

Jesus Messiah: Seeing Christ In The Gospel Of Mark

*“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)*

*And the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said,
“Truly this man was the Son of God!”
(Mark 15:38–39 ESV)*

He Has Risen; He Is Not Here

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Mark 16:1-8

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Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles this morning to Mark 16:1; that’s on page 853 in your pew Bibles. We are going to take a bit of an unusual approach today because we are dealing with the most significant textual issue in all the Bible. NT scholar James Edwards refers to the ending of Mark’s Gospel as:

the gravest textual problem in the NT¹

Let me unpack that for you. I trust you understand that the Bible was not written in English. It was certainly not written in King James Version English. The Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek – by and large. There are a couple of passages written in Aramaic which is a dialect of Hebrew, but by and large – the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament was written in Greek. And it was written a very long time ago on perishable parchments and papyri. A typical New Testament papyrus would have had to have been replaced every 20-30 years. The paper – if you will – started breaking down and the scrolls started falling apart – so churches stored their copies of Biblical documents very carefully and they hired professional scribes to make new copies as soon as the older copies started to wear. This is why we have

¹James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 497.

hundreds and thousands of little bits and fragments from the New Testament. Multiple churches across the Mediterranean were making multiple copies of every book of the Bible every 20-30 years.

Which is great for historians and great for Christians. Whenever we find these scraps and fragments from different regions and time periods we compare them and we are gratified to discover that there are VERY FEW significant variations. It is clear from all this evidence that the early church was extraordinarily careful in their treatment, storage and copying of these important documents.

The one exception to this happy rule relates to the ending of Mark's Gospel. Something happened there that scholars have been researching for literally hundreds of years. When we compare fragments and early copies of Mark's Gospel we discover significant disagreement. Most of the best and earliest copies end at verse 8. But then there are several later copies that end at verse 20, so that's a problem and we can't just ignore it for the simple reason that we need to know what to preach on this morning. Do we preach on verses 1-8 or 1-20? That is the practical implication of this question: where does Mark's Gospel end?

Well after hundreds of years of study the consensus of scholars now is that Mark's Gospel ends at verse 8. So for example Dennis Nineham says:

"The undisputed facts are that everything which follows 16:8 in any surviving MS (manuscript) can confidently be declared non-Marcian on grounds of attestation, style, and content; thus the Gospel in the earliest form in which we can trace it ended at 16:8."²

I've read a bunch of commentaries on Mark's Gospel and I haven't yet found one written in the last 100 years that disagrees with that assessment. This holds across the theological spectrum. This is where Evangelicals think Mark's Gospel ends, this is where Liberals think Mark's Gospel ends – this is not a battleground issue. The work has been done and the verdict rendered. Mark's Gospel ends at verse 8 – everything after that was added later by someone other than Mark and should not be considered as Holy Scripture.

² Dennis Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Penguin New Testament Commentaries. (London: Penguin Group, 1992), 439.

But that raises the question: why does it end at verse 8? Verse 8 doesn't seem like the right place to end the story and it may well not have been where Mark intended to end the story. Let me quote from Nineham again. He says:

"It is generally argued either that St. Mark intended to write more, but was prevented by illness or arrest from doing so, or else that he did write more and that the remaining part of his MS (manuscript) was somehow lost or destroyed."³

So in terms of the why question there are 3 opinions offered by scholars. The first is that Mark did write more – maybe a verse or two at most – but that those words were lost in the process of opening the original scroll when it came to time to copy and reproduce it. So for example one scholar says:

"The most plausible suggestion is that it was lost due to wear-and-tear on the last leaf of a codex."⁴

Again – these original manuscripts were written on very perishable materials. They were glued onto scrolls or wooden doweling – therefore when opened or unwrapped it is entirely possible that a small fragment could have been ripped or been otherwise obscured. Many feel that this is the most plausible answer. And that makes a certain amount of sense. Verse 8 in Greek ends with the word "for" – which is an odd way to conclude a sentence. It does seem as if there should be a few more words to explain what that "for" is there for. The Greek text literally says: "they were trembling and amazed and said nothing to anyone, they were afraid for....." They were afraid for what? They were afraid.... for they assumed people would think they were crazy? They were afraid for people don't normally rise from the dead? They were afraid for they hadn't yet understood all that the Lord had done and said? They were afraid - for what?

"For" is just not a helpful way to end a sentence.

So again, perhaps the most plausible suggestion is that a few words were lost on the last leaf of a codex.

³ Dennis Nineham, *Saint Mark*, The Penguin New Testament Commentaries. (London: Penguin Group, 1992), 440.

⁴James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 503.

The second option is that perhaps Mark was arrested before he could finish the story. Maybe he meant to tell the story of Jesus gently restoring Peter or talking to the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, or being revealed to them in the breaking of bread – maybe he was drafting that sort of ending just as he himself was arrested by the Romans.

We know that Mark began to write because Peter had been arrested. I mentioned in the first sermon in this series that the Gospel of Mark smells as if it has been rescued from the flames of persecution. Mark began writing because Peter was arrested and shortly to be executed. There was a fierce outbreak of fatal persecution under Nero around AD 65. Prominent leaders were rounded up and summarily charged and executed. Some of them were crucified and lit on fire in Nero's garden. Church historians say that both Paul and Peter were executed as part of this first official wave of Roman persecution. When Peter was arrested his scribe and translator – Mark – immediately and hurriedly began to write down all his recollections of Christ. Now this wasn't the first time Mark worked for Peter. Peter had already written 1 and 2 Peter quite a bit before this – but now that he was arrested Mark wanted to record his recollections of the Lord during the time of his earthly ministry. And it does not defy imagination to think that just before he finished his Gospel he himself was caught up and arrested and executed as one of the leaders within the early Christian movement.

That is certainly possible.

The third option is that Mark intended to end his Gospel at verse 8. That would be odd but not impossible. It would be ODD to end with an announcement of the resurrection rather than an appearance of the resurrected Christ. The angel says that there will be appearances but Mark doesn't narrate any. In verse 7 the angel tells the women to tell the disciples to go up into Galilee:

There you will see him, just as he told you. (Mark 16:7 ESV)

It would be odd to end a Gospel with an announcement of appearances rather than with the appearances themselves.

Odd - but not impossible. It is sometimes suggested that Mark wanted to end his Gospel here because faith comes by hearing and not by seeing. In essence Mark wanted to say: "You've heard

everything you need to hear. You've heard the evidence. You've heard what Jesus said and did. You've heard what Jesus testified about himself under oath at his trial. You've heard what the centurion said when he saw Jesus die. You've heard what the Angel said when the women discovered the empty tomb. You've heard enough. Now who do you say that Jesus is?"

Mark may have intended to end his Gospel with that kind of evangelistic challenge.

The simple truth of course is that we don't know. We know now that Mark's Gospel ends at verse 8. We just don't know for sure why it ends at verse 8.

And so the last question we have to wrestle with then in terms of this very extended introduction is this: what should we do with the longer ending?

Most Bibles still print those verses. The ESV includes a note that they were generally not in the early manuscripts and the NIV prints them in smaller italicised text after a disclaimer – but by and large they are still there in our Bibles so we have to talk about how we should treat them and how we should feel about the fact that they are there.

In terms of how you should use them I would say that you should read them as history but not treat them as Scripture. Most scholars say that the fact that they were added by some churches tells us at least two things – it tells us that churches really liked how Matthew and Luke ended their Gospels – we know that because most of what was added was lifted or summarized out of Matthew and Luke. It also tells us something about some of the early controversies in the church. One section of the longer ending of Mark seems like an argument for a more charismatic understanding of Christian life and mission. You have that section about picking up snakes and everyone who believes casting out demons and speaking in tongues. About those verses James Edwards says:

the prominence given to charismatic signs in vv. 17–18 stands in stark contrast to the reserve of Jesus in Mark with regard to signs and sensation (cf. 8:11–13).⁵

So that confirms what we learned by reading 1 Corinthians. We know that in the early church

⁵James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 499.

some people were trying to position speaking in tongues as a necessary sign gift – if you didn't do it you weren't saved and Paul writes 1 Corinthians to correct that interpretation. He doesn't delegitimize tongues but he does deprioritize it. Reading the longer ending of Mark reminds us why that was necessary. Apparently there were charismatic distortions of the Gospel in a variety of early Christian communities. That is good to know from a historical perspective. But we ought not to treat these verses as Holy Scripture. Don't build a doctrine off of anything you find in these verses unless you can support it from somewhere else in the New Testament.

Alright lastly, how should we feel now having waded our way through this controversy? Let me just give you two words.

Confident.

Be confident that a great deal of effort has been expended over centuries to ensure that you know what is and what is not part of Holy Scripture. Scribes, historians and theologians have been looking into this question for over a thousand years and now at the end of that process there is no legitimate dissent from the conclusion that has been reached. Liberal scholars, evangelical scholars – scholars who believe in the resurrection as a historical event and scholars who do not – they all agree that this is where the evidence leads. And so I think you should feel very confident in that process. And you should be glad that so much effort, so much investigation and so much care has gone into that process.

You will sometimes hear from internet sceptics and first year university philosophy students that the New Testament documents evolved over time – but that simply isn't true. We have thousands of fragments and partial parchments from all over the ancient world and from all over the time line of reproduction and distribution and they are remarkably uniform in their contents and when a variant is discovered – as here – it is noted, investigated and if determined to be unoriginal it is discarded. The rigorous nature of this process and the doggedness with which it was pursued and the unanimity with which this verdict has been greeted should give you tremendous confidence that what we have in our Bibles is in fact the unchanged, unvarnished, unedited, un-evolved **WORD OF THE LORD.**

The second word is this: Grateful.

Grateful for 4 Gospels. Mark does appear to have been written in haste – it does kind of reek of the fires of persecution – but I’m grateful for that. I’m grateful for an unadorned, unamplified, urgent and courageous Gospel of Jesus Christ. I love the idea of this Gospel being completed as Mark is being ripped away from his pen and paper – metaphorically speaking. I like a Gospel that smells like prison. But I’m also thankful for Matthew’s longer, fuller and more complete picture. I’m thankful for Luke’s thoroughness as a historian. I’m thankful for John’s thoughtful reflections a further 30 years later. I’m thankful for all of that and I think we are far richer as a church because of it.

So I think we should feel confident and grateful for the work of God in securing for us the Word of God. The Bible is a miracle and a grace and a gift – thanks be to God!

Now with all of that lengthy – but necessary introduction behind us, hear now The Word Of The Lord – beginning at verse 1 and ending at verse 8.

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” 4 And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. 5 And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. 6 And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” 8 And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1–8 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Alright, in the time that we have left, let’s say what needs to be said about this passage. I think the first and most obvious thing to say is this:

The Empty Tomb Is Mark’s Last Word On The Identity Of Jesus

Whether or not there were a few extra words in Mark’s original manuscript the actual ending that has been preserved for us is perfectly adequate as a conclusion to the story Mark has been telling. We’ve said many times over the course of this series that Mark is proving a single, central hypothesis.

He is proving to us that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

He told us that in the first verse of his Gospel.

He showed us that in the words and works of Jesus in his earthly life and ministry.

He gave us Jesus' own sworn testimony, under oath, at his trial before the Supreme Court of the Jewish people.

And he recorded for us the words of the Roman centurion. Even though he was not a Christian and not even a Jew and not even up to speed on the things that Jesus had said and done – at the moment of his death he said this:

“Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39 ESV)

So there you have it! What more do you need? What more evidence do you require? Well Mark gives us one more thing. He gives us the evidence of an empty tomb.

The empty tomb is Mark's LAST WORD on the identity of Christ.

If you don't believe what I say, Mark says, if you don't believe what the miracles say, if you don't believe what JESUS SAID, or the centurion said then for crying out loud, how in the world do you explain the empty tomb?

How do you argue with the angel who said:

He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. (Mark 16:6 ESV)

What do you say about that?

How do you argue with an empty tomb?

It is Mark's LAST WORD on the identity and significance of Jesus.

The second thing I think we can say with great confidence is that:

The Empty Tomb Is Mark's Last Word On The Significance Of The Cross

Now, notice that I'm saying it is Mark's LAST WORD on the significance of the cross – not the first word. If it was the first word I'm not sure we would get it, but it's not the first word. Way back in Mark 10 Jesus said this:

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45 ESV)

As a ransom for many. Jesus said that way back in chapter 10. He said that his death on the cross would be a payment of some sort. When they put his body on the cross; when they put his body in the tomb he was MAKING A PAYMENT ON OUR BEHALF. So when his body was raised to life and when it walked out of the tomb and out of death that was God saying: this payment has been accepted in full.

Right? When you put your debit card in the machine and you wait and your payment is being processed; what message are you waiting for? PAYMENT ACCEPTED. Remove card.

That's what the empty tomb is saying:

Remove card. Arise. Go. Payment accepted.

Jesus died so that we don't have to. He descended to the dead – so that we don't have to. His death was a ransom for our sin. His resurrection is the guarantee of our eternal life. That's what the empty tomb is saying - thanks be to God!

Now what should we do with all that information?

Mark isn't just trying to convince us – he's trying to MOVE US; he's trying to EFFECT US – he

wants to overwhelm us – a lot of people say that this is why Mark ends his Gospel where he does. Even if there were a few more words on Mark’s original scroll – it is still a strange ending. Look at it:

they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:8 ESV)

Mark says when they saw the empty tomb, when they heard the angel’s announcement, when they started wrestling with the implications of all this – they trembled and were astonished. They were afraid – they were overwhelmed – that is where Mark wants to leave us.

He wants to leave us **WRESTLING** with the world changing implications of what we have just heard and seen.

If Jesus was who he said he was – who the empty tomb argues that he was – then nothing will ever be the same. If this says what we think it says then the Kingdom of God must be at hand.

By the way, that’s the first thing Mark records Jesus as saying:

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” (Mark 1:15 ESV)

So Mark leaves us exactly where he started us: overwhelmed at the implications of everything Jesus has said and done.

If Jesus is who he said he is and if he has just done what he said he was doing then the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at hand.

So what should we do?

The first answer I think is pretty obvious:

1. Repent and believe in the Gospel

That’s what Jesus says we should do – and it makes sense! If Jesus is who he says he is and if he

has just done what he said he was going to do then the time is fulfilled – there is literally nothing left for God to do in order to secure our redemption. Nobody else has to come. No further payment needs to be made. Jesus is the one we've been waiting for and Jesus has done what was necessary therefore - the Kingdom of God is at hand. It isn't three steps away. It's no steps away. When Jesus died on the cross he said: **IT IS FINISHED** – not it is almost finished – **IT IS FINISHED**.

So there is no time to waste my friends. No further evidence to consider. No future messages to ponder over. Its been said. Its been done. Its been demonstrated. Now **WHAT SAY YOU?**

If Jesus is who he said he is and if he has done what he said he was doing then you better repent right now because you are on your way to final judgment. The cross is like a coat rack in the lobby of the Supreme Court of the Universe. You can hang all your sins on that coat rack – on Christ on the cross – before you go into the Judge's chambers to give an account for everything you have said and done in your life as a human being – as an image bearer - on God's earth. Or you can carry them in yourself. And you can pay for them yourself. Because one way or another they will all be paid for. In you or in Christ. Those are the options.

And so my advice is Jesus' advice. Repent. And believe in the Gospel.

And secondly:

2. Worship Christ as your Lord and Saviour

I actually kind of like how Mark ends his Gospel. Many modern readers think that Mark should have had the women dancing or singing or clapping or something more positive than what he tells us. He says that they were terribly afraid. He says they were trembling. And that seems odd to us – but maybe it shouldn't. Maybe if we read the Old Testament more than the **FEAR AND AWE** and **TREMBLING** of the women would not seem so strange to us.

When people in the Old Testament realized that they had been interacting with **GOD** – what did they usually do? They fell down trembling. Do you remember when Samson's parents realized that they had been talking to God? God came down and visited them but they thought it was just

an angel or something, and then when they finally realized that they had been talking to God do you remember what Samson's father said to his wife? He said:

"We shall surely die, for we have seen God." (Judges 13:22 ESV)

They were terrified! That's how Bible people respond when they realize that all this time they were seeing God, speaking to GOD – they are struck with FEAR and they fall down TREMBLING and they are overcome with AWE. Just like these women.

According to the Bible – it's not weird, it's wise. Psalm 2 says:

be wise; be warned... Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Psalms 2:10–12 ESV)

The Bible actually TELLS US to serve the LORD – the SON with fear and trembling. To fall down and kiss his feet lest we perish in the way. For his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all those who take refuge in him.

So maybe their response wasn't so bad after all.

Maybe that's what we are supposed to do.

When you realize who Jesus is – Son of God – Son of Man – LORD OVER ALL THINGS TO THE GLORY OF THE FATHER FOREVER – maybe a little fear and trembling wouldn't be a bad thing. Maybe it would be exactly the right thing. Because the time is fulfilled friends, the Kingdom of God is at hand. So REPENT. Confess your sins. Kiss the Son – WORSHIP THE LORD - lest you perish in your way.

And then lastly:

3. Go and tell the nations

The angel tells the women:

go, tell his disciples (Mark 16:7 ESV)

Obviously it has to start there. We have to get the Apostles properly saved but then we are going to do what Jesus said we are going to do. When he called the disciples way back in Mark 1:17 Jesus said:

“Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.” (Mark 1:17 ESV)

You come and follow me. You figure out who I am and what I’ve done and then you go and tell the world.

Do you see that friends? The job of the church is not to gather in the empty tomb – its not to rub ourselves on the Holy Sepulchre - the job of the church is to gather in people from every tribe, tongue and nation on planet earth.

Come and see – and then go and tell.

That is the mission and the mandate given to every single person who believes. We’re going to take this Gospel – we’re going to take this message about Jesus Christ – the Son of God - to the ends of the earth until the end of the world because this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God – let’s pray together.