

Follow the King

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Sermon Questions

Date: *April 9, 2023* | Scripture: *Mark 16:1-8*

1. Read the passage from the sermon together. What do you find convicting? What do you find challenging? What do you find confusing?
2. What do you come to church looking for? Peace of mind? Community? Quality music? Worship?
3. How does the empty tomb—the resurrected Jesus—defy your expectations of what you look for in church? How does it surpass them?
4. What hope does the resurrection of Jesus give you personally?
5. How does the resurrection (both Jesus' and yours) fill you with astonishment, fear, and wonder?
6. Who might you share your hope and wonder with this week?

Inward Grace in Action (continued on back)

Easter Sunday marks the end of our series through the Gospel of Mark. Take some time to reflect on the whole Gospel. Reread Mark 1:1-11 and 8:27-38 as a group.

- What is something new you've come to appreciate about the gospel?
- What is one area of sin you feel has been challenged through this series? Where have you felt convicted?
- What are you particularly thankful for in light of the Gospel of Mark?
- What is one way you've grown through this series?

ACTION: Spend some time this week either by yourself or with your Community Group reflecting on the takeaways from our sermons and sermon questions. If you are in the habit of taking sermon notes, reread your notes. Find one or two applications which resonated with you and commit to integrating those into your regular schedule for the coming season. It could be keeping a list of friends and family who do not yet know Jesus as Lord and praying for their salvation, or it could be signing up for a meal train once a month. Whatever it is, share it with your Community Group next week!

Additionally, if you have questions regarding Mark 16:9-20, The Washington Institute published the article below on its origin and inclusion in the Gospel. Feel free to read this and use it in your discussions.

WORSHIP THROUGHOUT THE WEEK

Reflect on these Scriptures:

- Exodus 15:1-18
- Psalm 68
- Isaiah 25:1-12
- John 20:1-18
- Romans 8:31-39
- Revelation 5:1-14

Serve: there are lots of opportunities to serve in our church family. [Click Here](#) to serve as a volunteer.

Pray for those who came to our church this Easter without a saving faith, that they might gain a thirst for the gospel and find satisfaction in Christ.

Reach out if you need assistance:

- Call our church office at 703.821.0800
- Request aid from our Deacons' Fund at deaconsfund@mcleanpres.org

What's the Deal with Mark 16:9-20

Patrick Quinn

As a child, George Lucas drew me in: fantastical worlds, unique aliens, futuristic technology, high-action combat, and especially the lovable heroes and despicable villains, they all immediately drew me into the Star Wars trilogy. But the main thing that first hooked me, and captivates me still some twenty years later, is the story itself. The original trilogy unfolds an epic story arc with an incredibly satisfying ending: the redemption of the primary antagonist, the reunion of a father and son, and the decisive overthrowing of a tyrannical empire in the face of unbelievable odds. The closing scene features all the story's protagonists gathered around in celebration, with hope of a new, free world bursting out of them in song. As the credits roll to John Williams' score, I can't help but feel that joy and hope, too—as if I was the one who had just completed an amazing adventure.

Good stories are built with a progression: the classic elements of a story we all learn in elementary school. The story opens with exposition, which introduces the world, the characters, and the “normal order.” This is the way the world *is*—not necessarily how it *ought to be*, but still at some level of stability and order. The status quo is well established...until it isn't. Suddenly the normal order is disrupted, sparked by a source of tension, suspense, or conflict that demands to be resolved, and the characters introduced in the exposition work toward resolution. Action rises and tension crescendos, occasionally arriving at a false peak where the story seemed to climax and resolve, only for a new tension to come up as a result of it and blow the whole story up to even greater proportions than before. Sometimes, the climax is a huge subversion of expectations, and the resolution goes a completely different direction than what you thought would happen. Even still, even with false peaks and subversion of expectations, stories demand resolution. Tension can't build toward nothing. Our brains are hardwired to need resolution in our stories. So finally, the story reaches its highest point of tension and then breaks. Then action falls as the characters tie up loose ends until the story resolves with a new normal order. If the protagonists are good and they come out on top, the new normal is probably a lot closer to what ought to be than what it was at the start. And we all live happily ever after.

Scholars, fans, and video essayists have all noted how brilliantly the original Star Wars trilogy models this standard story progression. Many point to this as the main reason for its massive popularity; plenty of other sci-fi stories feature fantastical worlds, unique aliens, futuristic technology, and high-action combat, but very few others have as compelling a cast of characters and as satisfying a plot as Star Wars. In many respects the original trilogy serves as a modern-day masterclass in storytelling.

Star Wars might be in my top five favorite stories of all time. It might even take my second-favorite spot. But there is a vast gulf between my second favorite and my top story. There's no competition: the gospel is the greatest story ever told. It is more grand, expansive, and intricate than any other story imaginable. It features the most diverse cast, the most brilliant plot, and the most spectacular hero. The most amazing part is that the gospel isn't just a story. It's *our* story. What a wonder: the greatest story to ever be told is the very world we live in!

We could spend a lifetime discussing the “bird's eye view” of the whole plot—what Christians call redemptive history, spanning from the creation of the cosmos in Genesis to the consummation of God's kingdom in Revelation—but for now, let's zoom all the way in on the peak of the whole thing, the death and resurrection of Jesus. This moment is so crucial to the plot, the Bible gives us four different perspectives from four different authors: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. However, one of these Gospels is not like the others. While Matthew, Luke, and John all follow the typical story progression with exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and at least a little bit of resolution, Mark seems to entirely defy the pattern.

Modern Bibles note that the last chapter of Mark's Gospel was originally only eight verses long, and that the extended twelve-verse conclusion was probably added a few generations after the book was first written. Here is the entirety of Mark 16, including the extended conclusion.

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. 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. 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." 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.

[SOME OF THE EARLIEST MANUSCRIPTS DO NOT INCLUDE THE FOLLOWING]

Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs. (Mark 16:1-20, ESV)

Now, for the time being, consider Mark's ending if it had ended with verse 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." How would that feel? Disorienting? Out of left field? Maybe even unsatisfying? To say the least! This would be an *insane* ending to a story, and by the standard we just outlined, this is actually by definition *not* an ending at all!

To highlight that, chart the progression of tension in Mark's story. The exposition is incredibly brief. Mark hops right into rising action with the question, "Who is this guy?" The whole book runs at breakneck speed up the hill of rising action as Mark repeats his favorite word "Immediately." The book reaches its midpoint in Mark 8 when Peter gives an answer, "You are the Christ, the holy one of God." This would provide a fitting resolution to the question Mark opens with, but quickly we realize Mark 8 is a false peak. Rather than resolving tension, Mark has introduced a new and greater one with Jesus' reply: "the Son of Man must suffer many things and be

rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). The driving question then becomes “Could this be true? Is he the Christ?”

Tension reaches a fever pitch as Mark recounts the events of Holy Week in chapter 11. Mark slows the pace of the narrative down from a collection of stories over three years, to one week, to just one day, Good Friday. When Jesus is arrested and tells the Sanhedrin who he is in 14:62 we readers are beside ourselves. What will happen? Will Jesus break free? Is this the end of the age? It’s not until Jesus dies on the cross that tension breaks, and the bottom seemingly falls out. It was not the climax we had hoped for. The climax of Mark 15 ends when a Roman soldier of all people confesses for the first time in human history, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (15:39). And now, this Son of God lay dead in a tomb. What a heartbreaking, poignant, disappointing way for the tension to break! What a subversion of expectations!

Now, if Mark were to follow a traditional narrative flow for his story, we’d expect a relatively quick falling action and conclusion to tie up loose ends and complete the story. At first, it seems like that’s what we’re getting—from 15:40-16:2, tension continues to fall. It even seems like Jesus’ disciples have accepted the fact that this really is the end as they go to the tomb. And then we get Mark 16:3, with the tiniest flicker of tension. Who will roll away the stone? It’s barely a blip on the radar.

That faintest spark of tension lands on dry leaves in verse 4—the stone is already rolled away—and that small fire falls on a propane tank in verse 6—Jesus is alive!? By the time we finish verse 8, all of a sudden we realize that the climax in Mark 15 was a false peak! The true climax, the highest point of suspension in the whole book of Mark, is the very last verse—and that’s where the story ends.

...What!? What do you mean that’s where the story ends!? It can’t end there!! Where’s Jesus!? What happened?! What did the women do!? What comes next?!

Mark’s audience would be going crazy if the story ended like that, right?

That’s probably the point.

There are at least two reasons why we might think Mark intended to end his Gospel on such a wild cliffhanger. First, Mark’s ending lines up perfectly with his thematic and rhetorical use of amazement, awe, and fear. All through Mark, we see the disciples constantly “amazed,” “astonished,” and “afraid.” This ending is absolutely consistent with Mark’s pattern of punctuating Jesus’ miracles and teachings. Of course, nothing is more amazing, astonishing, and fear-inducing than Jesus’ resurrection! It seems fitting he would end with all the disciples left in utter speechlessness.

Second, it served as a powerful call to action. The abundance of names and lists of relatives within this book implies that when Mark was first written, these people were still alive and were known to the community. The way Mark ends his book almost demands its original audience hunt down these eyewitnesses and ask them what happened. The story demands resolution, Mark leaves us with questions we simply must answer—first, because our brains are wired for narrative and we innately want resolution, but most importantly, because of all the claims that Mark has made thus far concerning Jesus! If this man *really is* the Son of God, if he *really is* the promised messiah, what does his resurrection mean? Is this the end of the world? Is judgment here? Will the rest of the dead be raised? Mark’s ending says implicitly what John’s Gospel says explicitly: come and see!

But if this is the case, what’s the deal with the longer ending? Where did it come from? What purpose did it serve? First, consider a few of the oddities within Mark 16:9-20: Verse 9 breaks from the narrative in verse 8 and moves from the women to Jesus, jumping back in time. No such time jumps occur anywhere else in this gospel. The audience is given another introduction of Mary Magdalene, though she had already been mentioned three times in Mark. Much of the vocabulary in these verses isn’t used anywhere else in Mark,

including the title “the Lord Jesus.” Most notably, none of the four Gospels contain a description of the apostles’ signs; only in Acts records these. Much of what 9-20 includes is either direct quotation or paraphrase of verses elsewhere in the New Testament.¹

For these reasons scholars almost unanimously agree verses 9-20 are later additions to Mark’s original gospel. Of the hundreds of early manuscripts we have of Mark, none of the earliest contain this longer ending. Our earliest complete manuscript of Mark ends at verse 8. Even early church fathers like Eusebius comment on 9-20 not being original to the book of Mark. The King James Version (and NKJV) include no break or disclaimer with these verses because the KJV translation was based off of medieval manuscripts; later translations of Scripture had access to more and earlier manuscripts and added the disclaimer in light of new evidence.²

Who added it? We’re not sure. When was it added? Probably some time in the second century. Why was it added? That’s a great question. It probably ties back into the innate human desire for stories to resolve. Verse 8 ends with all this tension, all these questions, all these loose ends. Some later scribe might have seen this as a potential stumbling block and wanted to give some sense of resolution to the story. If our proposition that Mark wanted people to find witnesses and ask them what happened next is true, that can only work for Mark’s immediate audience. Soon enough, all those people mentioned in Mark’s gospel will die. If an early church community only had the gospel of Mark in their collection, it’d be reasonable for someone to add a sort of epilogue that answers some of the questions other gospels don’t leave hanging.

If this is indeed the case, what do we do with this extra ending? First, we can acknowledge that it is true. Verses 9-20 provide a fairly succinct and accurate summary of what happened after the resurrection (outside of maybe that poison bit). We can acknowledge its oddities. It’s not internally consistent with the narrative Mark is telling and the way Mark tells it. We can acknowledge the manuscriptal evidence that points to it as a later addition. We can also acknowledge the historical precedent of including it in the Bible because the Bible translators of the Reformation used later Greek manuscripts that included it.

Some people believe the long ending should be removed on the grounds of keeping our modern Bibles as close to the original text as possible. Others believe we should include it because in God’s sovereignty it has persisted this long. What ought to be done? This article will not settle a centuries-old debate, but here are a few points for consideration.

First, would it be more of a stumbling block for Christians to remove the long ending or to keep it? The first version of the Bible to exclude this passage will undoubtedly face criticism both from within and outside of the church. A lengthy explanation would have to be given on why the passage was removed, which may distract the reader from the main point of the Bible. Such a translation would also have to deal with John 8 (which is a whole separate matter outside the purview of this article) and other smaller discrepancies that persist in modern translations.³ However, leaving the long ending in also causes confusion and produces questions that require articles like this to explain its inclusion. In short, there’s no obvious answer.

Second, while the longer ending doesn’t match with the rest of Mark, it also doesn’t include anything directly inconsistent with Mark or the rest of Biblical truth. Even that poison bit could be considered to be only true for the original disciples, though we DO know most of them died, painfully, for the truth of the resurrection, so they were clearly not immortal! Whether we keep the long ending of Mark or not should not be a point of division in the church. This is something we can kindly and reasonably share different views on.

As tricky as it might be when one first comes across it, there are ample reasons to explain 16:9--20’s existence and conclusion. In fact, its inclusion introduces many Christians to the world of textual criticism and other more technical, scholarly disciplines in the field of Biblical studies. Not to say that every Christian needs to become a

scholar, but it can be reassuring to know there are high-level academics thinking critically about the Bible and still affirming its validity.

Wherever you land on Mark 16:9-20, we can all marvel at the miracle of Scripture as the inspired word of God, written by human authors and preserved with astounding uniformity over two thousand years, unfolding the same gospel message to people since the resurrection of Christ. That's the story we have all been invited into. And the amazing part is, God is still writing it! We have yet to arrive at that final conclusion, when all tension will be resolved, and we shall live happily ever after with Christ. To him be all glory!

* * *

¹ See the following parallels listed below. These parallels are especially strange in light of Mark's dating. Scholars widely regard Mark to be the earliest Gospel written as Matthew and Mark draw much of their material from it. Mark 16:9-20 presents information from later New Testament works in summary fashion despite the rest of Mark predating them.

9 -> Luke 8:1-3

10 -> John 20:18

12 -> Luke 24:13-32

13 -> Luke 24

14 -> Luke 24:36-38

15 -> Matthew 28:19

16 -> John 20:23

17-18 -> Matt 10, Luke 10 (casting out demons); Acts 2 (Speaking in tongues); Acts 28:3-6 (pick up serpents); Acts 5:15, 16; 8:7; 9:12, 17; 28:8; James 5:14-15 (laying hands on the sick to heal); notably, no mention of drinking poison and surviving can be found anywhere in the New Testament

² Craig Blomberg's book *Can We Still Believe the Bible?* (25-27) gives a concise summary of the evidence regarding Mark 16, contra Bart Ehrman's criticism of the New Testament. See more: https://holisticthinking.files.wordpress.com/2016/05/can-we-still-believe-the-bible_-blomberg-craig.pdf

³ On the other hand, there is already precedent for removing verses considered to be late additions to the text. In fact, have you ever noticed that there is no Mark 11:26? Some Bibles have added the verse in brackets, but others have removed it altogether and replaced it with a simple footnote saying, "Some late manuscripts include language similar to Matthew 18."

Additional Resources

"The Fitting End to Mark's Gospel - Mark 16:9-20" by John MacArthur <http://webmedia.gty.org/sermons/High/41-85.mp3>

"Mark" by Benjamin Gladd, in *A Biblical Theological Introduction to the New Testament* Edited by Michael J. Kruger, 61-91.

For a dissenting opinion, see "The Authenticity of Mark 16:9-20" by Jim Snapps II http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/Jeffrey_W_Hamilton/LVarticles/AuthenticityOfMark16920.html