

You might well ask yourself what has happened to the Year of Mark. There hasn't been a Sunday reading from Mark since the Passion (Mk 14:1-15:47) on Palm Sunday, although the resurrection reading in Mk 16:1-7 was read on Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday's reading being from John. The next reading from Mark is on Ascension Day; since that is a Holy Day of Obligation it 'counts' as within the Year of Mark. The first Sunday to return to Mark is Corpus Christi (6 June) but the Mark reading was part of the Passion narrative so it is on 13 June that we return to consecutive reading from Mark 4:26-6:30-34, with the omission of just a few verses. We have an interlude of readings from John 6 from 25 July-22 August; on 29 August we return to Mk 7, continuing steadily to Mk 13 on 14 November. Complicated, isn't it?! I shall comment here on Mk 16 then early in June, on the June and July readings, with a brief note on the readings from Mk 2-4 that are not included.

First, however, a note on the Eastertide Sunday readings, which are mainly from John.
 Easter Sunday John 20:1-9 Empty tomb: Mary Magdalen. Peter, the beloved disciple
 2nd Sunday of Easter John 20:19-31 Appearance to disciples and to Thomas
 3rd Sunday of Easter Luke 24:35-48 Risen Lord appears to disciples
 4th Sunday of Easter John 10:1-10 Good Shepherd Sunday (known over 500 years)
 5th and 6th Sundays are concerned with the Church's ministry, mission and service
 5th Sunday of Easter John 15:1-8 Jesus as true vine; we, as followers, are to bear fruit
 6th Sunday of Easter John 15:9-19 Mission exercised through love
 7th Sunday of Easter John 17:11-19 part of High Priestly Prayer; sending disciples out into the world (compare Matt 28:19-20).

Mark 16

Since I first read the final chapter of Mark in Greek almost 50 years ago, I have been fascinated by scholarly work referred to as textual criticism. Most of you will have no interest, so I have explained this at the end in the section marked * These days almost all Catholic and mainstream Protestant scholars would agree that Mark wrote verses 1-8 and that verses 9-20 were added later, by another author(s). Whether one agrees with this opinion or not, **all of Mk 16:1-20 is part of the Canon of Scripture.**

The empty tomb (Mark 16:1-8)

As many commentators say, the empty tomb was not a proof of Jesus' resurrection, but in order for him to have risen it had to be empty. However, the young man's comments, 'He has been raised' (16:6) and 'he is going ahead of you to Galilee' (16:7) make it plain that Mark understands Jesus to have been resurrected. All three of his passion predictions also refer to Jesus' resurrection.

The Sabbath was over (16:1) around 600pm on Saturday so the women could go to buy spices, used to keep down the smell from a corpse. The three women had witnessed Jesus' death (15:40), Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus had witnessed his burial (15:47). There had not been time before his burial, hence they went on Sunday morning to anoint him. However, the unknown woman had anointed him beforehand (14:8). They came 'very early' (16:2) on Sunday morning, maybe around 0600. The stone (16:4) was a large round slab fitted into a groove at the entrance to a cave hewed out of rock. It's strange they hadn't thought earlier about how they would move it, but they found it already rolled back (16:4). The term used – young man – is the same as the one used for the man dressed only in a loin cloth (14:5). He is called an angel in Matt 28:5; whoever it was, the women were

‘alarmed’ or utterly amazed (16:5). The explanation, by use of the passive, implied it was God who raised him (16:6). They would have been shown the empty shelf where his body had been laid (see 15:47). Resurrection on this the third day, was significant – see Hos 6:2. Jesus, in being raised, anticipated what awaits all the faithful.

The women were told (16:7) to tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus was going ahead to Galilee, where they would find him. If Mark’s account ended at 16:8 then either the women told no one on the way, or else they failed to deliver the message. The ending leaves them apparently ignoring the instructions, terrified and afraid. (16:8). If the original ending has been lost, we can assume from 14:28 and 16:7 that Mark had described the meeting in Galilee in this lost section. If Mark intended to finish at 16:8, the Christians for whom he was writing would know and believe the resurrection proclamation. Maybe Mark was telling them to go back and read again about the suffering Messiah, now risen as Son of God. Also, if Mark intended to finish at 16:8, then, just as in Mk 14-15 the male disciples failed and let Jesus down, so also did his women followers. This would point to the fact that it is not his followers but Jesus that we should imitate. We shall not know in this life what Mark intended, but the remaining verses, probably composed by an unknown author, make clear that Jesus had risen indeed.

Resurrection appearances and Ascension (Mark 16:9-20)

Very few commentaries say much about these verses. I have been mainly reliant on Dennis Sweetland *Mark From Death to Life* US: New City Press 2000.

Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene (16:9-11). Mary Magdalene was present at the cross, the burial and the empty tomb, and is mentioned in all four gospels as a witness to the resurrection. Here, she told ‘those who had been with him’ i.e. the disciples, but they would not believe it. She is often referred to as *Apostola Apostolorum* (Apostle of the Apostles) and from early days, including Hippolytus of Rome and St Jerome, she was venerated as the first witness to the resurrection. On 3 June 2016 Pope Francis published a decree elevating the celebration on 22 July to the rank of Feast. One reason given for the decision was ‘to reflect more deeply on the dignity of women’; it calls her ‘an evangelist who announces the joyful message of Easter;’ and ‘an example for all women in the church.’

Jesus appears to two disciples (16:12-13). This is reminiscent of the Emmaus story (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus ‘appeared in another form’ i.e. the risen Jesus ‘had changed from the Jesus of the historical ministry’ (Sweetland p 209). Like Mary Magdalene, these disciples are not believed.

Jesus commissions the disciples (16:14-18). The disciples were at supper, presumably on Easter Sunday evening, and Jesus ‘upbraided them’ for lack of belief and, as in the other gospels, he commissioned them to preach the gospel, stressing the importance of baptism. Power to perform marvellous works is found in other gospel passages e.g. Matt 21:21 and John 14:12 as well as in Acts 3:6; 9:34. There is a reference to snakes in Luke 10:19 and to a viper when Paul was in Malta (Acts 28:3f).

The Ascension of Jesus (16:19-20) This seems to be on Easter Sunday from Jerusalem but ‘later’ in 16:14 could be some weeks later. (Compare Luke 24:50). I cannot find any discussion of this! To me, it suggests the second century author was relying on oral witnesses. What matters, surely, is that Jesus ascended and that the disciples ‘proclaimed the good news everywhere’ and ‘the Lord worked with them’. Jesus worked with the disciples, despite their frailties and lack of belief. He will work too with us.

* The Bible translation found in most English households from the 1950s to 1960s would probably have been the AV, which prints Mk 16:1-20 without any special comment. By 1952, the RSV complete Bible concluded Mk 16 at verse 8 whereas the Catholic edition, in 1966, printed all of Mk 16:1-20 with a footnote, ‘other ancient authorities omit verses 9-20’. The Jerusalem Bible, as published in 1966, does the same, adding to the footnote ‘this ending to the gospel may not have been written by Mark’. Nowadays, very many of our university theology departments use the NRSV. The Catholic edition of 2000 concludes Mark at verse 8, but in brackets it has ‘The shorter ending of Mark’ which is present in very few manuscripts, and then ‘The longer ending of Mark’ i.e. Mk 16:9-20 with a note including ‘Some of the most ancient authorities bring the book to a close at the end of verse 8’.

I find the cause of these changes so interesting: The United Bible Societies Greek text, which I use, marks ‘omit vv9-20’ with A, meaning that those Greek texts that do this are ‘virtually certain’ to be correct. The two crucial texts are both fourth century, and the oldest we possess. They are Codex Vaticanus (in the Vatican since the fifteenth century but little used for a long time) and Codex Sinaiticus found in St Catherine’s Monastery on Sinai in the mid nineteenth century but now in the British Library in London. Ancient versions such as the Syrian, Armenian and Ethiopian agree with them as do some of the early Fathers. This is why, as new translations proliferated from the 1950s, scholars increasingly accepted that what was written by Mark ended at verse 8. This was not only because of the manuscript evidence, but also because the vocabulary and style differ from the rest of the gospel. Daniel Harrington, in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (student edition 1993 p 629) says that Mk 16:9-20 ‘is most likely a second century compendium of appearance stories based primarily on Luke 24 with some influence from John 20’. If Mark intended to finish his gospel at 16:8 he probably assumed his readers would know of the appearance of the risen Jesus. Nowadays, this is the most popular view. The problem with this is that it is very unusual (but not impossible) to finish a book with Greek *gar*, which means ‘for’. The alternative, which I find more attractive, is that the end got lost and so later scholars added what they thought was in the lost page.

We don’t know who wrote verses 9-20, but must regard all of Mark 16:1-20 as Scripture.

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Quotations are from NRSV, as used in Bible Society Mark’s Gospel