

# *The Fear of Miracles*

Mark 16:1-8

One of the great confounding mysteries of the Gospel of Mark is, very simply, how did it actually end? Even though scholars recognize that Mark's was the first written account of Jesus' life (at least in terms of the four surviving Gospels), they also realize that, in both style and content, the final 21 verses are quite different than the rest (as well as missing from the earliest versions known to us), and thus not original to the text.

If you aren't familiar with the verses in question, let me assure you, consider it a great relief since there are some crazy ideas floating around in there. For instance, according to verses 17-18, the hallmarks of authentic believer are: casting out demons, speaking in tongues, picking up snakes, the ability to drink poison without harm, and healing the sick. These, of course, used to be the criteria for membership here at Noank, until the Deacons concluded the arsenic test resulted in more losses than gains! Besides, I would hate to think that my eternal destiny is predicated on an affinity for snakes! I'll take spiders any day, but snakes, that's altogether different. I'll face fire and brimstone before I'll start associating with a copperhead (mind you, that's what Charles Weaver, the abolitionist preacher of Noank once claimed as well!).

Fortunately, most scholars believe the original version of Mark's Gospel ended at verse 8 with this:

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.

The end. That's it. There are no sightings of the risen Lord, just three frightened women fleeing the scene of an open tomb.

For most readers, this might come across as a bit incomplete, underwhelming, and certainly a strange way to end the story, given that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is supposed to be the centerpiece of Christian theology and tradition. Unlike the other Gospels, there are no stirring anecdotes about seeing Jesus in one form or another, no strange encounter while walking along the Emmaus road, no sight along the shores of Galilee, and no sentimental "In the Garden" exchange between Jesus and Mary Magdalene.

The final word we get from Mark is that three women (Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome) discovered the tomb empty and a young man dressed in white telling them that Jesus had been raised and would meet them in Galilee. Stone rolled to the side, no body, and a stranger spinning a yarn about a dead man walking. The final impression: the women fled in fear and wonder.

So what's up with Mark? Is it because he wasn't sure what happened, even after forty years? Was it because there were disagreements among the early Christian communities and their critics, with conflicting thoughts and accounts? Did skeptics claim the tomb had been robbed by Jesus' enemies, who wanted to make certain the final resting place of a messianic martyr wouldn't become a rallying point for insurrection? Did some hold out that Jesus was merely resuscitated, like Lazarus, and fled Jerusalem in order to gather his followers again up in Galilee? These could have been the some of the plausible explanations for such a mystery.

So did Mark just not have available material to prove that Jesus rose from the dead? Or were the anecdotes passed down as Gospel truth from eyewitnesses too varied and wildly fantastic that it would strain credulity? Or was he afraid that ending his Gospel with an unbelievable miracle might have called into question everything else he had claimed about Jesus? Maybe he was afraid skeptics wouldn't quite know what to do with this startling twist. The rest of the Jesus' story makes sense and is truly inspiring and real; but an out-of-the-box, magical leap from the grave appears dubious, if not staged. So was Mark's own uncertainties reflected in the three women who fled the tomb afraid—refusing to say a word about what happened at Easter? What is one to do with something that defies logic and human experience and is, by all accounts, unnatural?

It's hard to say. As much as people pray all the time for miracles and for God to supernaturally overturn the laws of Nature, in many respects, we also fear this. Why? Because on so many levels of life we fear the unknown. Things that don't follow the well-ordered processes of natural phenomena are often as unnerving as they are intriguing. If there's an outlier, it's easier to dismiss it as an anomaly, rather than have to completely rewrite the rule book for how life works in order to account for it. Human beings rely on things to operate in a normal, predictable fashion; we value reliability, dependability, and our own ability to grasp reality as it is. There's a natural, empirical order to life. Anything that falls outside of that paradigm is a problem, not a possibility.

If you think I'm overstating the case, just consider how people react to disorder, chaos, and anarchy—they disturb and upset us. Or

things that are unexpected, unnatural, and unexplainable. In short, they spook us. Isn't that why there's a common fear of ghosts—we feel vulnerable to things we can't contain or control? I think that's also why circus clowns give some people the heebie-jeebies because they appear strange, grotesque, and unnatural. What seems unnatural is disturbing, often forcing us to think out-of-the-box in order to engage it as part of reality.

Yet, as much as we find comfort in that which seems familiar and natural to us, it has not always served us well. Most advancements in human knowledge traversed the very boundaries of what was perceived as real and natural. Look how liberating it was when humans realized the earth was round instead of flat, or how disconcerting it was when Copernicus determined the earth circled the sun, instead of the heavens revolving around the earth! Or consider all the other developments over time that have come with science and inductive reasoning! The great discoveries of civilization reordered conventional thinking of the time and rewrote the laws on what was considered natural and real. Virtually all of these advances initially were met with resistance by those who refused to believe in them or who feared what the change in thinking might do to their previously well-ordered view of the world.

Thinking outside of the box often allows us to grow in our awareness of reality beyond the boundaries of our current knowledge.

Can the same be said about imagining the resurrection? Why not? Though it seems to defy the laws of Nature, what if really doesn't? What if it merely reveals a part of reality that human haven't yet discovered or experienced? I'm not sure quantum physicists

would find the concept of resurrection beyond the scope of reason given the transmutation of energy and matter. Exploring the universe has allowed them to cross thresholds of knowledge into dimensions of reality outside of our normal models of time and space. What seems impossible is actually quite reasonable.

Maybe we actually benefit from Mark's sparse, rather underwhelming account of Easter because it requires us wrestle with it and fill in the gaps on our own. He didn't describe the unknown; he won't ease our discomfort in not having all the answers. He wouldn't allow us overcome our fears of uncertainty with a definitive account. Mark is leaving this miracle in our hands for us to decide how to make sense of it. Without any detailed description of Jesus' final state, we are left to our imaginations and free to believe in his resurrection from the dead in whatever bodily form we can grasp it, or we can dismiss it as something else, coming up with our own explanation to fill in the blanks. Or, we can leave it like Mark did, with an affirmation that God did raise Jesus from the dead, but accepting its truth by trust alone, and not by eliminating all doubts.

Mark, however, also did one more thing, which for me is far more significant and consistent with his Gospel message. For those who would believe and follow, he kept the focus solely on what Jesus did and said, instead of making his resurrection as the primary reason for believing in him. If the Christian faith were only about escaping the grave, then one could argue it amounts to little more than self-preservation. Believing in Christ is just a way to overcome our mortal fear of death. That's why it's the most popular way to look at faith.

But it's important to realize providing an escape clause from death wasn't Mark's primary message in the Gospel. His focus wasn't on eternal salvation; in fact, it had little to do with the afterlife. The Gospel message was about engaging this life through the truth that Jesus brought to bear and the spirit of love and service to others. The real impact was turning the world upside down because of endless injustice, violence, and destructive human pride. And the effect of following his way was to bear the cross of the world with him. For Mark, Jesus' way, in fulfilling the very merciful intentions of God, is what defines the good news of the Gospel, not his resurrection from the dead. As I see it, the resurrection is merely the confirmation that, despite Jesus' death on the cross, God is still writing the Jesus story.

This is what makes Mark's strange ending on Easter so appropriate. There was no conclusion neatly wrapping up the narrative; no final chapter to God's intentions to transform the world; the Gospel didn't end with Jesus' ultimate exit to heaven two thousand years ago. The story wasn't just about Jesus and the time in which he lived. Instead, it was about everyone who follows in his way in the time in which they live.

Hence, Jesus' story continues; it doesn't end. The resurrection is still defying human control and logic; it remains a miracle that pushes the boundaries of human knowledge and experience and still refuses to be fully grasped or reduce salvation to religious formulas or clichés. And we are still perplexed and confounded by what does not make sense as much as the three women who witnessed the empty tomb; like them, we are compelled to believe because Jesus' living Spirit touches us in the depths of our souls as well.

That's the mystery and the wonder of it all and the very plausible explanation why Mark, of the four Gospel storytellers, seemed to grasp what the very first Easter was all about. It was a miracle that gave birth to both fear and amazement—pushing back the boundaries of reality. It still does. Maybe, just maybe, given what it stands for and what it leads us to, that's all we really need to believe.

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5 April 2015