

“What Mark Didn’t Tell Us”

Mark 16: 1-8; 8a; 9-20

4/23/2000 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

Before our text is read, I’d like to say a few things about Mark because I suspect that we remember little about the man who wrote the first version of the Gospel story of Jesus. Mark was brought up by a well-to-do woman in Jerusalem and her name was Mary.¹ Later on, their house was a central meeting place of the first community of Christians in Jerusalem. From the earliest years of the Church, Mark was brought up in the center of Christian fellowship.

Mark was also the nephew of Barnabas and when Paul and Barnabas went on their first mission trip, they took Mark along as their secretary and attendant. For Mark, however, this trip turned out to be negative. When they reached the city of Perga, Mark decided to go home. Some think that Mark was disappointed that Paul was more in charge of things than his uncle Barney.

Later, when Paul and Barnabas finished this first missionary journey and were about to begin the second one, Barnabas wanted to have Mark come along. This time, Paul refused and seemed irritated that Mark had left them before. Their disagreement over whether to bring Mark along was so serious that Paul and Barnabas split company. As far as we know, they never worked together again.

We know little of what Mark did in the following years. There is one tradition that he went to Egypt and founded the church in Alexandria.

We are surprised to see that later, when Paul writes to the Colossians from prison in Rome, Mark is with him. In another prison letter to Philemon, Paul says Mark is among his co-workers. And when Paul is within a few days of his death, he writes to Timothy, saying “. . . *and take Mark with you because he is one of my most useful helpers.*” About ten years later, in the 60s, this Mark wrote his version of the life of Jesus but where did he get his information? He had not traveled around with Jesus and the disciples.

From the beginning, his home had hosted a church and he undoubtedly heard people tell of their personal memories of Jesus. Near the end of the second century, a man named Papias commented that Mark’s gospel is nothing other than a record of the preaching material of Peter. Since Mark had gone on the first mission trip with Paul and his uncle Barnabas, he had also heard all of Paul’s core teaching.

Mark’s writing style, compared with the others, was not very polished. He continually added statement to statement, connecting them with the word ‘and.’ In fact, in his third chapter, there are 34 clauses or sentences strung together with just one verb. Mark was fond of using the words “and immediately” – using those words about 30 times. So Mark, almost hurriedly, marches through the life of Christ and the peculiarities in his writing style are distinctive and are a factor to which we return later.

Many commentators believe that Mark wrote this gospel for the purpose of one very long sermon he was delivering in the church in Rome. The congregation was Gentile so he took time to explain details about Judaism. We also believe Mark highlighted the lack of faith and outright failures of the disciples because he was trying to address an attitude of spiritual superiority prevalent in that church in Rome. The idea being that if the revered disciples botched things that much, maybe the people in the church of Rome should do some self-reflecting and not be so spiritually sure of themselves.

Mark also seemed to be reminding them that their faith was going to cost: there would be death for some believers – not a blessed life. And he reinforced that concept with repeated teachings of Jesus on matters of suffering.

This morning our text is Mark’s version of the resurrection and you may follow along with this reading as it is printed in the bulletin.

Mark. 16:1-8 read here

Now where that reading concluded, with verse 8, is where Mark ended his gospel. He told about the

¹ A common name in 1st Century Judaism. She was definitely not the mother of Jesus nor Mary Magdalene.

three women going to the tomb, finding the stone rolled back and a young man in white announcing the resurrection. “Go and tell the disciples, ...tell Peter especially, that Jesus is going on ahead to Galilee and there you’ll meet Him.” And strangely, Mark ends with the women returning home in shock, afraid to say anything to anyone.

“But wait a minute,” you say. “My Bible has verses 9-20 in chapter 16 of Mark. What do you mean Mark stopped at verse 8? Now this is going to be an interesting Easter. The denomination officials are going to come in here and have a heresy trial, defrock the minister and ship him off for career counseling.”

The fact is that there *are* multiple endings of the gospel of Mark found in the ancient manuscripts. The oldest copies of the New Testament we have show Mark ending with verse 8. These manuscripts are copies from the 300s.² The oldest copies of Mark, then, do not have verses 9-20.

Later on, by around the 7th century and onward, a few manuscripts show up in Latin, Syriac and Ethiopic with a small addition to verse 8 (that you see marked as the second reading).

Verse 8a is read here.

By the 5th century, a hundred years later than the oldest known copies of Mark, verses 9-20 began to appear in manuscripts. The vocabulary and style of writing of the verses are unlike Mark. Further, the connection between verse 8 and what follows is so awkward that it is hard to believe that Mark actually wrote that section after his verse 8. This material that was added, is in this third section and it contains copies of material originally in Matthew and Luke.³

Verses 9-20 are read here

The scholars, doing the detective work on these manuscripts, suspect that these later verses were copied from still another document – dating from perhaps the early second century. All this is why modern publishers of the Bible put a footnote after

² or the 4th century or the 4th century

³ There was actually one more passage alternative that showed up in a 4th century translation preserved by Jerome in his Vulgate Bible. It was, however, was found in only one Greek manuscript.

verse 8, letting you know that it is doubtful that verses 9-20 were from Mark. So why did the ancient Christians put these insertions in the text?

Scribes *thought* that Mark’s original ending must have gotten detached from his original manuscript. From what they knew of Jesus’ appearances to the women (that Luke provided), obviously there was more to the resurrection than what Mark described. But to most of the scribes and monks, who were copying from the copies, Mark’s ending was just too awkward. They obviously didn’t feel comfortable with the women going home from the empty tomb (without seeing Jesus) and being stunned to silence from hearing the message from a “young man” dressed in a white robe. To them, the resurrection just had to have a more thorough and rational explanation.

If we think about this, we see that the copyists were exhibiting some of the same mentality shown by the disciples (who clearly did not believe the women’s story). Luke says the disciples thought the women’s story was an “idle tale.” “That’s the most hysterical irrational thing I’ve ever heard of!” one of the men probably said after he heard their story. “Why do you have to burden us with this, especially now, when we’re all so upset?”

You see, it has always been a human tendency to impose a rational, predictable, orderly scheme on reality. Despite the many times the disciples saw Jesus do spectacular miracles, they still couldn’t believe the reality of the resurrection (*until* Jesus showed up in their midst). The disciples liked to have all the detail collected. They didn’t want their orderly rational lives interrupted. “Resurrection from the dead? Really!”

But it happened and Mark told it like it was: the empty tomb, the stranger telling them to go on because Jesus left the tomb behind. What an abrupt ending – no sunset scene with all of the followers sitting around a camp fire singing hymns.

Instead, there were the proprieties of the funeral procedures and mourning – all that shockingly interrupted by the totally unexpected empty tomb. The grave had been opened – the body is gone. No memorial service and everyone is stunned to silence.⁴

⁴ It’s almost like an episode out of the old television series, “The Twilight Zone.” The comfortable rational and orderly world suddenly becomes eerie and frightful.

Mark’s gospel doesn’t *end* smoothly because the resurrection is not an ending but a continuation of what had already transpired. There’s no getting around the stark and blunt reality of Jesus coming back from the dead. But He had already demonstrated His power over disease, human knowledge and death (remember Lazarus and the others). Jesus’ resurrection was just more of the same, . . . only He was moving on to meet them ahead. Mark was in effect saying: “*There you have it – the tomb is empty—deal with it.*” What more is needed to be said?

Contrast the stark blunt outrageousness of resurrection from the dead to our American life today. You’d think that with all the Hollywood neon and media glitz and the seductive indulgences of our Victoria Secret-Ally McBeal-‘Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire’- culture, our lives are anything but dreary and dull. But as our moments turn into months and years of these trends and commercial intrusions into our psyches, we quickly come to know ‘it’s all been done before.’⁵ What *else* can you show us?

Being mindful of the discipline of Art, let’s look over at one artist’s reaction to our culture – taking in some of the work of the painter Edward Hopper. While it would be ideal for us to be standing before his work in a museum – time, space and expense cause us to compromise with these small and inadequate but color representations in the bulletin.



Edward Hopper
"The Chair Car" 1965

Hopper’s paintings of empty streets, storefronts and solitary figures in the urban settings,⁶ embody a sense of such profound loneliness and alienation that they seem to transcend their particular time and place.⁷ In his works the

⁵ As suggested by the “Bare Naked Ladies” band in their song by that same title.

⁶ as well as in his other works depicting rural life

⁷ Edward Hopper (1882-1967) Hopper is a precursor of both Pop Art of the 1960s and the more recent Photo-Realists. His realistic vision recalls 19th century artists like Whistler, Homer and Sargent. He was born in 1882 in Nyack, New York, and is

“Chair Car,” the “Automat” and the Pennsylvania Coal Town,” notice how he emphasized shapes and angles. In these forms of “realism,” he seemed to focus on, and even glorify, the dreariness of much of American life.



Edward Hopper
"Automat" 1927

He tended to depict a bleak world made of dingy streets, gloomy houses, comfortless rooms and dismal restaurants. He perfected the apparent hopelessness of the inhabitants and their lack of aesthetic or spiritual connection. At the same



Edward Hopper
"Pennsylvania Coal Town"
1947

time, he also mysteriously compensated for this in his use of light – whether by day or by night – he used the light to transform even the dullest scenes into a contrast of interacting geometric planes and

spaces. Ultimately, though, the quiet loneliness of life seemed to be the real subject of his paintings.



Edward Hopper
"Room in New York" 1932

Look to his work entitled “Room in New York.” The painting is organized by the orderly rectangular shapes of the room architecture – which is further echoed by the framed pictures that hang on the wall behind the couple.⁸

Again, we see a desolate quality in his portrayal of this couple. They’re anonymous and they’re not communicating with one another. The man is lost in reading his newspaper – ignoring his female companion.

recognized as the most important realist painter of 20th-century America.

⁸ A device Hopper probably learned from the work of Edgar Degas.

Notice how silent it appears. As in all of these paintings, the silence is almost deadly. But here, the woman is clearly shown striking a piano key, making music. Her note from the piano becomes a substitute for spoken communication. In this encounter, the substitution of the music note seems necessary. The man is so lost in his newspaper that he even appears to want to escape from his companion – being *so* intent, in his reading, that he leans into it.



Edward Hopper
"Night Hawks" 1942

Perhaps Hopper's most widely known work is "Night Hawks." As was his earlier "Pennsylvania Coal Town," "Night Hawks" has bland streets and landscapes. All of his characters are curiously muted – appearing even more still because they are surrounded by empty and unimportant space. All motion is stopped and time is suspended.

Notice the darkened streets outside the restaurant that contrast with the lighted interior – seen through the huge plate-glass windows. The windows reveal the inner spaciousness of the restaurant and paradoxically give us a sense of the inside of the restaurant being both a safe refuge and a vulnerable place for the three customers and the man behind the counter. The interplay, between the people in the restaurant and the empty space, seems to heighten the apparent indifference of the characters to one another.⁹ This quiet and indifferent space between these (and the other people in his paintings) conveys an intense sense of loneliness and distance that people feel between themselves and others and perhaps God.

⁹ See Gardner's *Art Through the Ages* ISBN 0-15-503769-2 pages 1013-1014 and *Art Through the Ages*, 9th Edition HBJ, ISBN (hard) 0-1115-503769-2 (soft) 0-15-503770-0 and 0-15-503771-4

And all of us here, this morning – you and I – have tried, throughout our lives, to stay ahead of the still and quiet feelings of loneliness and isolation in life. The mediocrity and commercial dreariness, that surrounds us, is empty and a lot of times we're afraid that if we slow down for too long, we'll be enveloped by the silence and the lack of purpose. So we keep the radio, the TV, the computer and video games running throughout the day because something or someone unexpected might just come along.

The resurrection of Christ doesn't fit into our neat and orderly (and sometimes *ordinary*) world. It's about as unnatural as someone getting up out of a casket in the middle of their own funeral – eerie, frightening and breathtakingly shocking. We can't tame God. God is too much.

So into any of these Hopper paintings – and into any scene in our own lives – picture this: the empty tomb. There's the grave. It's empty because He's no longer in there. He's not there because Jesus is standing right beside you.

For whom are you living your life? Nothing needs to be "ordinary" ever again. Rejoice! Our Redeemer lives.¹⁰ ■



The Empty Tomb, made by Jesus in conquering death

¹⁰ This work on these ancient text is summarized by Bruce Metzger on behalf of and in cooperation with the Editorial Committee of the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament in A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament a companion volume to the United Bible Societies Greek New Testament* third edition (New York: United Bible Society, 1971).