

The Streaker in the Garden

Hespler, March 24, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Passion Sunday

Mark 11:1-11, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Psalm 31:9-16, [Mark 14:43-52](#)

There is one small incident in the Gospel of Mark that I have always found fascinating. I'm not the only one. People have debated for centuries about the meaning of the strange appearance of the young man in the garden who is wearing only a linen cloth and who then runs away naked.

The incident is mentioned in none of the other gospels, but it stands out with such distinctiveness in this one that people can't just ignore it. It has led to endless speculation.

Speculations

Some people suggest, for example, that this young man is an appearance of Mark himself, the author of the gospel, and that the author is saying that he actually was there either historically or perhaps symbolically. It is an interesting idea to be sure, but there's really no evidence that that is who it is supposed to be.

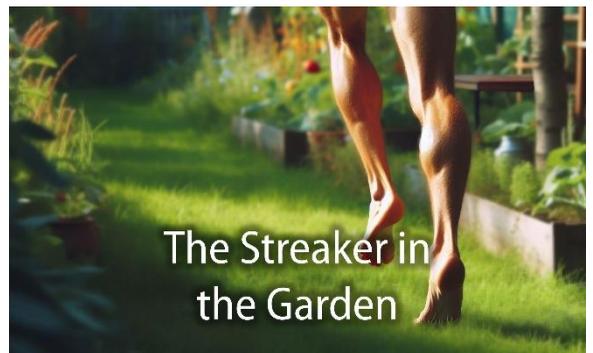
Other people have noted that the appearance of this young man may be symbolic of the early Christian practice of baptism. Apparently, the common practice in the earliest church was for candidates for baptism to present themselves dressed in a simple white linen cloak and that, after the baptism had been completed, the robe would be stripped off and the newly baptised person would leave in the nude as a symbol of new birth. Interesting idea to be sure. I'm not going to suggest that it is a practice we ought to revive though!

People have also noted a very odd resemblance between this man in the garden and the young man who appears dressed identically in the tomb of Jesus at the end of Mark's Gospel. Surely that cannot be a coincidence! Mark must want us to make the connection.

So, there is a lot of speculation, but no clear answer. And so, I set out to figure out what this strange streaker is doing in the garden. Scholars have actually written a lot about it over the years. So, I did a lot of reading and some of it was helpful.

Comic Relief

For example, I read this one paper in which this scholar argued that this guy is in the story as comic relief. And, you know, after reading it, I think I kind of agree, he is there to make us laugh. But do you want to know what the funniest part of all of that was? The scholar¹ took 14 pages of dense theological and literary argument to come to the conclusion that this episode is comic relief. And when it takes that long to explain a joke, you have to wonder how funny it really is!



¹ Stephen B. Hatton, Mark's Naked Disciple: The Semiotics and Comedy of Following

The Importance of Following

The paper argued that the key word in the little story may be the first verb: “was following,” as in, **“A certain young man was following him.”** The word is important because it is a key word, repeated often in this gospel. “Following,” it could be argued, is the most important thing that anybody does in this gospel. The choice to follow Jesus is what makes all of the disciples into disciples. And that also seems to include the women who are said to have followed Jesus to Jerusalem. So, the mere fact that this youth is following Jesus puts him in important company.

The Grammar Matters

But there is more than that. Mark uses a particularly intensive form of the verb here – a form that essentially means to follow closely. He only uses that word one other place in his gospel when he refers to three key disciples, Peter, James and John, following Jesus into the home of Jairus. This suggests a particularly close connection with Jesus.

And then there is the tense of the verb. It is in the imperfect tense which, in Greek, refers to an action in the past that is continuous. In other words, this youth did not just follow Jesus once on this occasion. It was something that he had been doing for some time. It can also refer to a habitual practice. It could even be saying that he was kind of obsessed with following Jesus.

All of this makes me suspect that Mark does not want us to underestimate the importance of this young man or to think of this incident in isolation. We need to see it as an essential part of his overall narrative. And so that made me wonder where else this young man’s following of Jesus might have intersected with the story of Jesus told in Mark’s Gospel.

Next in Line

Imagine that you are the person who is next in line to be baptized by John the Baptist when Jesus goes down into the water. Even though the place by the Jordan River is far away from any human settlement, people have come here from Jerusalem and all Judea to hear what the Baptist has to say and to receive his baptism of repentance. And nobody wants to be baptized by one of John’s disciples. They want the authentic experience and so they wait in line for hours to each get their few minutes in the river with John.

When Jesus Was Baptised

But when Jesus is baptized, everything suddenly grinds to a halt. There are some who say that clouds in the sky are ripped apart. And when a dove flies down from a nearby tree, many read that as a great omen as well. There are some who insist that they hear a rumble of thunder, which others identify as the very voice of God. But whatever signs each one sees, and however they interpret them, there is an immediate consensus that there is something different about this Jesus. Even John is rendered silent as he stares at the man walking out of the stream and, if you know anything about John, that is a wonder all its own.

And you are there next in line after Jesus. You have come out from a town in Judea. Ever since you have heard about what John is doing near the Jordan, you have been intent on coming. You even purchased a fresh white linen cloth – a symbol of the repentance and new beginning that John’s baptism represents – and wrapped it tight around your body. But now as you come to stand before

John (whose mind is clearly still trying to process what has just happened) and John rather robotically goes through the motions of baptising you, it does not really go as you had imagined.

Implications of Following

But you do not mind in the least. You, like everyone else, are totally focussed on the man who was just baptised. And so, as you come up out of the water, without even pausing to take any of your possessions, you set out following Jesus as he climbs the riverbank heading towards the wilderness.

And now it is later. It is hard to say exactly how much later, because the timeline in Mark's Gospel is far from clear. But a lot has happened. And all this time you have followed Jesus as closely as possible. You are not one of those disciples that people talk about. You are not a Peter or James or a Mary Magdalene. But you have listened to everything that he has taught. You've tried to do your best to follow.

When, for example, Jesus had that encounter with the rich young ruler who wanted to know how to enter the kingdom of God, and Jesus told him that he needed to **“go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me,”** (Mark 10:17) the rich young man could not handle such a demand. He chose not to follow.

But you did. You didn't necessarily have a whole lot to sell and give away, but you gave what you could. You gave what you had left. And if it left you wearing little more than a linen garment wrapped around a naked body. But you were okay with that.

Final Test

And now he has come up to Jerusalem. And things have been looking real bad for about a week. When you are all together in the garden at Gethsemane, it finally comes to a head. There is an entire crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders and they are coming for him.

This is finally it. This is the great test of what it means to follow Jesus. And as you stand there, trembling with terror, you look to those big-name disciples. You look to Peter and James and John, and you see that they are all shaking with the same fear that you feel.

Who Will Follow?

But surely, you think to yourself, as terrifying as this situation is, they will not abandon him. He called them to follow him and that means even at moments like this – maybe especially at moments like this. But as you stand there, mouth agape, they do it. They break and they start to run in every direction. They are gone.

And you stand there amazed and terrified. Could it be possible? Could you really be the only one. And you feel a determination come over you. Yes, you will follow. You have to follow especially now. As they start to drag him off, you move with determination to follow closely.

Escape

He turns and for a moment he catches your eye. And in that moment, you understand that he sees you, that he knows of your commitment and love for him. He knows that you will follow him anywhere. He nods his head in blessing, but then he shakes it, and you understand him to be saying that here you cannot follow. Not yet.

That is the moment when one of the ruffians in the crowd notices you trying to follow. There is a cry. Several hands reach out to grab your loosely wound linen garment. You turn and, as you turn, you can feel the cloth unwinding. In a moment you are free. You are running naked in the garden. The men cry out to you with mocking and cursing. But, perhaps unsurprisingly, none of them seems inclined to set out in pursuit. You are free, perhaps freer than you have ever been.

You know that, as you run, there are all kinds of things that you should be feeling. You should feel the shame of public indecency. You should feel the humiliation of being on display. But you feel none of it. Having let go of your last possession on earth, you feel as if every weight has finally dropped away. You feel as if you have come newborn into the world.

The Following Days

The next couple of days are very difficult. There is no place you can go that people will not reject you. You dare not go into the city or any settled habitation. You end up walking through the pathless wilderness and find a place to sleep in the hedges. The next days are spent wandering about, always being careful to avoid being seen by any passing humans.

The Burial Ground

Eventually you are so desperate to find a little bit of shelter that late into the night you decide to head for the burial ground outside the city. Very early in the morning, before the sun has even started to rise, you look around the graves and are able to dimly make out what looks like a newly hollowed out tomb.

Amazingly it seems to be open. The stone that would normally be placed at the entrance to keep out wild animals is rolled off to one side. And so, you enter in, glad to find the shelter. And there, in the place where a body would be laid – should be laid – you find nothing but a folded white linen cloth. Grateful to find something to wear, you quickly take it and wrap it around your body. For the first time in days, you feel almost normal.

That is when you hear footsteps approaching. A small group of women are coming to the tomb. You are amazed to recognize them. They are women who also followed him up to Jerusalem. As they approach, everything comes together in your mind and in your spirit and you know what you need to say to them.

A Stand-in for the Reader

Who was the strange young man in the garden who ran away naked? We may never know. But I don't think that he is meant to represent the author of the gospel, nor any particular disciple. I suspect that Mark wrote him into the Gospel as a stand-in for you, the reader. He wanted you to imagine yourself in the scene. He wanted you to ask yourself what you might have done.

In particular, he wanted you to ask what it might mean for you to follow Jesus – to truly follow Jesus – and what that might mean in your life. This young disciple is all of us – or at least who all of us could be if we choose to follow him closely as a habit in our lives.