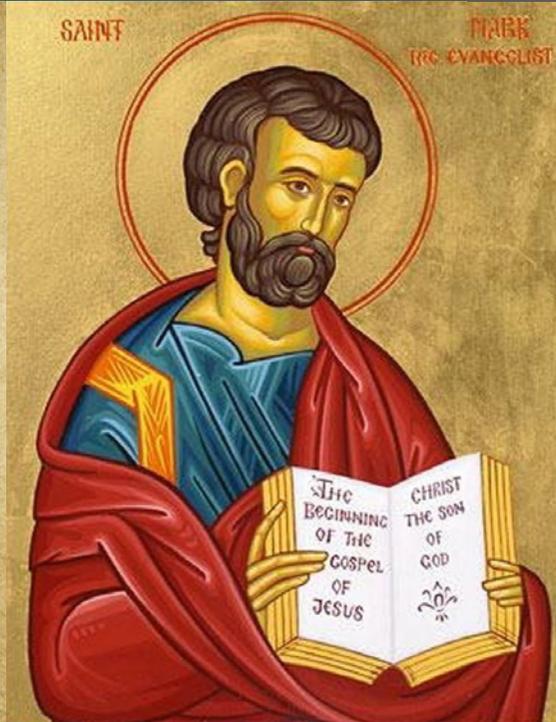


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CRUCIFIXION TO RESURRECTION

A devotional exploration of Mark 15:21–16:8

Rev. Alex Jacob

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Rev. Alex Jacob

Welcome to the Olive Press Research Paper – an occasional paper featuring articles that cover a wide spectrum of issues which relate to the ministry of CMJ.

Articles are contributed by CMJ staff (past and present), also by Trustees, Representatives, CMJ Supporters or by interested parties.

Articles do not necessarily portray CMJ's standpoint on a particular issue but may be published on the premise that they allow a pertinent understanding to be added to any particular debate.

INTRODUCTION TO MARK'S GOSPEL

There is wide-ranging consensus that Mark's gospel is the earliest gospel account in the New Testament. For some scholars Mark's account pre-dates Matthew and Luke by as much as 30 years and, also for some, Mark is the only gospel composed prior to the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70.

Sometimes the order of the gospel accounts in the New Testament, with Matthew coming first, confuses the reader into thinking that Matthew's account was the first to be written. However, the ordering of the New Testament books is not based on chronology. A number of attempts have been made to structure New Testament writings chronologically and this is in my view an interesting exercise, but one which is not an exact science and therefore leaves some room for debate.

The gospel accounts of Mark, Matthew and Luke are known as the “synoptic¹ gospels”, as they can be viewed together and are considered to share similar material and style of presentation. John's gospel account is generally seen as separate from the so-called synoptic gospels, as it clearly has some different source material with a different “historical” and “theological” style and purpose. John's gospel is invariably dated later than the three synoptic gospels. It is difficult to date the four gospel accounts precisely and there is therefore debate among scholars². My own suggestion is that Mark's gospel was composed first in the mid 50s, while Matthew and Luke's gospels were probably written in the early 60s and John's gospel shortly before the destruction of the temple. While my suggestions have some scholarly support³, it is still probably a minority view amongst scholars today, as many scholars prefer later (post AD 70) dates for most if not for all four gospels. Although it is worth noting that a growing group of scholars are much more tentative in terms of precise dating. However, as stated earlier, Mark's gospel is almost universally seen as the first gospel to be written and the scholarly dating of Mark's gospel sits within a range of dates from the early 50s to the late 70s.

The “priority” of Mark's gospel as the earliest account is often seen as an important interpretive key for helping to understand and explore how the source material is used and shared in the three synoptic gospel accounts. The understanding is that both Matthew and Luke's gospels used Mark's account as their primary written source, but also added their own insights and drew from other written and oral sources. Some of these sources were shared by Matthew and Luke while other sources appear to be exclusive to one of the writers. Such exclusive material is known as “special Matthew” or “special Luke.”

The authorship of Mark is probably less contested than the date, although there is no direct evidence of authorship from within the text. It was the overwhelming understanding

1 From the Latin meaning sharing a common view or viewed together from the same point

2 There is a wide range of good New Testament commentaries which will help set out various arguments about dating, authorship and other important introductory issues. For example, Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction*, (Tyndale Press) Reginald H. Fuller, *A Critical Introduction to the New Testament*, (Duckworth) and A.M Hunter, *Introducing the New Testament*, (SCM Press).

3 See the influential publications by Robinson, Wenham and Thiede.

of the early church⁴ that the author was John Mark. The Mark who is linked with Peter in the early non-Biblical tradition is generally agreed to be the John Mark of the New Testament. John Mark is first mentioned in connection with his mother, whose home in Jerusalem was used as a meeting place for followers of Jesus (Acts 12:12). John Mark is then linked to a number of missionary journeys outlined in the book of Acts (Acts 12:25, 13:5 and Acts 15:36 – 39). Mark is also referenced in three of Paul’s letters⁵, Colossians (4:10), 2 Timothy (4:11) and Philemon (verse 24) and finally in 1 Peter 5:13.

The early Church’s understanding that Mark was the author is interwoven with the view that Mark was very closely associated with Peter⁶ and with the city of Rome. There is a tradition that Peter led Mark to faith in Jesus and that Mark was in fact the unnamed young man, who fled naked following the arrest of Jesus (Mark 14:51 – 52). This interesting detail is only found in Mark’s account and maybe is a special autobiographical touch by Mark.

Many see Mark’s gospel as drawing primarily on Peter in three main ways. Firstly, on Peter as an eye witness of many of the events in the life and ministry of Jesus; secondly, on Peter as a key member of the “inner group” within the disciples of Jesus, and thirdly, on Peter’s preaching and teaching ministry within the early church community. This teaching and preaching material is then recorded and interpreted by Mark in his gospel narrative. For example, when Peter is preaching to the household of Cornelius, he uses a structure (Acts 10:37 – 43) which is very similar to the structure which is later developed in the ordering of Mark’s gospel.

Regardless of the precise date or authorship of Mark’s gospel, the gospel is clearly a very straightforward, concise⁷, vivid and fast-moving account of the ministry of Jesus. The hearer or reader is taken on a journey in which the actions⁸ of Jesus are shown. There is an emphasis on the centrality of His death, the importance of discipleship and the teaching of the Kingdom. Nearly 50% of text is focused upon the final week of the life of Jesus. This makes the structure of the gospel very different from the normal structure of most biographical accounts. However, this gospel structure is established because the author wants to make clear that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the pivotal events of history. Through His sacrificial death on the cross, sins are atoned for and reconciliation with God is made possible. Nothing should take the focus away from what Jesus did through His death and resurrection for all who will place their trust in Him.

4 See the writings of Papias, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria.

5 Mark is linked to Paul by his participation in some of the missionary journeys as outlined in Acts. At one point there is a falling out (Acts 15:37) yet reconciliation has clearly occurred by the stage Paul writes the second letter to Timothy (2 Tim 4:11). Also Mark is closely traditionally linked to Peter, especially through source material for the gospel writing. If this is true Mark would have had perhaps the closest relationship with the two most significant leaders and missionary practitioners in the early church. This would have given to Mark a uniquely valued insight into the gospel message and the growth of the emerging Christian communities.

6 See footnote 5 above.

7 Mark is the shortest of all four gospel accounts and has no mention for example of the birth or childhood of Jesus.

8 Those actions are the ones known to Mark (probably through the testimony of Peter) and selected by Mark for his purposes in regards to editing his gospel.

FOUR KEY POINTS IN MARK'S ACCOUNT OF THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION

Mark's account of the crucifixion of Jesus (15:21 – 41) is immediately preceded by a number of events: the Last Supper (Passover meal), Peter's emphatic denial that he would ever disown Jesus, the time of testing in Gethsemane (the place of pressing), Jesus' arrest, Jesus' judgement by the Sanhedrin Court, Peter's disowning of Jesus, Jesus' judgement before Pilate and finally His being mocked by Roman soldiers. In all of these events there is a dramatic change of 'tone' from the earlier part of the gospel account in regards to how Jesus is perceived and how Jesus acts. This is the first key point in Mark's account of the crucifixion and resurrection, namely;

Jesus becomes Passive.

Somehow Jesus is caught up in a tide of events. He is swept along and becomes a 'victim' of the actions of others. Jesus is 'done to', He is no longer – or so it appears – in control of events. Jesus is seized, arrested, denied, mocked, tortured, stripped and led out to be crucified. This sense of passivity is as stated a key point in Mark, but this emphasis on passivity (from the Latin verb "to suffer") should not lead one to undermine the conscious self-giving of Jesus. Jesus freely laid down His life.

The cost to Jesus of this tide of events is that Jesus becomes exhausted. Hence the need for someone to be conscripted to help carry the cross (15:21). A passer-by is conscripted into this role. This passer-by is simply someone who was in the wrong place at the wrong time or perhaps the right place at the right time! This passer-by is named as Simon and is identified as coming from Cyrene. Cyrene was a city in North Africa which had a large and well-established Jewish population. The assumption is that Simon travelled from Cyrene up to Jerusalem for the Passover festival along with many thousands of faithful Jewish people scattered throughout the Jewish diaspora⁹.

Mark also records that Simon is the father of Alexander and Rufus. This specific mention of these two names (only mentioned in Mark's account) implies that these names would have been well-known to some of Mark's readers and to parts of the Christian community, probably associated with congregations in Rome. This Rufus is probably the same Rufus mentioned in the greetings of Paul's letter to the Christian community in Rome (Romans 16 :13). My suggestion therefore is that the act of carrying the cross and his direct witnessing of the suffering of Jesus was the catalyst which brought Simon to faith in Jesus and subsequently led his sons to faith as well. The point here is the second key point in Mark's account of the crucifixion and resurrection, namely;

Jesus continues to witness even in his utter weakness.

⁹ See Acts 2:5 – 11 for a list of some of the places from which Jews had gathered for the celebration of the festival in Jerusalem.

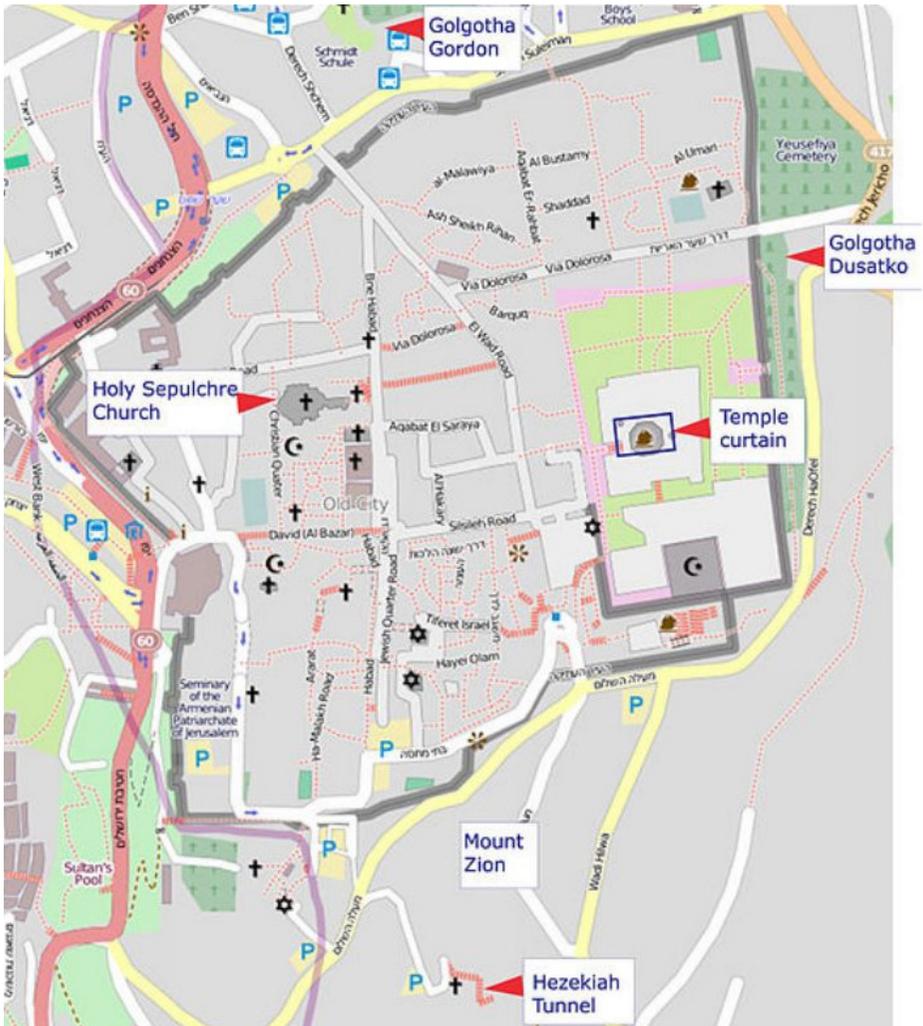
Jesus is exhausted and ‘passive’ yet people such as Simon and later the centurion (15:39) are drawn to Him. The importance of this for Mark (and for the emerging Christian community) is that even in weakness, perhaps at times, especially in weakness and in times of suffering and persecution, the life of discipleship and the task of witnessing continue. This is the grace of God at work and Mark shows this grace to be perfectly displayed in the crucifixion of Jesus. This understanding of the grace of God working out God’s redemptive purposes through suffering and weakness is a key understanding within parts of Christian spirituality and hymnology. A good example is found in the hymn “*El-Shaddai*”¹⁰ where the final verse states: “*Though Your word contained the plan, they just could not understand, Your most awesome work was done, through the frailty of Your Son*”.

Such an understanding would have been a great encouragement for many in the early church as they faced on-going persecution, opposition and suffering. Also it is worth noting that such themes of sustaining a living witness in times of suffering, frailty and persecution are key themes in the New Testament letters of Peter.

Mark then records that Jesus was taken to Golgotha, the place of the skull (15:22). This was a place of execution. It was probably originally a Jewish place of execution, but now used by the Roman authorities. Jewish execution was not carried out by crucifixion which was the Roman method, but by pushing the victim off a cliff (Luke 4:29) and then, when necessary followed up by the act of stoning (John 8:5, Acts 7:59). Therefore, this place of the skull would probably be on some elevated ground. Certainly by the early 4th century there is a well-attested Christian understanding that Golgotha was a small hill or mound. Also the place of execution would be near to a busy public place as this was important to make a public spectacle of those being killed in order to act as a deterrent for others. The public place of the crucifixion of Jesus is affirmed by the mention of those passing by (15:29). Maybe Golgotha was therefore near a main road or close to a public square or one of the gates to the city.

None of the gospel writers records the exact place of Golgotha (the place of the crucifixion), but John 19:20 states that the site is “*near the city*” and Hebrews 13:12 states that Jesus suffered “*outside the city gate*”. At one level the precise site of Golgotha (or any pilgrim site) is not of great importance, because at the heart of Christian faith is a person and not a place. However, at another level, place (and time) is important. Place (and time) can become sanctified by the working of the Holy Spirit. A site becomes “*holy*” through a mixture of what took place there and through the prayers and worship offered at specific sites by generations of local believers and visiting pilgrims. This is, in part, the meaning of the incarnation and the affirmation of the historicity of the gospel, in which Christians celebrate the rooting of the eternal in time and the omnipresent becoming defined by space. In terms of the site of Golgotha there is wide-ranging consensus that the Holy Sepulchre Church marks the actual site of both the crucifixion and resurrection.

The church was first built in the fourth century on a spot which local Christians had venerated as the site of the crucifixion and resurrection, although it was being used as a site for pagan worship (the temple of Aphrodite). The site was identified by Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine, in 325 and fits in well with the route of the way of the cross as indicated in the four gospel accounts. Today the site contains a smaller twelfth-century Crusader church building. The site has also been shown to contain first-century Jewish tombs. This also adds credibility to the claim. The site was also outside the first century city walls, although now somewhat confusingly for the casual visitor today the site is within the Old City walls and situated at the heart of the Christian quarter. (See map below of the current layout of the Old City of Jerusalem and the site of the Holy Sepulchre Church and the two other possible sites for Golgotha.)



Other sites for Golgotha have been promoted, firstly a site north of the Damascus gate on a small rocky outcrop (sometimes known as Gordon's Golgotha or the Garden Tomb). Today there is a wonderful garden containing a large water cistern and a rock tomb. This site provides a very reflective and worshipful atmosphere for the visitor and in many ways is a helpful contrast for some visitors to the Holy Sepulchre site. Secondly, there is a site close to the Lion's gate; here there is an area of elevated ground which would have provided a good view into the east-facing temple. The first proposer of this site, a German missionary Rodger Dusatko, argued that this would have provided a perfect and necessary viewing point for eyewitnesses to have seen the tearing in two of the curtain in the temple, just when Jesus died (Mark 15:38 – 39).

At Golgotha Mark records (15:23) that those crucifying Jesus offered Him wine mixed with myrrh to drink but He refused it. Mark does not state why Jesus refuses to drink the wine and myrrh designed to help with the pain. Most commentators suggest that Jesus decided to stay fully conscious while suffering on the cross in order to carry out His Father's will. However, there may well be an additional insight here, namely in Mark 14:23 – 25 when Jesus drinks a cup of wine at the last supper (Passover meal). This cup is a sign of the coming New Covenant. This cup is part of the Passover ritual in which traditionally four cups of wine would be drunk. The cup Mark records that Jesus drank from is probably the third cup drunk during the Passover meal. This is known as the cup of redemption. How appropriate that this cup marks the redemption which Jesus will shortly bring through His atoning death. However, Jesus clearly states He will not drink again until the Kingdom is fully consummated. Therefore Jesus did not drink the fourth cup at the Passover meal or drink again when offered wine at the point of His crucifixion. He refused to drink the fourth cup because this cup is known as the cup of completion and Jesus knew that the completion of His ministry had not yet occurred. The completion will only come when He returns to rule and reign and the Kingdom of God is fully established.

Mark also records that the crucifixion began at the third hour (15:25). This was nine in the morning, the same time as the outpouring of the Holy Spirit took place as recorded in Acts 2 and significantly the same time the priests would have gathered in the temple to offer the first sacrifice of the new day.

In verses 29 – 32, Mark records that passers-by, along with the chief priest and those crucifying Him, hurled insults at Him and urged Him to *"come down from the cross and save yourself"*. As a child when I first became aware of this, I so much wanted Jesus to do just that. I did not fully understand the power of God's love or the reason why it was necessary for Jesus to die, yet Jesus stayed upon the cross. It is in this act of staying upon the cross and submitting Himself to the horrors of crucifixion – both physical pain and spiritual separation – which shows the full outworking of God's love. In this moment Mark is making the third key point in his account of the crucifixion and resurrection, namely:

Here at the cross we see the true power of sacrificial love.

Three hours later the climax of His suffering is recorded with Jesus uttering His final words *“My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?”* This sense of being forsaken must have been linked in some way to Jesus becoming the perfect sin offering. Sin separates all of us from God’s Holiness and His presence. Paul in 2 Corinthians 5, reflected upon the mystery of the redemptive and reconciling power of God in Christ states in verse 21: *“God made Him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

In this act of redemption, Jesus for the first and only time ever knew separation from His father. The act of atonement is so costly that it tears the Trinity. Just as the curtain in the temple is torn, so too is the Godhead. It is of interest to note that in some rabbinical circles it is taught that one of the reasons Jesus could not be the true Messiah of Israel was that He was forsaken by God. The argument goes that the Messiah would never be forsaken by God, yet the truth which eludes these rabbinical teachers is that it was during this very time of being forsaken that the key act of the Messiah, namely bringing about the redemptive work of the New Covenant, was being accomplished.

Another important angle on these words of Jesus spoken from the cross is that these words are the opening words of Psalm 22. In Jewish tradition, a Rabbi would often quote an opening verse of a Psalm (or any portion of Scripture) with the expectation that his students would then speak out the rest of the verses. This was a well-proven method of memorising key Biblical texts. The words of forsakenness spoken by Jesus were intended to direct attention of those witnessing His crucifixion to the rest of Psalm 22. As one reads Psalm 22, especially verses 7, 8, 16, 18, 22 and 31 one sees how wonderfully appropriate such verses are for shedding light upon the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus. Many commentators suggest that this psalm in fact is a prophetic description of crucifixion, some 700 years before crucifixion was widely known. Psalms 22 and 110 are the most quoted Psalms in the New Testament, and this shows how these two Psalms were important for devotional reflection, Christian teaching and apologetics in the emerging early church communities.

In verse 37, Jesus breathed His last and He dies. His death is marked by two events in Mark. Firstly, in verse 38 the temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom. This curtain was a huge curtain and its tearing must have made a huge impact on those who witnessed it. The spiritual symbolic significance of this tearing is shown in Hebrews 10, in which the writer reflecting upon the universal and once-for-all nature of Jesus’ sacrificial death states in verses 19–20, *“Therefore brothers since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain that is His body.”* Secondly, in verse 39 the faith of the centurion is noted. A case could be made for suggesting that this man was the first Christian as he is the first person to proclaim Jesus as the Son of God following His death. Maybe Mark is deliberately contrasting the faith of this soldier with the mockery of Jesus by the soldiers earlier in his account (15:16–20). Also maybe it is significant to see that faith is proclaimed by an unlikely source – namely a soldier from the occupying forces. Mark is probably hinting that the Gospel will find

a welcome in “unlikely” places as the Gospel is shared and proclaimed beginning in Jerusalem and then throughout the whole world.

It is also worth noting the high profile of centurions within the wider gospel story. For example, we see the faith of the centurion in Luke 7 and in Acts 10; it is in the household of the centurion Cornelius that the gospel first permeates beyond the contours of Jewish life into a largely gentile context.



Mark now turns to the burial of Jesus, many more details of the burial are found in Matthew, Luke and John, but here in Mark we see the role of Joseph of Arimathea who was a prominent and faithful member of the Jewish ruling council. Joseph took the body and placed it in a tomb. The tomb appears to have been very near to the place of crucifixion and Mark adds that a stone was rolled against the entrance of the tomb (verse 46) and that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the tomb was (verse 47). In John’s gospel Joseph is associated with Nicodemus in this act of burial and both are shown as ‘secret believers’ in Jesus. Without this intervention by Joseph providing a decent burial, the body of Jesus would have simply been thrown out upon the waste grounds beyond the city walls to be consumed by wild animals. Such would have been the fate of most crucifixion victims.

Mark then turns to the final part of his gospel narrative, the resurrection. Three women (the two who witnessed the burial plus Salome) are central to what happens next. After the Sabbath they come very early to anoint the body. This is an act of deep devotion, but they are concerned about how they will be able to gain access to the tomb for they expect the tomb to be sealed. Yet as they approached the tomb they saw that the stone was rolled away and they could enter the burial chamber (16:5).

As they enter they see a young man who is dressed in a white robe who states: “*Don’t be alarmed, you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen!*” (Mark 16:6). This final part of the statement that Jesus is risen is Mark’s fourth and final key point in his gospel account, for:

“He has risen” is the central theme of the Gospel and the source of all hope.

The man then adds: “*But go and tell His disciples and Peter*”. Peter is specifically mentioned, perhaps because of his previous denial (Mark 14: 66 – 72). The message may well be that Peter is not beyond hope. A new start is possible. Even for those who deny the Lord in His hour of great need like Peter had, a new start is possible. The failures and the “if only” moments of the past can hold us all back and restrict our future steps. However, such realities can be overcome. If this is true for Peter, then it is true for everyone. Or maybe the specific mention of Peter is given here to reinforce the special role Peter has in the content of Mark’s account, or perhaps both!

Alongside the call to tell there is a call to go. To go to tell the disciples and to go to Galilee where they will meet with the risen Jesus. Going to Galilee is probably significant because Galilee was the place where, for most of the disciples, the journey with Jesus began. For it was along the shore of the lake or in the local towns that they first heard about Jesus and where they first met with Him and responded to His call and encountered His ministry. In our own discipleship times of renewal and re-commitment often involve going back to the beginning of our calling and revisiting our “first love” for the Lord and reaffirming those first promises. Often one needs to go back before one can move forward!

THE ENDING OF MARK’S GOSPEL AND SOME CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As one reads the final part of Mark’s account all seems set for an inspiring account of meetings with Jesus in Galilee where faith is built up and new ministry priorities are pursued. But this is not the case: all which remains in the text is a very sudden ending. An ending which may well appear to undermine faith and block any new beginnings: “*Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*”

It is a very strange, perhaps even brutal ending. The final context is one full of fear and silence, the very opposite of the faith-inspiring message given a few verses earlier by the young man, namely “do not be alarmed, go and tell”. It all seems deeply unsatisfactory, namely three fearful women¹¹ who are silent.

How should we understand this ending? For some the way forward has been to suggest

11 In the Jewish legal custom of the time the value of women as witnesses would not have been widely accepted and the use therefore of women as prime witnesses would appear to undermine the credibility of those who claimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

that this is not the actual ending. Such a view insists that the following verses (9–20) are part of the original ending of Mark’s gospel. The problem with this approach is that the most reliable and earliest manuscripts do not have these verses. Also these verses seem to be ‘out of step’ with the rest of Mark, in terms of style, language and perhaps theological content. Another suggestion is that the original ending has been lost or perhaps Mark died suddenly before he could complete the final resurrection accounts. Again, while such a view is possible, it seems unsatisfactory and there is no supporting evidence for such views.

My understanding is that this “unsatisfactory” ending is in fact deliberate. It is in one sense a “masterstroke” by Mark. Mark has chosen to leave the readers or hearers of his gospel account with the lingering question resounding in their hearts and minds, namely: “Well what did happen next? This question is where Mark wants the church community to step in and to offer the answer. It is here that each generation of Christians in every context needs to share their testimony. It is here where the church witnesses to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus through words, worship and actions. This ‘unsatisfactory’ ending is the open invitation for each Christian to go and tell!

We all have opportunities to go and tell. Sometimes we have the opportunity to initiate and consciously reach out to others directly. In other contexts we may choose to support others (church leaders, evangelists, mission workers and CMJ staff!) through prayer and finance in the pursuit of effective outreach. In my own life my “outreach” has mostly been in response to the questions of others, as Peter states: *“Always be prepared to give the reason for the hope you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”* (1 Peter 3:15).

One such example of this responding to the questions of others was during a recent visit to Jerusalem. I was visiting the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and I was standing in a long and slow moving queue which had formed to enter the tomb (see photo on page 10).

The queue was full of a mixture of pushy tourists and devout pilgrims, on this occasion most of the pilgrims were from Singapore. One Indian-looking man spoke to me and asked somewhat bewilderedly – *“Whose body is in the tomb?”* I said, *“There is no body in the tomb. We are waiting to see an empty tomb.”* *“You mean I am queuing here to see nothing, this is strange!”* I replied, *“No I don’t think it is strange, but I think it is wonderful and it is true!”*

As one reads Mark’s gospel there is much to reflect upon and many questions to explore. However, hopefully in this brief devotional exploration of Mark’s account we can be strengthened in our faith and we can be strengthened in proclaiming and in living out the core gospel message:

Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again!

THE OLIVE PRESS RESEARCH PAPERS

Back in 2006, CMJ decided to publish a quarterly study journal, entitled the Olive Press Quarterly. The idea was to produce some quality study material to complement existing CMJ publications.

Over the years, the style and frequency of the papers has changed, yet the core purpose has remained, namely to produce quality reflective theological and devotional writing. Listed below are the entire back catalogue of these papers, with authors and dates.

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- A New Israel – Supersessionism and Dispensationalism re-examined.
Timothy Butlin, May 2006
- Romans 9: 1 – 5. Exploring a key Biblical text.
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- A devotional exploration of Mark 15.21-16.8.
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