

# “The Never-Ending Story”

Mark 16:1-8 <sup>1</sup>

Well, here we are, once more, at the zenith of the Christian calendar, the celebration of our Lord’s resurrection from the dead! Today’s text is also the climax of Mark’s Gospel, and this sermon is the final one in our several-year journey through Mark.

Without the Resurrection, Jesus’ life and death, though noble and admirable, are nonetheless overwhelmingly tragic events. But *with* the Resurrection, Jesus was declared to be the eternal Son of God with power (Romans 1:4), and the disciples were transformed from terrified and defeated fishermen into flaming witnesses that turned the world upside down.

Mark’s account of the Resurrection, though, is a most unusual one, and one that many have found unsatisfactory through these nearly two thousand years. The other three Gospels have endings that soar and celebrate; but Mark ends with: “*Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid*” (Mark 16:8).

That conclusion has been considered so inadequate that at least two alternate endings were composed fairly early on, and you may have one or more of these longer endings noted in your Bible. Since scholars are convinced that Mark did not write either of these alternate endings, some have wondered whether Mark died or was martyred before he could finish the last page of his work. Some have wondered whether a page has been lost. Maybe the dog *did* eat his homework!

It seems unlikely, though, that a lost page would leave the document ending on just the right word to finish a complete thought. So scholars increasingly argue that the Gospel of Mark ends just as Mark intended for it to end, and that’s the approach we’ll take today. We’ll have to back up to the beginning of the chapter, though, and make our way toward that final verse. You might want to keep your Bible open.

**The Approach** (vv. 1-3). <sup>1</sup> *When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body.* <sup>2</sup> *Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb* <sup>3</sup> *and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?”*

Jesus was buried by Nicodemus before sundown on Friday, the preparation day for Sabbath. Mary Magdalene and at least one other woman watched the burial and saw the tomb closed with a massive stone. Being unable to work on the Sabbath, which runs from sundown to sundown, Mary Magdalene and two other women waited until the Sabbath was ended on Saturday evening and then purchased spices with which to anoint Jesus’ body the next morning.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 21, 2019. Resurrection Worship. Parallel passages are Matthew 28:1-8; Luke 24:1-10; John 20:1-8.

Sources for this sermon include: Barclay, William, “The Gospel of Mark,” *The Daily Study Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954); Culpeper, Alan, “Mark,” *The Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007); Garland, David E. “Mark,” *The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); Lane, William, “The Gospel According to Mark,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974); Turlington, Henry, “Mark,” *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); Wessell, Walter, “Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8: Matthew, Mark, Luke*. Digital Version; Williamson, Lamar, Jr., “Mark,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, digital version.

The anointing the women intended had nothing to do with embalming, because embalming was not practiced by the Jews. It was intended to be simply a tender act of love and devotion.

Having secured their supplies the night before, the women were up at first light to make their way to the tomb. They were unaware that the religious leaders had sealed the tomb and posted a guard, but they were well aware of the problem of moving the huge stone.

Although the lists in the four Gospels vary somewhat, it's clear that essentially the same group of women witnessed Jesus' death on the cross, His burial that evening, and the empty tomb on Sunday morning. And it is quite apparent that the women did not anticipate Jesus' Resurrection. They were not coming on the "third day" because of Jesus' prediction of His Resurrection. They were coming on the third day because they were unable to come any sooner.

**The Stone, the Angel, and the Resurrection** (vv. 4-7). <sup>4</sup> *But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.* <sup>5</sup> *As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.*

<sup>6</sup> *"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.* <sup>7</sup> *But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'*"

Mark made no mention of the strong earthquake that attended Jesus' Resurrection, and he didn't mention that the guards fainted dead away at the appearance of the radiant angel. In fact, Mark didn't mention the guards at all.

Mark did confirm that the stone was "very large," and that when the women arrived at the tomb, the stone had been mysteriously rolled away. The women entered the open tomb, and they were surprised to see "*a young man dressed in a white robe*"—the other Gospels identify this person as an angel—who welcomed them and assured them that they were at the right tomb, the tomb of "*Jesus the Nazarene.*"

None of the Gospels attempt to describe the Resurrection Event itself, but we can infer some things from the evidence we have.<sup>2</sup> John's account is especially helpful:

<sup>1</sup> *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.* <sup>2</sup> *So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"*

<sup>3</sup> *So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.* <sup>4</sup> *Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.* <sup>5</sup> *He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.* <sup>6</sup> *Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.*

John's description varies from the other Gospels in that Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb alone, sees that the stone has been removed, does not go in, and does not see an angel. She immediately concludes that someone has stolen Jesus' body, and runs to tell Peter and John. Obviously none of the three expected a Resurrection.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10

But here's the most interesting part. When they entered the tomb, Peter and John found the strips of linen that had been wrapped around Jesus' body, and they found the cloth that had been wrapped around His head still lying in its place, separate from the linen.

Had the grave been robbed, either the body and the linen would have been taken, or else the body would have been hastily unwrapped. There would not have been the orderly scene they found. From our point of view, the most obvious explanation for the evidence would be that Jesus' body was simply transported—somewhat as in *Star Trek*—to another location, or to another dimension.

But there's an even more intriguing explanation. Dr. Gene Eller, a friend of mine who was for many years the Headmaster of the Nazareth Christian School, pointed out that it was the custom in those days that when a servant had accomplished everything the master had assigned, the servant would approach the master silently, with his headcloth folded in his hands, which was the sign that the assignment had been completed.

I think perhaps what Peter and John saw was not simply the evidence that Jesus' body had vanished without disturbing the linen. They also saw His headcloth folded by itself, as if to say, "Mission Accomplished. I have done what you sent me to do."

In Mark's account, though, we aren't told those things. The angel simply shows the women that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and tells them, "*Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.*"<sup>3</sup>

It was a grace-gift indeed that this message was sent to Peter. Peter was singled out because he would have desperately needed the assurance that he was both forgiven and reinstated into the disciple band. The New Testament tells us that Jesus appeared privately later to Peter, but we have no description of that glad meeting (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5).

The word Mark used for "*going ahead of you*" is an interesting one. The verb (προαγω) doesn't mean simply "gone first." It is the verb used for leading troops forward as they advance in battle. We'll come back to that idea shortly.

The Gospels do not explore the significance of the Resurrection very much. They simply report it as God's vindication of Jesus' identity and of His right to command our allegiance and obedience. But the Resurrection is the essential keystone of Christian theology, and Paul expounded on its significance over and over again.<sup>4</sup> Here are just two of those comments:

*"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith. . . . But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. . . . For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive"* (1 Corinthians 15:14, 20, 22).

*"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved"* (Romans 10:9).

My friends, in the Resurrection of Jesus, God has touched us right where we are and has defeated our last enemy. We are not cosmic orphans, as the modern secularists would make us. Before Jesus was raised from the dead, His disciples ran away, denied their Lord, and huddled behind locked doors in fear and confusion. After they met the Risen Jesus, they were transformed from scared rabbits into world-changing missionaries.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 9:22, 44, 13:3, 17:25, 18:32-33, 22:37

<sup>4</sup> Romans 4:24-25, 6:4, 8:34, 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, 15; Philippians 3:10-11; Colossians 2:12-13, 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:14

**The End of the Story?** (v. 8). And that, at last, brings us back to where we began, to Mark 16:8: *Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*

Perhaps you can sense better now than at the beginning of this message, how stark and disjunctive this final sentence is. Where is the Resurrection power? Where is the world-changing transformation? Where is *Jesus*, for heaven's sake!?!

In a way, I guess, we can empathize with the women as described here. They were not expecting a Resurrection, and events were unfolding so quickly and so unexpectedly that they were overwhelmed. I expect that most of us have experienced similar moments here and there.

And we know, as Mark's readers already knew, that Jesus had given many convincing proofs that He really was alive (Acts 1:3). As Paul put it in the first written record we have of the Resurrection, "<sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ **died** for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was **buried**, that he was **raised** on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he **appeared** to [Peter], and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all he appeared to me" (1 Corinthians 15:3-8a).

Chuck Colson, of Watergate infamy, often noted that "Watergate proves the Resurrection." Colson pointed out that once it became clear that heads were going to roll, Nixon's inner circle, the only ones who knew what had really happened, began to betray one another right and left in order to try to save their own skins. Observing that nearly every one of Jesus' original disciples was executed because he refused to deny that he had seen the risen Jesus, Colson pointed out that "Men don't choose to die for something they know is a lie."

But even after all this, we still have Mark's abrupt ending. What are we to make of this? Here's what I think . . . .

I think Mark ended his account so abruptly because by so doing, he effectively put the ball in our court. Mark puts us to work. *We have to decide* how the story turns out. We are forced into the Story, and **we suddenly realize that we are the next chapter.**

Do the Cross and the Resurrection *really* transform a hopeless end into an endless Hope? Is the Story of Jesus going to be a Never-ending Story that leads to the New Creation, or is it going to end with a fearful whimper? Are we going to leave this service, check it off our list, and head eagerly to a lovely luncheon; or is something more significant going to happen here?

The angel told the women that "*Jesus is going ahead of you. There you will see Him.*" And that's always where Jesus is. He is *with* us, as He promised to be; but He is also out *ahead* of us, pulling us toward the New Creation.

So who will you tell, and how will you tell them? *When* will you tell them? Are you, too, going to say nothing to anyone, because you are afraid? If Jesus is alive—and *He is*—and if Jesus is here—and *He is*—and if Jesus has work for us to do—and *He does*—then Let's Roll.