

The Last Page

Hespeler, March 31, 2024 © Scott McAndless – Easter Day

Acts 10:34-43, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, [1 Corinthians 15:1-11](#), John 20:1-18, [Mark 16:1-8](#)

The end of the Gospel of Mark has always been a bit of a mystery and a problem. It ends rather abruptly. The women come to the tomb on Easter morning to anoint the body of Jesus, but they find it empty. A young man dressed in white informs them that Jesus isn't there, that he has risen, and that they must tell the news to the others so they can all meet the risen Jesus in Galilee. But then the women don't tell the others – they don't say anything to anyone because they are too scared.

And that is it. The gospel ends right there. There are no appearances of the risen Jesus. There is only a vague promise that people will be able to see him at some point and that promise doesn't even get passed on. It is a weird ending, isn't it?

Alternate Endings

You are not the only people to think so. Right from the very beginning, Christians were very dissatisfied with the ending of Mark. So much so that very early on, people wrote their own longer endings that they tacked onto it – endings that we still often include in our modern Bibles.

But we are certain that those endings were not part of the original text. They do not appear in the oldest and best manuscripts of the gospel. And the later manuscripts disagree over which ending to add. Some even indicate that they don't think that the endings they have included are the right ones.

So, as far as we can tell, the oldest manuscripts of the gospel really did end at verse eight. That means one of two things. Either the original ending was lost almost immediately after it was written, or this strangely abrupt ending was intentional.

I think that it is the latter. The author ended it that way on purpose. But to understand that purpose, you need to understand something about the author of this gospel and why he was writing it.

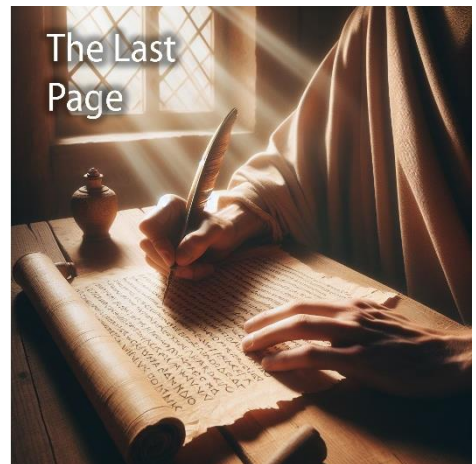
About the Author

The gospel was written anonymously, so we don't know what the author's name was. But the church decided to name him as Mark. That's a convenient name, so let's just stick with it. Most scholars agree that Mark wrote his gospel sometime around 70 AD and that it was the first of our gospels written. We know that Mark wrote it then because he makes references to contemporary events in ways that indicate that his readers should know what he is talking about.

And what are these contemporary events as Mark is writing? Mark is writing around the time of the great revolt of Judea against Rome. It was a dreadful period. There were wars and rumours of wars, an era of death and destruction. It culminated with Roman victory and the destruction of Jerusalem and its holy temple. And Mark was looking on from some distance while all of these terrible things took place.

Mark's Reaction to Events

He reacted much like you or I would. He was upset and frightened. He was also angry with some very specific people. He



was mad at the Jewish leadership who had chosen to follow the path of violent revolt led by bandits.

And he was also very mad at the leadership of the church – the disciples of Jesus, the women who had followed him and even the family of Jesus (his mother, brothers and sisters). He felt as if they had failed to lead the church in the path of Jesus at a critical time.

And so, Mark decided to do something constructive with his disappointment and his anger, something that no one had attempted before. He decided to write the story of Jesus' life and death and to write it in a way that would help the people of his age navigate a world full of dangers and disappointments.

And as people who are often alarmed at some of the disturbing things happening in our world and often deeply disappointed by both our national and church leaders, I think that we might benefit from understanding why he wrote as he did and especially why he chose to end his story in such an odd way.

A Few Inches Left

Mark had been working and writing his account of the good news about Jesus for weeks. As he looked at the scroll of parchment that had cost him at least two months' wages, he noted that there were only a few inches left on the end of the scroll. He would have to wind up this story quickly, but he wanted to make it clear to his readers what they were supposed to do with what they learned. He wanted to make sure that they were set up to do better than those who had failed to follow in the path of the Christ.

He had written this book to tell people the story of Jesus, of course. But he also wanted to make sure that the people he was writing it for – the people who were living through the same horrors as him – responded well. And maybe he kind of wanted to make sure that they understood who to blame for the present state of affairs. So, what really mattered to him was not just what Jesus had done and said, but also how people had responded to him so poorly.

The Barabas Incident

He felt as if he had perfectly encapsulated this in one of his favourite episodes that he had just written the other day. He told of how, when Jesus was on trial before the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate offered the people a choice. They could either choose the way of Jesus and peace, or they could choose the way of violence and war – which Mark had personified as a dangerous bandit named Barabbas.

He felt pretty sure that his readers would know not to read that in a strictly literal way. I mean, the name Barabbas (which meant "the son of the father") was clearly made up. And everyone knew that no Roman Governor would release a violent prisoner just because it was an important festival.

No, surely people would understand the deeper truth of that story – that the Jewish people's choice to follow bandits like the zealots and the sicarii into an ill-advised war against Rome was the ultimate rejection of Jesus and everything that he had stood for.

Yes, he had communicated his disdain for the Jewish leadership very effectively! But he was even happier with the criticisms of the leadership of the church that he had slipped into his narrative.

The Failures of the Disciples

He knew some of those leaders personally – the disciples and the brothers of Jesus in particular – and he had been repeatedly disappointed by their lack of faith and of courage in these crisis times. Again and again, they had acted in ways that demonstrated that they really hadn't understood what the message of Jesus was about.

And so, as he told the story of Jesus, he had made a point of playing up every incident in which Jesus criticized them – every time he told them to "be not afraid" or told them that they had "little faith."

And every time that Jesus told them what the plan was – of his coming death and resurrection – Mark made a point of following up with an episode in which one of them rebuked him or a couple of them tried to jockey for more important leadership positions. Surely no one would be able to read this gospel without coming away with an understanding of how abysmally the disciples had failed.

Jesus' Family

And as for Jesus' family – especially Jesus' brother James who had led the Jerusalem church through the crisis so ineptly – Mark had included an episode that he hoped would permanently discredit them.

You see, Mark had discovered that there was an occasion when Jesus' mother and brothers decided that Jesus was deranged, and they tried to forcibly take him away to have him committed. Oh, you can bet Mark made a point of including that episode and contrasting it to Jesus saying, **“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”** (Mark 3:35)

So, Mark felt as if he had thoroughly criticized leadership for their failures. But now he had about six inches of parchment left. The question was how he could end this in a way that would give his readers some hope for the future.

The Appearances of the Risen Jesus

Mark believed – he knew deep in his heart – that Jesus had risen from the dead. He had included three times in his gospel the prediction of Jesus that he would be raised. He also knew that the risen Jesus had made appearances to various people. As it was often repeated in the churches, **“he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time... Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.”** (1 Corinthians 15:5-7)

But he also knew what people like Peter, James and those apostles had done with their experiences. They had used them to fight with one another over who should lead and to pretend that their experiences were better than anyone else's. And look at where that had led them all!

And so, Mark resolved not to include any resurrection appearances in his blockbuster ending. Why start any of those fights up again? And so, as he took up his pen, he decided that he would end instead with an invitation to his readers.

The Women at the Tomb

“When the Sabbath was over,” Mark began to write, **“Mary Magdalene and 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.”**

Yes, he realized, this was yet another dig against the followers of Jesus. Jesus had told them not once, not twice but three times that he would be raised by the third day. They should have known that he wouldn't be in the tomb by Sunday morning.

But of course, they got it wrong. As far as Mark was concerned, almost all of those who had followed Jesus during his life had got it wrong. But these women were about to get the lesson of their lives, not to mention the biggest fright as well.

An Invitation

And so, Mark didn't tell of an appearance of the risen Jesus to them. If they had one, he knew that they would only misuse the experience like the others did. And so, instead, he gave them a message and an invitation. **“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. 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.”

This was an invitation, not to believe someone else’s account of them seeing the risen Jesus, but to experience it for yourself. All you had to do was go to Galilee and you would see him.

Now what, exactly, Mark meant by “go to Galilee,” I’m not entirely sure. He may not have meant it literally in terms of travelling to a specific place. Maybe, in the turmoil of the revolt, he thought of Galilee (which had been ravaged by the Romans) more as a state of mind than a place. But I’m pretty sure that Mark was making a promise to his readers: you can and should experience the resurrection for yourself.

Message Interrupted

How do I know that? Mark tells us that this all-important message wasn’t passed on. He ends his entire gospel by saying that the women who had received this message **“said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”** Yes, as far as Mark was concerned, the original leaders of the church had failed one more time.

And, because they had failed, the earliest church had been forced to fall back on hearing the testimony of people like James and Peter who had seen the risen Jesus. But they were denied that experience for themselves. And Mark had seen how badly that had gone.

But now, you see, there was a possibility for a new beginning. The message that the women had failed to pass on had now been transmitted. Mark had transmitted it in this gospel. The church now had the message! And they could go to Galilee, whatever that meant, and they could experience the power of the resurrection for themselves. That is the final promise of the final words of the gospel of Mark, and, as far as I’m concerned, that is a pretty powerful promise.

Mark’s Final Challenge

The ending of the gospel of Mark does seem strange to us, especially because we have the other gospels that were written after it and that put such emphasis on the experiences of those who first witnessed the resurrected Jesus. I believe that Mark knew about those experiences, but he had been disillusioned because the people who had had them failed to be good leaders of the church.

Mark thought it was time for something else. It was time for all God’s people to experience the power of the resurrection of Jesus for themselves. That was the challenge and invitation he ended his gospel with as he was writing for people whose entire world was falling apart.

And I am feeling like we might be in need of something similar. As the world around us fills with chaos and fear, as we see the leaders – both political and spiritual leaders – who have disappointed us, what are we supposed to do? Do we give up because their way of doing things is failing? No, it’s time for a new approach. Instead of assigning power and authority to certain people because of the experiences they claim, it might be time for us to seek the power of the resurrection for ourselves. Will you come to Galilee to see him for yourself?