

EPILOGUE
THE TOMB AND THE PROMISE
Mark 15:40 - 16:8

⁴⁰ **There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome.**

⁴¹ **These used to follow him and provided for [were ministering to] him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.** ⁴² **When evening had come, and since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath,** ⁴³ **Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.** ⁴⁴ **Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time.** ⁴⁵ **When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph.** ⁴⁶ **Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb.**

⁴⁷ **Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.**

Jesus is buried

The two verbs used of the women identify them as disciples, sharing in Jesus' mission. They 'were following' Jesus (akolouthe□, see especially Mark 1:18 and 8:34), and they were 'ministering' to him (diakone□, see 9:33-37).

James and Joses have already been mentioned as being 'brothers' of Jesus (6:3). We refer the reader to the commentary on Mark 3:19-30, where we used the present text as an indication that these were Jesus' cousins and not his blood-brothers; otherwise the 'Mary' mentioned here would surely have been identified as Jesus' mother rather than theirs. Mark seems to be contrasting these women who merely 'look on from a distance' and who do nothing and have nothing to say, with the faith-response of the centurion mentioned in the previous verse. Their failure is highlighted in the final line of the Gospel (16:8).

The fact that Jesus was crucified on a Friday meant that sunset was the beginning of the Sabbath. This added a certain urgency to the burial.

When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree; you shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for possession.

– Deuteronomy 21:22-23

Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin, and, like the scribe mentioned earlier in the Gospel (12:34), an obedient follower of the Law, takes it upon himself to see that Jesus is buried. It is a simple burial, with no mention of washing or anointing. Hence the relevance of the narrative of anointing recorded in Mark 14:3-9, and of the action of the women in the following scene.

Jesus has been raised

The women do not find the dead body of Jesus in the tomb as they expected. Rather they find ‘a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side’. The clothing takes us back to the transfiguration (9:3). The position (‘on the right side’) reminds us of Jesus’ promise concerning the Son of Man (14:62). The young man takes us back to the scene of Jesus’ arrest (14:51-52). That young man deserted Jesus in his hour of trial. Is this young man a symbol of those faithful disciples of Jesus (the martyrs dressed in white robes) who do not run away but rather remain faithful to their crucified and risen Lord?

The response of the women is the response of people overwhelmed by the presence of the divine. The meaning of their experience is conveyed in a revelation, expressed in the credal formula: ‘Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised; he is not here ... you will see him’.

‘He has been raised’

To point to something that is beyond our everyday experience we must use imagery and analogy. Mark chooses the simple word ‘raised’ - a word he used when Jesus raised Simon’s mother-in-law from her bed (1:31), and when the disciples roused Jesus from sleep during the storm (4:38).

More mysteriously, it is used when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus from her ‘sleep’ (5:41). Mark has already used it during the debate with the Sadducees, when Jesus referred to the dead being raised (12:26), and at the last supper when Jesus promised: ‘After I am raised, I will go before you into Galilee’ (14:28). Death is likened to sleep, and God raises the dead person, not back to this life in a form of resuscitation, but to the life-beyond-death.

¹ **When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and 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 **They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?”**

⁴ **When they looked up they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.**

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 **But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.**

⁷ **But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”** ⁸ **So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.**

compare Matthew 28:1-8

Luke 24:1-12

Because of certain ways in which the risen Jesus revealed himself to his disciples (a summary account is given in the Appendix to Mark's gospel), Jesus' disciples came to believe that the crucified Jesus was in truth alive and active among them after his death. God had raised him from death into the life-beyond-death. It was the wonder of this that brought them through their fright and the shattering of their hopes to the new energy that empowered them to do to others what Jesus had done to them. It was this spirit that brought about the incredible growth of the Christian community.

It is this foundational belief that is presented by Mark as the explanation for the absence of Jesus' dead body. The resurrected life is not simply a new beginning. All that Jesus was is caught up in the transforming mystery of grace. The empty tomb and the dramatic language before us in this ritual text depict for us the wonderful truth that death is robbed of its prey, and that the final victory is not with darkness but with light.

This is the fulfilment of Jesus' trust that God would act decisively ('after three days', see commentary on 8:31-32a), and that he would rise again (8:31, 9:31, 10:34). This is also the fulfilment of the promise Jesus made that the Son of Man would be glorified (8:38; 13:26). On the cross Jesus radiantly revealed the beauty of God as a God of unconditional love. The empty tomb is a sign for those with faith to see that Jesus' trust in his father was not misplaced.

'He is not here'

Death for Jesus was no different from death for any of us. It meant the end of the kind of presence that his disciples knew. No longer could they see him or touch him and be touched by him. The 'he is not here' raises the question: Where is he? And our faith answers: at the heart of the mystery of life; for as Jesus himself said: 'God is God not of the dead, but of the living'(12:27). Wherever God is, Jesus is, and since God is everywhere, Jesus is still present among us, though mysteriously beyond our empirical experience. Hence the call to 'keep awake'(13:33,35,37) and to watch for his 'coming' (8:38; 13:26,35; 14:62).

'You will see him'

The word 'see', it must be remembered, is also used by analogy. Mark uses it for a perception that involves much more than the eyes, as, for example, when Jesus 'sees' the faith of the friends of the paralysed man (2:5). He uses it also for a spirit 'seeing' Jesus (9:20). He uses the same word for their 'seeing' the Son of Man coming in glory (13:26; 14:62; see also 9:1). The Greek word is *horaô*, a word to which our English word 'aware' is related. 'Seeing' the risen Christ refers to an awareness that only by analogy can be compared to the seeing we do with our eyes. Furthermore, it is always, necessarily, a seeing that is possible only to one who has faith.

Tantalisingly, Mark does not give us any of the experiences on which was based the faith of the Christian community in the resurrection of Jesus. He does, however, point the disciples to Galilee and the promise Jesus made to go there before them (14:28). In their panic at his death, they are to go back to where Jesus first met them, and he will be there again for them, for his love is faithful and his call irrevocable.

Presumably, when they fled at the time of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion, the disciples would have got out of Jerusalem as quickly as they could, and made their way to the relative safety of their homes in Galilee. And it was back there that they experienced his presence again, forgiving them, calling them, urging them to continue his mission. Presumably, as each of them was moved by the Spirit of Jesus, they re-grouped and committed themselves to the journey of discipleship. All this is implied in this simple verse: 'Tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him just as he told you'.

The gospel ends in what appears at first sight to be a strange, unfinished, way. The women have been presented to us as model disciples. They were disciples of Jesus in Galilee, where they also shared in Jesus' mission as servants of the Lord (15:41). When the men fled in terror, it was the women who stayed with him at the death (15:40). It was they who were there when he was buried (15:47), and who were the first missionaries of the risen Christ (16:7). Yet this mission is beyond them, too. They are seized with terror and amazement 'and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid'.

Mark is encouraging his community not to give up. Even if they have run away, even if they are seized with terror before the reality of persecution, they are to remember that Jesus' first disciples, too, failed, and yet Jesus remained faithful to them.

In a sense, the silence of the women picks up the theme of the Messianic secret. In the final analysis we cannot learn about Jesus from another. We have to be open for him to come to us, and to encounter him in our Galilees. There is no easy way to the resurrection. There was not for Jesus and there cannot be for us. He went through his agony (14:33), so did his first disciples, and so must we.

The experience of an empty tomb already contains, for those with faith, a promise and a hope. Mark's Church experienced Jesus, as do we all, as the one who 'is not here'. They have to wait on God. Like the deaf and the blind they can only wait for the divine miracle. But they have reason to wait, for 'he has been raised'. God was faithful to Jesus and God will be faithful to those who lose their lives because of him and because of the good news (8:35).

Mark does not present the empty tomb as a proof for anything. It does, however, raise a question. It is a reminder of what Jesus himself hoped for, and it prepared the women, and it can prepare us, to be vigilant, so that when the risen Jesus comes to us we will be open to his presence and his call. If we are vigilant, we will see him when he comes.