



THE GOSPEL OF MARK

A YALE BIBLE STUDY

with Allen Hilton

Session Eight – Resurrection!

Our Grand Finale

Mark 16.1-8

I write early on the morning of November 4, 2020, as 300 million Americans wait to know who our next president will be. Counters in some swing states stopped to sleep and interrupted our accustomed pattern of knowing results. It is an abrupt and, to many, surprising moment of suspense.

The end of Mark's Gospel is frustratingly, mysteriously abrupt. We are used to disciples seeing the risen Jesus – in Galilee, in locked-door Jerusalem rooms, on Emmaus Road, over breakfast on a beach. Our traditional Easters have taught us to expect the white-robed messenger announcing the resurrection, who tells the women that a Galilee reunion with Jesus awaits them and the disciples. But then, the story changes...and suddenly stops.

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. (16.8)

Period. End of sentence. End of Gospel.

“Wait, what?!”

In this final session of our study, we get to explore how the mystical, magical, mysterious, abrupt ending of Mark was right on time for that audience we've come to know – and how it is right on time for us.

Part One – Why Did Jesus Die?

We ended our last time together with Jesus crucified, the disciples scattered in fear, and the faithful women who've stayed near bereft at the foot of the cross. Burial arrangements were

being made.

The question disciples had to be asking through their fear and tears in the gloomy aftermath of that dark Friday afternoon was “Why?!” They knew the practical cause: a Jewish court with ulterior motives had found him guilty of blasphemy and a Roman governor intent on increasing his own power had sought the crowd’s favor and gotten their verdict: “Crucify him!”

But there are other layers to the question that reach to divine purpose. In the words of Tony Jones’ provocative book title, “Why Did God Kill Jesus?”

Cross Purposes – The Reason Jesus Dies in Mark

As readers who have fixed our eyes on the literary and theological artistry with which Mark weaves meaning into his story, when we look for reasons Jesus died, we cast our eyes back to hints spread through the book.

Moral Example

For Mark (as, we’ll see, for the Apostle Paul) Jesus’ death sets an example for those who would follow him. That sounds strange, as if this were a suicide cult and disciples were called to be like lemmings to the sea. But Mark’s Jesus uses the image of a Roman cross, menacing tool of imperial power, to signify a way of being that gives up one’s own ends and prerogatives for the sake of others.

Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mark 8.34)

Then two chapters later, after his last passion prediction seems once again to elude his disciples’ grasp, he drives home the self-sacrifice in more practical terms:

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and Whoever wants to be first must be slave of all; for the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life...for many. (10.43-44)

Like Jesus, who actually died for others, disciples will live a death to self that frees us for others. Moral example.

In letter form, this use of the cross became clearer. The Apostle Paul reported his own spiritual experience as “having been crucified with Christ [so that] it is no longer I who live but Christ living in me”. (Galatians 2.20) He spoke of having crucified the flesh with its selfish desires (Galatians 5.24), having died to sin (Romans 6 and 7 and 8). And he wove cross-shaped living the entire rubric of his first letter to the Corinthian church. He began by aligning his own preaching with the foolishness of the cross in the world’s eyes. (1 Corinthians 1.18) He then urged the Corinthians to give up their right to sue one another in court (Ch. 6), their right to eat meat sacrificed to idols (Ch. 8), and their right to choose their favorite spiritual displays simply by what they prefer (1 Cor 12 and 14).

All of this fits the pattern of “not to be served, but to serve” from Mark 10. To top it all off, Paul even grounds the value of the other to whom we are called to defer in the fact that this other is “a brother or sister for whom Christ died.” (1 Cor 8.11) The cross guiding morality again.

Mark encapsulates this way of being through narrative of Jesus’ words in the Caesarea Philippi moment and the aftermath of James and John’s oblivious request for places of honor. The cross-shaped life would not take us there.

Revelation of Jesus’ Identity

The American comedians, Steve Martin and Bill Murray, did a short improv bit on Saturday Night Live in which they wander onto a rural gas station set, peer intently past the camera, and ask in a heavy hick accent, “What the H*** is that thing?!” The sketch is 150 seconds of two comic geniuses repeating that one question. They warn some kids offscreen not to get near it. Steve asks Bill to take a picture of him with it. But mostly they just ask it over and over again. Finally, sporting a look of epiphany each says: “I know what the H*** that is!” and saunter off the scene...only to circle back a few seconds later with one final unison, “What the H*** was that?!”

Not to trivialize, but substitute “Who?” for “What?” and that silly SNL scene captures a major plotline of Mark’s Gospel. The narrator (1.1), God (1.11; 9.7), the demons (Mark 1.25; 3.11; 5.7), and Jesus himself (14.61-62) don’t need to ask it. But people spend the whole Gospel watching Jesus teach and heal and do other peculiar, marvelous things, then pausing to ask themselves and one another “Who the H*** is this guy?!”

- The scribes ask it combatively, as in “Who does this guy think he is?!”, when Jesus presumes to forgive a paralytic man’s sins, “Why does this fellow talk like that? He’s blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (2.7)
- The disciples ask it in wonder on a newly-calm Sea of Galilee: “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (4.41)
- Jesus senses that the crowds have been asking the same question when he polls his disciples at Caesarea Philippi: “So, who do people say that I am?” (8.27)
- He also knows that his disciples have been dying to know, because he follows up with, “Well, who do YOU say that I am?” (8.29)
- Like prosecuting attorneys, the Jerusalem authorities who interrogate Jesus during his trial supply a title, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” and when he answers that he is, they tear their clothes and claim blasphemy. (14.61-62)
- And, finally, Pilate pokes around at Jesus’ identity somewhat disinterestedly. (15.1-10)

For all their attempts to size Jesus up, though, these human characters quite unanimously don’t get it. Even Peter misses by a bit, as we’ve seen many times. (8.30-31)

As you know, this plot line comes to its climax at the cross, when a Roman centurion, of all

people, gets it right. This grizzled veteran of crucifixions galore watches Jesus breathe his last breath and, we imagine, finds it starkly different than the passing of the passel of criminals whose demise he's observed. He concludes, "Surely this man was the Son of God."

I include this extensive review of a theme we've tracked closely throughout our journey, because one of the functions of Jesus' death is, very ironically, to identify his immortality. For Mark, that is the most God-revealing moment in the whole book.

New Access to God

So, Jesus breathes his last breath and a Roman soldier calls him Son of God. That's headline material! But simultaneous to all that, down the road, something remarkable happens: the curtain of the Temple is spontaneously torn in two. Our narrator doesn't tell us how the worshippers there responded to that spectacle. What we can know is what that might have symbolized for ears who have ears to hear.

The Temple curtain is described in the Book of Exodus.

This veil, described first and most fully in descriptions of the tabernacle, was made of blue, purple and scarlet yarn and finely twisted linen, with cherubic worked into it by a skilled craftsman ([Exodus 26:31](#); 36:35). It was to be hung before the holy of holies, which was a perfect cube of ten cubits per side. The veil was hung by gold hooks on an acacia-wood frame, which itself was overlaid with gold ([Exodus 26:32-33](#)), and the ark of the covenant was kept behind the veil ([Exodus 26:33](#))." (Gurtner, "The Veil Was Torn in Two")

But what does this "rending of the veil" accomplish? Two interpretations of the symbolic meaning of this event predominate in the scholarly conversation.

1. Judgment. This tearing is another indication of God's judgment on the Temple (a follow-on to Jesus' prophetic acts to interrupt Temple processes in Mark 11). (See, e.g., Craig Evans' Word Biblical Commentary on Mark)
2. Access. This tearing pronounces symbolically that the veil between heaven and earth is done away – a follow-on to the tearing open of the heavens (same Greek verb) when God's voice rings out Jesus' identity and a dove comes down at Jesus' baptism in Mark 1 (See John Donahue's and Daniel Harrington's, Sacra Pagina Commentary on Mark)

They need not be mutually exclusive, of course. The tearing could mean both.

Within our question why Jesus died, the first is hardly relevant. (It doesn't compute to say that the cross happened because God wanted to presage the destruction of the Temple.) But the second symbolic meaning – that heaven and earth are brought closer – seems well within the scope of the divine purpose.

Here's how Donahue and Harrington put it:

The rending of the veil of the sanctuary indicates that in Jesus' death God has opened definitively the way between heaven and earth through Jesus' death on the cross. (*Mark* p. 452)

The death itself supplies new access to God. When we entertain that concept, Paul's memorable words come to mind:

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. (Romans 5.1-2)

This grace in which we now stand...after Christ's death has torn the veil.

Ransom

While he predicts his death several times in Mark's Gospel, Jesus does not talk much about its purpose. In fact, only once does he offer an analogy, and it is precisely in the ellipsis of my quote from Mark 10 above: "to give his life A RANSOM for many." In our common usage, as in ancient usage of the word *LUTRON*, ransom describes money or goods offered in exchange for a life. Kidnappers demand a ransom that gives them a certain material gain in exchange for the newly granted freedom of their victim.

In this cryptic way, Jesus casts his life as the commodity of exchange between a kidnapper and a liberator. Given Jesus' reference to the "many" for whom he will become the ransom, the kidnapped party seems to be all humanity.

The natural candidates for the role of kidnappers in the Gospel are the evil powers who hold some humanity captive. Throughout, demons capture and oppress people.

- The man Jesus helps in the Capernaum synagogue is controlled by a legion of demons. (1.23-26)
- The many demons Jesus casts out in summaries like 1.29-30 and 3.11.
- Demons hound the Gerasene man roaming the tombs in 5.1-20.

That world of evil powers comes into focus when Pharisees accuse Jesus of being powered by demons in 3.22 and Jesus challenges their logic: "How can Satan drive out Satan?" and there follows the famous *bon mot* that "a house divided against itself cannot stand."

The problem with this nominee in the Gospel is that Mark never portrays all humanity as demon possessed. It seems a limited malady. But Jesus' claim to "give his life as a ransom for many" seems to range wider. Because of this, some interpreters move behind the individual

cases of possession to Satan, and so trace the kidnapping all the way back to Eden and the fall of humanity. Mark's Gospel does not have a developed theology of sin (hamartiology). He may assume one, but that's a hard thing to prove. Within the bounds of Mark's Gospel, it seems the farthest we can go toward defining the kidnapper of the "many" is to say that whoever or whatever has snatched them requires a significant payment.

The most important piece of the puzzle is to identify the liberator, who frees the bound. Here, Jesus plays both the payor and the payment. His words are not passive, as if Jesus' life "was offered or was given". The verb is active, and Jesus is its subject:

The Son of Man came...to GIVE his life as a ransom for many.

For many centuries after Mark's ink dried, Christian theologians found this vision of Jesus' death as ransom compelling, and people like Gregory of Nyssa and Bernard of Clairvaux taught it as the accepted theory of atonement. Protestant thinkers eventually displaced it in their circles with penal substitution, and the debate goes on.

The vehemence of that ongoing Christian debate, the collateral damage of it, and the revulsion it has produced in would-be lovers of Jesus who have not stayed when they see the virioli, makes C.S. Lewis' cautionary words seem all the more important. In *Mere Christianity*, he writes:

We are told that Christ was killed for us, that His death has washed out our sins, and that by dying He disabled death itself. That is the formula. That is Christianity. That is what has to be believed. Any theories we build up as to how Christ's death did all this are, in my view, quite secondary: mere plans or diagrams to be left alone if they do not help us, and, even if they do help us, not to be confused with the thing itself.

When we venture into the realm of defining the mysterious, we ought to heed this caution and tread humbly.

Ironically, Lewis himself offered a most poignant figure of the ransom metaphor in his drama of the Stone Table from the Chronicles of Narnia's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. We'll remember that scene together Monday evening in our Grand Finale.

For Us

We've seen that Mark has several uses for the cross, and that its list of meanings widens as we move into the rest of the New Testament. After we've appreciated the way Jesus' death teaches us a way of life, reveals his identity, gives us new access to God, and buys us back from imprisoning powers, and all those other metaphors we get from Paul and Hebrews and Revelation, our heads might begin to spin. Blessedly, there is a path back to simplicity if we will only take it. For all these theories of atonement share one thing in common, as C.S. Lewis has

reminded us. They all reflect the Christ's love for us. Jesus died for humanity. That death on calvary was for us.

That Abrupt Ending

Do you recall the question asked by Bishop George Berkeley at the height of philosophers' debate about empiricism? As his English counterparts John Lock and David Hume played out the stripped-down world that a strict empiricism presents – e.g., no certainty that a pool ball with cause another to move next time they hit – the Irish Berkeley asked an appropriate question:

"If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?"

In this question, Berkeley wondered if to be is only to be perceived. He comes to the rescue of the poor tree with a divine solution: God is the grand and ever-present perceiver. Hence the philosophy student's mnemonic poem:

*There was a young man who said, God
Must think it exceedingly odd
If he finds that this tree
Continues to be
When there's no one about in the Quad*

*Dear Young Man: your astonishment's odd
I am always about in the Quad
And that's why the tree
Will continue to be,
Since observed by
Yours faithfully, God.*

Lovely!

The Markan equivalent of Berkeley's question is this:

"If a Son of God rises from the dead, and those in the know are too scared to tell anyone, does the world ever find out?"

In Mark's Easter story, the question is real. We've seen that Mark's tomb is empty, Mark's white-robed attendant spreads resurrection news, and the script seems to be playing out nicely...until that last line:

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. (16.8)

Oops. To understand what Mark might be up to, let's hop into that Markan living room full of fearful, faithful folks with whom we've spent so much time.

When we chronicled, three sessions ago, the daftness of Jesus disciples in this Gospel, we presented the frightened silence of the women as the final exhibit in the prosecution's case. And as we did, we asked how this shocking finish would have played in that room.

An Evening Debut in Rome

Mark's crowd had gathered, and the room was abuzz with anticipation of Mark's new book drawn from his time downloading the Apostle Peter's memories of Jesus. They'd heard some Jesus stories of course – probably heard the Last Supper every week, may have heard the resurrection told as they gathered of a Sunday, and were surely familiar, 40 years after the death and resurrection, a whole lot of other teachings of and stories about Jesus. They settled in.

They lived in the frightened aftermath of a slaughter: Nero's assault on Christian leaders in Rome, so dramatically passed on to you and me by historians. Peter (their main leader) and the great missionary Paul, only recently arrived, had both been executed in that sweep, leaving the Roman Christians scared and cautious. How would they continue? Who would step up? No one in their generation seemed capable of filling Peter's sandals.

So, they listened to the Gospel for inspiration and examples. Surely the famous disciples about whom they'd heard so much would embody the courageous, leaderly virtues they needed to emulate.

This path we have walked before. But let's fast-forward to the after-moments when Mark's reader rolled up the scroll and sat down. (Remember, they'd have gotten it out loud only, because most could not read.) Listening for apostolic heroes, they got feeble disciples who abandoned Jesus when the heat rose and the women at the tomb, who kept the whole thing to themselves, because they were scared. Imagine the silence in the air.

The story of Jesus had been beautiful and bracing, but not one of them saw her or himself in the same stratosphere of the Son of God. So, all they were left with were disciples petrified behind locked Jerusalem doors and women closed-mouth to self-protect. What a disappointment these disciples had been?

Then, we might imagine, a tentative voice interrupted the silence. "Wait. Wait. But Peter told US about the resurrection. How did he learn?" Then another spoke with a little surer tone. "Yes, we celebrated the resurrection with him every week. How did he know?" Another chimed in even a bit more boldly, "It's not just that he knew these things. He believed them and they made him brave. Remember, he didn't back down in the face of a cruel execution."

One could feel the momentum build, as one after another testified to moments when Peter's presence had emboldened them – when they themselves could feel Jesus' power through

Peter. Then, at last, the quiet, attentive listener in the back asked a question: “Do you remember the strange way Jesus healed that blind man?” Silence, because not everyone caught every phrase. “Which, now?” “You remember,” returned the first. “The one when he rubbed dirt and spit. Strange, eh? Took Jesus two tries, but that doesn’t sound like Jesus. No power outages with him, right?”

It wasn’t long before the voices came together and realized that the strange, two-stage healing of the blind man was a clue. Mark dropped clues, they knew. And this seemed like an important one, because immediately after it, Peter came up just a smidge short of full vision. “You’re the Messiah!” he had said. But soon after, he rebuked Jesus and got called Satan.

So, Jesus heals a blind guy in two tries, and then Peter could only see dimly, “see people like trees walking around” or “the Messiah like a military hero riding a horse.”

Finally, a new voice pierced the living room air with a shout: “The women told them! The disciples went to Galilee! They had to! Or maybe Jesus chased and found them in Jerusalem! He had to! Because the Peter in this book is miles short of the Peter we knew! Our Peter was Jesus Brave!”

The whole room lit up. Suddenly, brave looked available to them. They knew now that they were one transformative encounter with Jesus from brave.

A Final Word

Thank you, friends, for walking the Gospel of Mark together and with me. We’ve discovered again that this brilliant book answers our close attention with insights and inspiration. This epiphany we undoubtedly share, not only with that original first-century audience, but with the generations and centuries who have heard and read it since that debut. I hope you’ve found a fresh reading helpful to you. Godspeed to you in your own discipleship and to me in mine, as we hope together that this new encounter with the Son of God has made us a little more Jesus brave.