

Meeting Jesus in the Gospel of Mark

Session Twenty-Five – Mark 16

Mark 16:1 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.

The Sabbath – Jesus' body had been hastily entombed prior to the onset of the Sabbath, which began Friday at sunset. No further work could be done after this time, on pain of severe punishment or even death, particularly on the Passover Sabbath. Passover would have been over at sundown on Saturday; Mark details that the women then bought the traditional spices.

Why spices? Preparation for burial involved a washing of the body, which would then be wound in a sheet. The face would be left bare, and covered with a separate cloth. Spices and fragrant oils would be used to mask the smell, as the family would be visiting the tomb for the week following. On the 3rd or 4th day, the face would “change” – at this point, the soul would be believed to have left the body.

Note that these details are made clear in John 11, and the death and resurrection of Lazarus. Jesus waits until Day 4 before raising Lazarus, which is the time at which any form of resuscitation would be past. Note also the detail from the visit of Peter and John to the tomb – that the face covering was separate from the main winding sheet.

John (19:38-40) records an extensive burial process:

Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus... He was accompanied by Nicodemus... Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

Mark, however, is more brief (Mark 15:46): ***So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.***

Either way, the women were now undertaking the responsibility traditionally left to them: paying their final respects and doing their final service for Jesus. This would have been done whether or not Joseph and Nicodemus had done as John describes. The women would want “to do it properly.”

Which women? Mark ends his description of the crucifixion with this note (15:40-41):

40 Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

It was less dangerous for the women to be seen attending the crucifixion; they would not be regarded by the soldiers as a threat, and would not have to be concerned about arrest. Nevertheless, they “stand at a distance.” Mark further points out that, “***Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid,***” putting to rest the idea that they mistook the placement of the tomb the next day.

The same women who were named at the crucifixion – the established eyewitnesses – are the ones who are named in visiting the tomb. Who were they? Mary Magdalene we know; Mary the mother of James is identified just a few verses before as the mother of James the Younger, distinguishing him from James the brother of John, the sons of Zebedee, whom we know accompanied Jesus and the disciples at least some of the time. This is actually traditionally the Salome in our story! In short, we seem to have Mary Magdalene, along with the mothers of three other disciples – James, John and James.

The fact that women feature prominently in the eyewitness accounts of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is a big departure from the literature and culture of the day, when women were not regarded as reliable witnesses – even by the disciples themselves! These three women, however, were prominent members of the early Christian community, and as Mark points out, long-standing members of the Christian community.

Mark 16:2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?” 4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.

So it is Sunday morning, with sufficient light to visit the tomb and to do what is needed. But there is a problem – the tomb has been sealed with a stone. This could either be a large “aspirin tablet” shaped stone, or a more squarish plug-like stone which would be rolled into, rather than across the front of, the entrance to the tomb. Both forms are present in archaeological discoveries.

That the stone had been rolled away was a concern – had vandals been present, seeking for adornments? Had enemies come to desecrate the body? As the members of the community entrusted with the task of checking and properly preparing the body, it was unlikely to be the work of a fellow follower.

Mark 16:5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 6 “Don’t be alarmed,” he said.

The tomb would be composed of a forecourt, then a small blocked entrance, then inside, a bench carved out of the bedrock on the right side. Such tombs would have had benches on both sides; it is possible this was the same, hence the specific mention of the “right side.” It is a particularly “eyewitness” kind of detail.

Who is the young man? Unquestionably an angel. He greets them with the angelic phrase, “Don’t be alarmed,” which we hear repeatedly from angels at the time of the annunciation, and the announcement of Jesus’ birth. Also, rather than our concept of wings and halo, angels in the Bible are more often described as quite human in appearance:

Genesis 18:2 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

Daniel 8:15 While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man.

Daniel 10:5 I looked up and there before me was a man dressed in linen, with a belt of fine gold from Uphaz around his waist.

Acts 1:10-11 They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky?”

Mark 16:6 “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.

“Nazarenes” was an early name for the Christian community, referring to the place where Jesus was raised, the community with which he was most identified – a more specific reference than “Galilean,” which is also used, but which was also used of others. ***Acts 5:37 - After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered.***

Matthew 2:23 - and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets, that he would be called a Nazarene.

Mark 14:67 - When she saw Peter warming himself, she looked closely at him. “You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus,” she said.

Many years later, when Paul is appearing before the governor Felix, the Roman prosecutor presents his case in this way: **Acts 24:5** - ***“We have found this man to be a troublemaker, stirring up riots among the Jews all over the world. He is a ringleader of the Nazarene sect***

The angel says, ***“He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.”*** Again, there is no doubt they are in the right place, and looking at the right spot.

Mark 16:7 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’s Gospel began with God’s messenger – John the Baptist - announcing what God was about to do (1:2 – 8); it closes with God’s messenger announcing what God has done. The clothes of both messengers are described. The rough hair shirt of the prophet contrasts with the white robe of the angel.

The “way” figures in both scenes: In the opening scene, the way is to be prepared; in the last, the way has been prepared and disciples are to follow, going to Galilee, where Jesus has gone before them. Peter, the new “designated messenger,” is mentioned specifically; perhaps because he needs to be reintegrated into the community, after his denial of Jesus.

Mark 16:8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

“Bewildered,” is an interesting word – the Greek is *ἔκστασις* – from which we get “ecstasy”, but which the ancients used as a term meaning “removed from their mind,” an experience beyond normal astonishment or amazement. Mark uses it in the raising of Jairus’ daughter (5:42) ***Immediately the girl stood up and began to walk around (she was twelve years old). At this they were completely astonished.***

Luke uses the term to describe the reaction of the crowd at the healing of the paralytic lowered through the roof (5:26); in the Book of Acts, the healing of the lame man at the Beautiful Gate (3:10); when Peter enters into a trance and receives a vision (10:10); and when Paul falls into a trance and receives a vision (Acts 22:17).

Mark ends with the word “afraid;” *ἐφοβοῦντο*, from where we get “phobia.” It is a common word, and speaks of fear, usually of others, such as the Temple officials afraid to act against Jesus because of the possible reaction of the crowd. From this, we can conclude that the

women were silent, afraid of the reaction their news might cause among those outside the community of faith.

That's it? The end? It is an unsatisfying ending – we expect more. As Mark's Gospel was being passed around and copied, various scribes attempted to improve on the ending, which was either deliberately short – anything from “ran out of room” to “ran out of time” to “the further story was told by word of mouth rather than in print, precisely because of the fear of others” – all the way to, “it is lost.”

A few later manuscripts have: ***Then they quickly reported all these instructions to those around Peter. After this, Jesus himself also sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen.***

This ending has the advantage of being short and concise, which fits the tone of the Gospel. The disadvantage is that the form of language is completely “other” and unfamiliar to Mark, much more obvious in the original language, which is more typical of later Christian writings.

A longer and more complex ending is more common, but not found in the earliest manuscripts and other ancient witnesses, such as letters from early Christian leaders and teachers quoting the Gospel, but never this longer ending, which seems to be made up of a series of excerpts from other Gospels as well as some later Christian legends.

Mark 16:9 When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. 11 When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

Luke 8:2 - and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out;

John 20:18 - Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Luke 24:11 - But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense

Mark 16:12 Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. 13 These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.

Luke 24:13-35 - Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

Mark 16:14 *Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.*

Luke 24:38 - He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds?"

John 20:27 - Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe."

Mark 16:15 *He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

Matthew 28:19-20 *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*

Mark 16:17 *And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."*

Acts 2:4 - All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

Luke 10:19 - I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you.

Acts 28:5 - But Paul shook the snake off into the fire and suffered no ill effects.

Deadly poison – the Apostle John was rumoured to have been subjected to trial by poison, and have survived unaffected; icons show him holding a cup with a snake or dragon in it.

Mark 16:19 *After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. 20 Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.*

Luke 24:50-51 - When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven.

Luke 22:69 - But from now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God."

Acts 1:8-9 - But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.