

From Fear to Faith: Easter Hope for a World in Pain

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I. The Malaise of the Modern World

“How much time do we have left and what will we be able to do with it? Those are the questions. And why do these imponderables prey so heavily on our minds? I guess it’s because we struggle to cope with the hope. When we know the end is coming, that hope is replaced by despair and somehow that’s always easier.” – Jeremy Clarkson, *The Sunday Times*, April 9, 2022

“I know I’m going to be in a hole where I shall rot. And I shall be there forever, or at least until a property developer decides he needs the graveyard for a new housing estate. And then I’ll be landfill.” – Jeremy Clarkson

II. Mark’s Story

Setting the Scene (Mark 15:33-41)

“At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon” (Mark 15:33). That element of ‘darkness’ often generate a sense of ‘heaviness’; suggests a sort of ‘blindness’ or disorientation. It certainly does here.

“Jesus, borrowing the words from Psalm 22, cries out: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34)

Christianity is the only religion that says God himself actually suffers, cries out in anguish. And I think this is important for us – because when we suffer, we might be completely ‘in the dark’ about the reasons for it. A sense of ‘blindness’ as to the why.

Point One: Even if we never know the reason for our suffering this side of eternity, what Jesus is doing on the cross tells us what it can’t mean. It can’t mean that God doesn’t love us. For here, Jesus is taking the evil of the world, even the evil I have been party to – he takes it into his own heart, lets it crush him. Why? Out of love for you and me.

Fear and Trembling at the Tomb (Mark 16:1-8)

- a. “First day of the week”. That’s creation language – and it matters.
- b. “...just after sunrise.” The darkness of the last scene is contrasted with the light of this day in particular.
- c. Repetition of the names of the women – three times in a short space. Oxford scholar, Richard Bauckham, says this is a way that Mark is letting us know that this is not a ‘legend,’ not just a ‘made up story’ that we might find interesting or comforting, but a real, in time-and-space historical event (*Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*).

He says the repetition of their names are ‘source citations’ – like ancient footnotes. These women are almost certainly still alive at the time that Mark is writing. Mark is likely saying, “If you want to know more, they are still alive; you can go ask them.”

“Don’t be alarmed,” he said. “You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”

Even though Jesus had promised he would rise from the dead, and repeated it, they don’t believe that a resurrection like this *could* take place. They had no category for it – the Jewish view of the world said that resurrection would come, but only at the end of history. There was just no category for a single person being raised in the ‘middle of history.’

There were dozens of Messianic movements on either side of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. And each time, after the leader dies, the followers pack up, go home, and the movement dies out. Why doesn’t that happen here? Why does *this* movement just keep spreading and spreading? It doesn’t make sense – that is, unless you grant that a miracle really did happen that day; that the resurrection really did take place.

“Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.” – Mark 16:8

III. Mark’s *Non-Ending Ending*

Unlike Matthew, Luke and John, Mark does not write about the post-resurrection encounters.

What about Mark 16:9-20?

You will see a note in your Bible that reads something like this: “The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9–20.”

1. All the ***earliest copies*** of Mark’s Gospel end at v.8. They stop there.
2. Why these additional verses in later manuscripts?
 - a. Later scribes likely compiled these excerpts from the other Gospels, perhaps thinking the ending had been lost. The so-called “longer ending” is an attempt to offer something more satisfying
 - b. We know this is not Mark’s writing because of the word choices, the grammar, and even the big ideas and themes, they don’t line up with the rest of the Gospel of Mark.
3. Why would Mark end like this?
 - a. Mark is a brilliant storyteller. He has likely made a choice, by the guidance of the Spirit, to communicate this story in this particular way. It wasn’t uncommon in the ancient world to leave gaps in the story to make a point. For example, the Greek literary stylist, Demetrius – probably around the 3rd Century BCE – he

advises leaving gaps in stories. He says: “Some things seem to be more significant when not expressed,” and those omissions “will make an expression more forcible.” – Demetrius, *On Style* (possibly 3rd Century, BCE).

- b. All throughout the Gospel of Mark there is this major theme – about how the first followers of Jesus were struggling to understand that Jesus was going to have to die.
- c. Cambridge biblical scholar, Morna Hooker, she says Mark’s abrupt ending follows the pattern that Mark has used all through his telling of the Jesus-Story, which is “...to leave his readers to make the crucial step of faith for themselves, without presenting them with less ambiguous evidence for the resurrection.” (*The Gospel According to St. Mark*)

Mark is saying: What will you do with this divine revelation? With this news that Jesus is raised?

IV. What does it all mean?

If Jesus was raised from the dead, it means the whole story Mark has been telling is true.

1. Jesus has the authority to forgive sins

2. Jesus’ promise of life eternal is wide open to anyone who puts our trust in him

“In an age when most people ebb between the fear of death and the futility of life (see Heb 2:14–15) ...the cornerstone of Christian hope is the future resurrection of believers (Rom 8:24–25). Christian hope is not a placebo in the face of certain death, but it has real substance and is confirmed by Christ’s own resurrection as the prototype of what will happen to us (1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 4:14).” – Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology*

3. Our fears can be *transformed*

“We want the Gospel to conclude on a note of victory and good cheer, but that was not Mark’s situation. The ache of death is not so easily assuaged. Mark writes for those who never will experience Jesus’ physical presence.” – David Garland, *Gospel of Mark*

It may seem that the Gospel ends on a pessimistic note because Mark doesn’t tell of how the women fulfill their ministry – overcome their fear. But the Gospel is not about the disciple’s fear or failure. It’s about the power of God, which overcomes and even works with our human failure and dysfunction.

This text says, “yes, there is failure and folly, and yet God...God still works...even in and through our fears and failures.” I don’t know about you, but **that** – that encourages me. That tells me that even with my fears, God can work. Even with my failures – in the past, and what will inevitably be there in my future – God can and will still work with me. And so, this fills me with purpose too – to keeping working for the good of the world.

4. We work in light of the coming new creation

The resurrection tells us that this new creation is already breaking in.

“Resurrection means that the curse of creation and the nexus of sin and death have been broken and will be swept aside. God’s new creation is launched upon a surprised and unsuspecting world where new hopes are buoyed among oceans of terror, and the stories of Jesus’ followers are billboards in the global metropolis of things soon to come upon the world.”
– Michael Bird, *Evangelical Theology*

Life Group Discussion and Reflection

Open Up

As you look around the world, or at the events of your own life at the current moment, in what ways might the ‘resurrection hope’ be good news? Give details if you can.

Dig In

1. **Read Mark 16:1-8.** What do you think the women were expecting to find? Why?
2. Mark does not narrate the resurrection encounters of Jesus with his disciples (as the other Gospel writers do). What does that say about the role of trusting in “divine revelation” – of God speaking through the angel about the meaning of the empty tomb? How might that encourage you to trust the words we have recorded in scripture and past down to us?
3. We heard in the message that Mark almost certainly intended to end his Gospel on this note of fear and bewilderment to make us, as readers, consider what we will do with this news (see the notes above for the reasons why). How might you connect with some of the same feelings and responses of the women in your own experience?
4. In what ways might you feel a sense of bewilderment or fear in regard to engaging in living for God’s glory in your workplace, school, neighbourhood, or home?
5. How might the reality that “He is risen!” encourage you this week to respond in faith anyways?

Prayer: Take some time to share your fears or confusions, with God in prayer. Ask him to empower you to love and trust him, despite the ambiguity of life. Lift up prayer for those in your group – for specific needs and for the courage to live on mission with God.