the transition from v. 8 to vv. 9-10 is very awkward, reintroducing Mary Magdalene as though she had not been present in the preceding verses and awkwardly contradicting what Mark wrote in verse 8; verses 9-20 contain both vocabulary and themes that would seem far more at home in Luke than in Mark; and finally, not only do "*some* of the most ancient authorities" lack these verses (as NRSV says)—they *all* do. And as for the other alternative endings attached to 16:8, they are (if possible) even harder to defend.

### **OBJECTIONS TO 16:8 AS THE END TO MARK'S GOSPEL**

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 NRSV)

"But, surely, Mark's Gospel couldn't possibly end at 16:8!" So argue many interpreters. You can't end a Gospel on a note of fearful flight and disobedient silence, they say, especially if not a single resurrection appearance has been narrated. In response to such objections, ancient Christian scribes tried to give the Gospel a "proper" ending. And then the speculation begins: Perhaps Mark himself wrote a "proper" ending, but it somehow got lost; or maybe he intended to write more, but was prevented (perhaps by martyrdom) from doing so.

I have always been amazed at the eagerness of scholars, especially conservative ones, to grasp at these hypotheses. Do they assume the last verses of Mark were not as inspired as the rest, so God's Spirit "made them disappear"? Or do they believe that the real ending was as inspired as the rest, but unfortunately God failed to keep it in existence long enough for anyone to know about it? Do they really believe that God chose Mark to write the Gospel, but could not keep him alive long enough to finish the job?

Though the best evidence indicates that the Gospel ended at 16:8, two reasons are typically given for rejecting that possibility. First, it is not possible (so it is claimed) to end a Gospel without reporting resurrection appearances! Just look at the other Gospels, all of which feature reports of Jesus' appearances to his followers. Therefore, obviously (it is said) Mark's Gospel is incomplete without them.

However, that seems like a strange argument to me. None of the Gospels end at the same point as any other. Luke contains a resurrection report, resurrection appearances, a reference to the future worldwide mission, and a report of Jesus' ascension. Of these four events, Matthew includes only the first three, John only the first two, and Mark only the first one. Apparently there are lots of different ways to end a Gospel. Moreover, if Mark wrote first (which is likely), he could hardly have learned from the others what constitutes a "proper" ending. In view of the fact that the gospel story continues on even to this day, its end is not told in *any* Gospel, not even if we consider Acts to be the continuation of Luke.

Mark knows that the gospel story includes resurrection appearances (see 14:28), a commission to evangelize (see 13:10), and Jesus' ascension (see 12:10-11, 36). He simply chose to refer to these events earlier in the Gospel and not report them at the end.

## THE SECOND, MORE SERIOUS OBJECTION

But there is a second objection, and this is the more serious one. It just doesn't make sense (so it is argued) to say the women were disobediently silent about the resurrection, and then stop there. This is a direct contradiction to what the other Gospels say, and, besides, who would think of ending his "good news" like that? This objection must be faced head on if we are going to reach any satisfactory conclusions about the content and meaning of Mark's ending.

As to the supposed contradiction, unfortunately that problem will not go away no matter what theory we hold. Mark 16:8 contradicts Matthew, Luke, and John no more and no less than it contradicts every other proposed ending of Mark's Gospel! That means nothing is gained by attaching one of the proposed endings to 16:8. It just imports the problem into Mark's Gospel itself! Everyone, including presumably Mark, must have known that the women eventually overcame their fear and reported the good news. But Mark is content to report their (initial) silence. And since every manuscript contains verse 8, everyone has to come to terms with that verse, no matter how they think the Gospel really ended.

Now there is one easy solution to the problem of 16:8 . . . if only it worked. Some interpreters have tried courageously to reread the Greek text and then interpret Mark 16:8 as a description, not of the women's panicky disobedience, but of their awe-inspired obedient haste to do exactly what they had been told to do.<sup>2</sup>

"They went out and fled from the tomb" is then interpreted to mean "they immediately left and in great haste ran to obey." The next line, "for terror and amazement had seized them," is taken to mean "for they were filled with awe and wonder." "They said nothing to anyone," is understood as "they even avoided the normal custom of greeting people along the road," and finally "for they were afraid" is read as "that's how awestruck they were with the good news."

This attempt to account for 16:8 is valiant, but, unfortunately, it works even less well as an interpretation of the Greek text than of the English. In Mark, "fleeing" (*pheugō* is virtually a technical term for abandoning discipleship, becoming a deserter (cf. 14:29, 50, 52) and "fear" (*phobeomai/phobos*) is in fact the enemy of faith (cf. 4:40; 5:36).

### A PROPOSAL FOR THE ENDING OF MARK

The following are the conclusions I have reached about the ending of Mark:

- Mark 16:8 is indeed the ending that the author intended.
- It is an ending that combines a great promise with a serious challenge.
- It is a subtle ending, but one perfectly suited to the kind of Gospel Mark wrote.
- It is an ending that "wraps up" Mark's Gospel perfectly, tying up loose ends that Mark has deliberately left dangling along the way.

Mark's last chapter reports that three women come to Jesus' tomb on Sunday morning, intending to honor him by anointing his corpse. For all their good intentions, they really do get *everything* wrong. First, their timing is wrong—another woman discerned the times and anointed Jesus' body earlier (cf. 14:8). Second, they worry for nothing about a stone too large to move—when they arrive, it has already been rolled away. Third, they respond with fear at what they find inside—and are immediately told that their reaction is wrong. The reader is actually quite well-prepared for their final reaction, their disobedient silence.

A young man (likely a divine messenger, though Mark does not tell us it is an angel) announces that the crucified one has risen. The women

are invited to see where the body had been and then told to report to the disciples that Jesus is waiting to meet them in Galilee. So far, so good. But then the shocking ending: they ran away in fear and remained silent. The reader who has come with them to the tomb is left standing there bewildered: what now? But there is only silence! What does it mean?

Sometimes Mark's Gospel is interpreted as though it was designed to undercut the authority of the first apostles. Mark makes them "look bad" all over the place, and then, in the end, denies them a resurrection meeting with the risen Jesus. If the women never reported the messenger's announcement, presumably the disciples never went to Galilee. "And that is why you just can't trust those apostles in Jerusalem" (Mark is understood to say under his breath).<sup>3</sup> But I do not accept this argument.

No scholar has proposed that, in history, there was an attempt to discredit the apostles. But some have seriously interpreted Mark's narrative that way. Others modify the theory slightly, claiming that Mark is not discrediting the historical apostles; rather, he is discrediting other church leaders in his own time, first by caricaturing them in the Gospel as the (mostly uncomprehending) disciples of Jesus, and then hinting, at the end, that they have never truly met the resurrected Jesus. I also find this theory unconvincing.

The proposal that Mark could have "loved Jesus and hated the apostles" is simply untenable, and that he used the apostles as literary foils for his own theological opponents is a theory for which there is no evidence. Some better solution to the problem of Mark's ending will have to be found. I propose the following.

### **WHY THIS PROPOSAL IS BETTER**

First, let us note that Mark, in his conclusion, did not incorporate everything he knew. That is clear from the fact that the great commission and the ascension of Jesus are alluded to earlier in the narrative (see above). Further, Mark's readers can be expected to have known enough of their own church history to realize that the women eventually told, and that the followers of Jesus eventually met the resurrected Jesus in Galilee and elsewhere. Our task here is to interpret "the narrative Mark wrote" and not to make a list of all the other things that happened after Easter.

Second, we know that, according to Mark, Jesus' followers did in fact meet Jesus in Galilee. We learned in 14:27-28 that such a meeting was a prerequisite to future faithfulness, and future faithfulness is

assumed in texts like 9:9; 10:39; and 13:9-13. Our task is to understand the meaning and the challenge in a Gospel ending that does not include a report of the Galilean reunion.

Third, we dare not overlook the importance of 14:27-28 in Mark's narrative. There Jesus informed his disciples, even before they abandoned him, that there would be a post-resurrection meeting in Galilee. Earlier he had told them when to expect the resurrection (cf. 8:31; 9:31; 10:34). That means the disciples know where and when they are to meet Jesus, whether the women ever tell them or not. The theory that the women's silence is Mark's final coup de grâce on the male disciples just does not work.

Fourth (and here is where things are especially interesting), the original text of Mark 16:7 can be translated two ways. The NIV, for example, translates it as a *direct* quote, and the NRSV as an *indirect* quote:

Go, tell his disciples and Peter, "He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."  
(NIV)

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.  
(NRSV)

The difference seems small, until we ask who the word "you" refers to. According to the NIV it refers to the male disciples. The women are to go tell *them*, "Jesus is going ahead of you into Galilee." In the NRSV version "you" includes the women. They are to join the male disciples and tell them, "Jesus is going ahead of *us* to Galilee."

According to the NIV, the women's role is only to be a communication link to the male disciples, telling them what they already know. According to the NRSV, they are to join (actually *rejoin*, see below) the male disciples and as a (*re*)united group travel back to Galilee, meet Jesus, and "start over" once again. For reasons that will become obvious, I prefer the NRSV version.

### THE SUBTLETY OF MARK'S NARRATIVE

Fifth, we can now see how subtly Mark has woven together two separate stories. First the story of the male disciples: they followed and served Jesus in Galilee, then followed him to Jerusalem. There they failed him in the crisis, abandoning him just as Jesus himself was taken

away to be tried and crucified (cf. 14:50-72). But just before their final failure they were offered “discipleship-renewal” on the other side of the cross and the resurrection. They are assured that, whatever failure intervenes, they can return to Jesus and start over (14:27-28). That is the story of the male disciples; not once prior to Jesus’ death does Mark even hint that there were women in the group of Jesus followers all along.

After Jesus dies, Mark tells the story of the women disciples. We learn now that they too followed and served Jesus in Galilee, then followed him to Jerusalem (cf. 15:40, 42). They did *not* abandon Jesus in the crisis and therefore serve as witnesses to his death (15:40), burial (15:47), and resurrection (15:5-6). In the end, the women also fail (16:8), but not before they too, just like the men, are offered the opportunity to meet the risen Jesus on the other side of failure, to go back to Galilee, and “start over” (16:7). Mark reports their failure (16:8), and the narrative is over.

The men failed to stay with Jesus on the road to the cross. The women failed to proclaim the message of the resurrection. Remember why Jesus recruited the disciples in the first place? —“to be *with* him, and to be sent out to *proclaim* the message . . .” (3:14, *emph. added*). Mark tells two stories, allowing the male and female disciples (respectively) to represent two ways people can fall short of their calling. Everyone misses the mark, and everyone is invited to start over in the power of the resurrected Jesus. That is Mark’s message.

## CONCLUSION

Mark now waits for his readers to react.

Some react like this: “Did the women ever join the other disciples? Did they go to meet Jesus in Galilee?” And Mark’s Gospel says, “That’s *their* story. What matters here is *your* story. You have now heard the message; will you go?”

Others react like this: “Women, how could you? How could you hear the wonderful resurrection message and then be silent?” And Mark’s Gospel whispers back, “How can *you*? How can *you* be silent in the face of the same message?” And we realize that just as Nathan “caught” David with a self-condemning parable (cf. 2 Sam. 12:7), Mark’s Gospel also “caught” us.

Still others react: “I think I also need to meet the resurrected Jesus in “Galilee.” And Mark’s Gospel says, “The good news is that *all* are invited to the Galilee reunion—the men, the women, even those who have failed most seriously.” That is why Peter is mentioned separately in 16:7—even *Peter* (as the original should be translated). *All* can meet

the resurrected Jesus, indeed all *must*—faithful discipleship depends on it!

And of course there are always those who react: “I would have preferred a different ending, maybe one that rounds it all off nicely and doesn’t demand quite as much from me, the reader.” Available are the “longer ending” that summarizes early church history, and the “shorter ending” that reads like this:

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

And Mark’s Gospel says, “Yes, happy endings are wonderful. The problem is they let us put down the book with a sigh of relief and say, ‘Great story!’ This is a different kind of book. You cannot put it down, even if you want to. Whether this book has a good or a bad ending depends on you. For you are still writing it!”

Mark’s narrative ends with 16:8, but his story goes on. Mark’s Gospel is “The beginning of the good news” (1:1). Our story is its continuation. ✨

## NOTES

1. See Timothy J. Geddert, *Watchwords* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 161-73.
2. David Catchpole, “The Fearful Silence of the Women at the Tomb: A Study in Markan Theology,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 18 (1977): 6-7; cf. Robert H. Gundry, *Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 988-1021.
3. Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1991), 258-63.