

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

And there the story ends. The earliest manuscripts of Mark's Gospel available to us end there: it is only from later manuscripts and from the other Gospel writers that we have accounts of the risen Jesus' appearing to the Eleven (his remaining closest disciples) and to other followers. The most ancient text of Mark leaves the women there, trembling and bewildered, wondering what on earth has happened.

Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. Three women are mentioned: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. These three are earlier named as being among the women who witnessed Jesus' death on the cross. Two of them – the two Mary's, Mark tells us – had seen where Jesus' body was laid. As soon as the Sabbath is over, on Saturday evening after sunset, the three women go and buy spices. Then at first light on the Sunday, the first day of their working week, they go to the tomb, expecting to have difficulty with the massive stone, but no doubt hoping that someone stronger will be around to help.

What they are not saying to each other is that they are going to the tomb to witness Jesus' resurrection. They had no idea that any such thing was even thinkable. No, they are going to the tomb to complete Jesus' initial burial. In that culture two burial processes were undertaken. In the first burial the body is laid out, and anointed with spices. This was so that the smell of decomposition would be masked: other bodies, in due course, would be placed in the same tomb over the coming year or so. Much later, after the flesh had decomposed, the second process could be undertaken: Jesus' bones would be collected and put into an ossuary (a bone box). This is the expectation the women go with on the morning of the first day of the week.

So now these women approach the tomb, to complete the sad task that reverence and practicality demands.

And they get the shock of their lives! The stone has already been rolled away. The body of Jesus is nowhere to be seen! A young man in white sits where Jesus' body had been, and he calmly explains to them that Jesus has been raised from the dead and will see them again in Galilee. They are to go with a message to the disciples. Peter is to be specifically told, no doubt to ensure that after his terrible denials he is not regarded as beyond redemption.

The women, quite naturally, rush off home, scared out of their wits. They must have passed several people on the way, but they don't say a word. They are in shock. They were completely unprepared for this.

And here you might quibble. Unprepared? But didn't Jesus himself talk of his dying and rising again?

Well, yes, that's true.

But we need to recognise how far outside of their worldview this event would have been. Whenever Jesus mentioned it, the disciples were uncomprehending – perhaps largely because they got emotionally caught up in reacting to the first part of what Jesus said: that he would die. That too was not part of their worldview: a dead hero was a failed hero.

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We prefer tidy endings, don't we? We like a satisfying conclusion, a tying up of the loose ends. And above all, we want to *understand*.

So this Gospel passage as it stands might feel a bit unresolved and unsatisfying for us.

But I think all this actually has valuable resonance for us in our day.

There are two aspects to the resonance I feel. One relates to things that are going on in our lives and around us. The other relates to our worldview.

In relation to the first, there is much about our world today that might make us feel trembling and bewildered. There is a great deal of conflict around the world, and a lot of it feels impossible to resolve. And as part of this we must note the desperate sadness of ongoing conflict in the lands Jesus inhabited all those years ago; and we must acknowledge too that the Christian Church has at times engaged in or allowed aggression – especially against the Jews, making them out to be exclusively responsible for Jesus' death despite the Bible being clear that we are all implicated, and ignoring the fact that the Jews were the very people Jesus called his own.

Other things that might make us trembling or bewildered include the behaviour of politicians and leaders of various kinds around the world and in our own country, the changes to our climate and the resulting effects of weather events of unprecedented frequency and ferocity, the unknown effects of powerful new technologies, the breakdown of many of the things we took for granted in the way our society works, and so on.

We see more and more in our world today that might make us feel afraid and unwilling to speak of what we know about Jesus. Around the world, persecution of people for their Christian faith seems to be growing and is now taking place in countries that for centuries had seemed to promote tolerance at least. And in countries that hitherto had claimed a Christian heritage, we increasingly find that the public expression of faith risks ridicule, censure, or restriction.

Those are just some examples of the sorts of things that create a resonance with the trembling and bewilderment experienced by the women visiting Jesus' tomb.

It is in relation to our worldview that I find my other point of resonance with the unresolved ending to Mark's Gospel. The women at the tomb had only the mysterious statements of Jesus before his death, and then the strange evidence of an empty tomb and witness of a mystery young man: at that point they had no other basis for accepting the strange new reality of the resurrection, Jesus raised to renewed bodily life. It was not part of their worldview.

For our part too resurrection remains strange and challenging. We don't have direct experience of it. Many of us have had personal encounters with Jesus; but these are not bodily, as for now he makes his dwelling only in the heavenly realm rather than appearing bodily to us on earth. We have only the Gospel accounts and those of the writers of the epistles bearing witness to the experiences they and others had when they encountered the newly living, breathing, thoroughly physical Jesus. And we are forced then to take these accounts on trust.

I find myself helped in this because I find that the worldview that results from trying to understand this resurrection event in the context of all that went before it, and in the context of what Paul and Peter and John *et al* went on to write about it all, is a worldview that makes sense of the world I know and experience. It is a worldview that makes sense of the things that cause me trembling and bewilderment now; a worldview that gives me a realistic hope for the future in which I, together with all the faithful, will indeed meet the risen Jesus.

As we have received it from the earliest manuscripts, Mark's good news seems to require no resurrection proofs based on encounters between Jesus and his disciples or anyone else. Instead, there is a promise: "He is going ahead you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."¹

Over against the apparent absence of Jesus at the conclusion of Mark, there is the assurance that he is "going ahead of you". If that is true, then death is stripped of its power for there is nothing Jesus' followers will endure, no place they can go, that Jesus isn't already there.

Jesus goes ahead of us. The proper place for a disciple of Jesus is behind or after him, always going on in the confidence that he is ahead of us even when we can't

¹ This paragraph and all that follows owes much to West's commentary, at times quoting directly. Audrey West, "Commentary on Mark 16:1-8", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-mark-161-8-9>

see him. And if Jesus “goes ahead of us in death, can there be any doubt that he will be there ahead of us wherever life might take us.”²

Among those with shattered, bewildered lives who long to be made whole, the followers of Jesus will see him, just as they did in Galilee. They (and we) might at any second run into him as the reign of God comes into its fullness.

God’s Messiah is crucified. Terror and amazement silence the women. The disciples are nowhere to be found.

It seems that everywhere we look human endeavour has failed.

But the way of Jesus, according to Mark, is a way of mystery and paradox. God’s Messiah is crucified ... *and yet lives*. Terror and amazement silence the women ... *and yet somehow the good news is proclaimed*. The disciples are nowhere to be found ... *and yet they carry the ministry of Jesus to Galilee and beyond*.

To me this ending to Mark’s Gospel speaks of both the power of God to accomplish what we could not humanly imagine, and the grace of God to include humankind in its achievement – both as its beneficiaries and as its agents.

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On its face, this ending to Mark’s Gospel seems flat and defeated. But because Jesus was truly dead and is now risen, because he goes ahead of us into Galilee, because he commissions us to go and promises that we will see him, we are assured of, not a sad ending, but a *new beginning!*

Christ is risen, and this is only the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God.

² Sally Bates, “Fill in the Words: Mark 16:1-8”, unpublished sermon preached on March 31, 2002, and quoted in West.