

“The Rest of the Story”

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Are we living our lives as if Jesus is alive, or do we act like Jesus is still dead?

Mark 16:9-20

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(Corinth sermons are available in audio and print forms at corinthtoday.org/sermons.)

Pastor Amy

The Elephant in the Room

If the only time you’ve heard or read today’s passage was during this worship service, you missed something important. Supremely important. It’s like at a “we-can’t-go-on-until-we-deal-with-this” level of importance. If you have read this passage in your Bible, I bet you’re thinking, “I wonder how they’re going to handle *this!*” Quite honestly, if I were in your seat right now, I’d be thinking, “I’m sure glad I don’t have to be the one to preach on *that!*” But here we are, with a gigantic elephant in the room. So let’s go ahead and tackle it head-on.

The passage I just read to you, which appears at the end of the Gospel of Mark in every copy of the Bible you have ever held or seen, was not written by Mark. It simply doesn’t exist in the oldest or best New Testament manuscripts. Everybody—conservatives, liberals, Baptists, Methodists, whoever—everybody agrees that this passage was not written by Mark and was not part of the original gospel that Mark wrote. Lest you think we’re making things up here and starting a new heresy, let me assure you that everybody has pretty much agreed on this fact for over 1600 years—so don’t turn off the live feed yet! We’re not doing heresy here, but we will start out with a bit of history.

Some of you are probably familiar with this, but for many of you, it might be new information that you haven’t heard taught or preached before. So, I suspect there are at least three questions you want answers to. First, how do we know that verses 9-20 aren’t part of the original gospel of Mark? Second, if they aren’t part of the original gospel, why are they in our Bible? And finally, what’s the point of

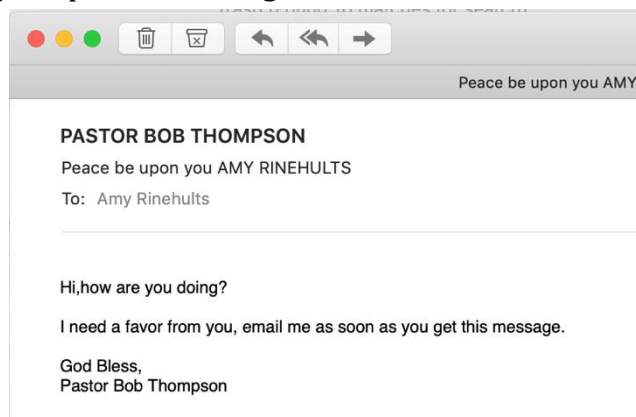
studying an ending to a gospel that the gospel writer didn't write? I'm going to try to tackle all three of those questions briefly, and then hand this over to Pastor Paul for some application points.

How Do We Know?

If you have a Bible nearby, you may want to open it. I checked a few of the Bibles I have and found a wide variety of notations around this passage. The most subtle was a Bible that had brackets around verses 9-20 and a section heading that reads "The Longer Ending of Mark." In between verses 8-9, below a section header that reads "The Shorter Ending of Mark," it added, "And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation." Most of my other Bibles have a note like the one on [Biblegateway](#)—"The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9-20," followed by verses 9-20 in italics.

This is taking us into a field known as textual criticism. In this context, criticism is not a negative word. Think of it more like taking a critical (close) look at something, rather than critiquing. The job of textual criticism is to look in and around the text we have now to figure out what the original looked like.

There's some good internal evidence that verses 9-20 weren't written by Mark. Internal evidence has to do with things that just don't look or sound quite right. To show you what I mean, let me first tell you that Pastor Bob seems to be a great target for email spoofing. Every couple of weeks I get an email from "Pastor Bob Thompson." And in every case, I know almost immediately that it's not from the real Bob Thompson. For instance, Real Bob knows how capitalization works, and he has never thought that either of our names need to be in ALL CAPS. And he's pretty good at punctuation and doesn't often miss a space after a comma. Real Bob doesn't start his emails asking how I'm doing. I think he usually does care how I am and sometimes he asks, but he sends way too many emails to do an emotional check-in with each one! Real Bob has never uttered the phrase "Peace Be Upon You" to me. And most importantly, Real Bob is a busy dude. He doesn't email me to ask me to email him back so he can email me again about what he wants me to do! Real Bob gets right to the point and sends me a bulleted or numbered list, so I know right away what 942 things he wants me to do. And finally, as if I need more proof, I know to click on his name. And when I do, I see that the message didn't come from Real Bob's email address, but from pastorooo23, whoever that might be!



We can do the same kind of thing with a Gospel and look and listen for what doesn't fit with what we already know. Scholars who have studied this passage much more than I have are able to identify a pretty long list of problems with the passage that make it clear that it doesn't fit. I'll share just a few that jump out at me. First, there's the problem of verse 9 introducing Mary Magdalene and explaining who she is, when verses 1-8 were all about her and the other women. Then there's the issue that verse 8 says the women "said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid," and verse 10 says that after Jesus appeared to her, Mary "went and told those who had been with him..." It's obvious that eventually the women did tell other people what had happened—we'll come back around to that point in a moment—but it makes no sense for such a sudden change with only one verse between, especially when that one verse is a pretty clumsy transition at best. Mark's writing is quick and he doesn't waste a lot of words on descriptions, but nowhere else in the gospel is the writing this choppy and erratic. Then there's the problem that Jesus shows up in verses 9-20 saying things that he doesn't say anywhere else in Mark's gospel. If Mark wanted us to know that Jesus had important things to say about snake handling and poison drinking, I think he would have found a way to work that in somewhere in the first 15 chapters. Much like how knowing Pastor Bob's writing makes it easy to identify writing that isn't Pastor Bob's, when we get to know Mark's gospel, it's pretty easy to see this isn't Mark's writing.

External evidence confirms this too. We have over 5,800 Greek copies of parts of the New Testament. The oldest of these manuscripts date back to 130AD. That's a lot of copies that get us really, really close to Mark's original writing. The oldest and best manuscripts that we have don't include these verses. They stop at verse 8. We don't know if there was another ending that Mark wrote that somehow got lost. Some scholars think Mark died before he finished writing his gospel, so a proper ending never existed. In either case, it seems like verses 9-20 were added somewhere between 150-250AD, when Mark's gospel was about 100-200 years old. And that addition seems to have been okay with everybody.

Why Is This in My Bible?

I think the shortest and simplest answer I have to the question of why we have these endings to Mark's gospel that Mark didn't write is this: we are a people who crave the end of the story. The reason we tune back in for multi-part shows or watch sequels of movies is that our brains don't like cliffhangers. Sure, we might get a kick from the adrenaline rush, or enjoy the suspense for a little while. But ultimately we want to know that the good guys win and the bad guys get what's coming to them. We want the star-crossed lovers to find each other. We want the underdog to overcome adversity and enjoy his victory. We don't do well with an unwritten ending.

About two years ago, I went to the theater to watch a sci-fi thriller movie called *A Quiet Place*. I am not recommending you do the same; I actually didn't care

for the movie. But if you haven't seen it yet and think you might want to, skip the rest of this paragraph. The same goes if you get easily upset by sci-fi movies. I'm not going to share anything graphic or gruesome—just a summary of a weird plot. The whole movie is based on the idea that these giant spider-like aliens have come to earth. They can't see, but they have amazing hearing. They also have incredibly strong armor on their bodies. They hunt by sound and have managed to wipe out most of the population. For almost 90 minutes, all we know is that the only way to survive is by being quiet. Fighting won't work because their armor is too strong. Then, all of a sudden, in the last five minutes, we hear the main characters create some awful electronic feedback noise. We see the aliens recoil at that particular noise, revealing a break in the body armor. One of the main characters fires a shot, and the alien drops dead. There's a momentary pause—the main characters look at each other and realize they've just figured out the key to their survival. Then they look up. The noise of the gunshot has attracted a whole hoard of the aliens who are rushing towards them. And then the screen goes black. The credits roll.

I don't often yell in public, but I did that night. "WHAT?!" I was about to jump through the movie screen. That can't be the end. It can't possibly be how the writers intended to leave things. The main characters are still in danger. There's hope—but it's still unfulfilled. There's too much we don't know. Do all the aliens have the same weakness that first one did? Do they have enough ammo to fend off all of them? There's obviously going to be a massive show-down, and I need to know who wins! The aliens didn't scare me. The suspense during the movie didn't scare me. But not knowing what happened next kept me up most of that night. We are a people who need to know the end of the story.

When Mark stops writing at 16:8, we know it's not really the end of the story. We even know that Mark knows it's not the end of the story. Mark 16:8 says the women went away terrified and didn't tell anybody anything. How do we know that's not the end of the story? Because we know that story! The only way for us to know that the women were there or that they went away terrified or that they didn't tell anybody anything (at first) is if they eventually *do* tell someone what happened so that Mark can write it down! Even without having the other gospels, the fact that we know anything about the women, the empty tomb, the man in white, the women's fear... it all tells us there's more to the story than what Mark wrote down.

Some people think this ending of the gospel is a compilation of the endings of Matthew and Luke—and there are some similarities between them, though there are also some things we don't see anywhere else in Scripture. I can't tell you who wrote this ending to Mark. I can't tell you where they got their information. I can't even tell you if this post-resurrection account of Jesus is more or less accurate than the other gospels. But I can tell you that Mark didn't write it. Somebody decided later that we needed to know "the rest of the story."

Why Are We Studying This?

This brings us to our final question and my shortest answer—“what’s the point of studying an ending to a gospel that the gospel writer didn’t write?” It’s in the Bible. Back when I was in seminary, I’d often get frustrated with translating Greek and seeing that my theology wasn’t supported by what the Bible actually said. It was hard work that was rewarded with a lot of pain. I’d pitch a fit and tell my Greek professor about every other week, “I don’t like this part of the Bible anymore.” And his answer was the same every time—“Get over it. It’s in the Bible; you need to do business with it.”

We worship a God who is all-powerful and all-knowing. And the Scriptures of that living God are not messed up by human writers or editors. The fact that Mark didn’t write the end of Mark only means that these aren’t Mark’s words. It in no way means that these aren’t the words God intended to be in the Bible. We are Reformed people, which means that we look up to the Bible as our God-given Scriptures. This passage isn’t a mistake, and it’s not out of place. Mark 16:9-20 is in our Bible. That information might have surprised Mark, but it’s certainly not the kind of thing that’s catching God off-guard. Around here, we take very seriously the idea from 2 Timothy 3:16 that “all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” And that’s where Pastor Paul is going to take us—to the ways we can use this passage in our lives today.

Pastor Paul

If you love to watch sports, you know that there are no live sports on now at all. However, ESPN is getting desperate. They are airing the 1997 spelling bee. That’s desperate. This is sad. In a world where sports are gone, ESPN’s relevance has gone away. I say that because the church would be in the exact same boat if Jesus hasn’t risen from the dead. We would be searching desperately for our relevance. We would be searching for the meaning, the why, and we would have no relevance. We would be broadcasting our greatest hits from hundreds of years ago. We would have nothing to talk about now. We would be desperately looking at who we are.

We have to realize that this is similar to what Luke talks about at the end of his gospel as well as Matthew and John. Church is relevant because Christ has empowered the church—he is the engine of the church. He physically commissions the church right there as he appears and talks to his disciples in verses 15-18.

When we think about this commissioning—picking up snakes and drinking deadly poisons—we don’t know all of the ways the early saints were persecuted. But we do see in the early church people laying hands on people and people being healed. These were never meant to be things we parade around to show our faith any more than when Satan is tempting Christ in Matthew 4:5-6. “Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. If you are the Son of God,’ he said, ‘throw yourself down. For it is written: He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not

strike your foot against a stone.” Jesus says that’s tempting the Lord and not having and living through faith.

Before we get to the commission, we need to look at the text—the first thing that happens is that Jesus comes back and rebukes the church for living like he is still dead. He says “I can’t believe you don’t believe. Believe in me. You’ve got eyewitness testimonies.” Go back to Mark 14:28 to hear Jesus’ own words, “But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.” The disciples and the church are not only refusing to believe the testimonies about Jesus, but they are refusing to believe Jesus’ own words.

Verses 9-20 might have been a later addition, but it still verifies one of the things we do as far as qualifying scripture as being real—divine and God-breathed—this also satisfies the criterion of embarrassment. Notice that when we look at these gospels, it never portrays the disciples as spiritual giants always believing, always doing wonderful things, being great, and accepting the news of Christ’s resurrection. It never does that. As a matter of fact, it goes to great length to show their lack of belief and their lack of faith. This satisfies the criterion of embarrassment because the disciples don’t believe. They just don’t believe the eyewitness testimony; they don’t believe Jesus’ own words about himself.

This serves as a warning to us as a church now. Do we as the church deserve the same kind of rebuke that the first church got for living like Jesus was still dead? One of the sad parts about being a pastor is that we visit more funeral homes than the average person. I have been to funerals and funeral homes where it has been a sad occasion and where it has been a joyous occasion. No matter the occasion, joyous or sad, when it was over did anyone say, “let’s hang out here.” It may be a place people congregate but no one wants to stay there. Why? Because it’s a place of death.

The church will also be stripped of its power if it lives as if Christ is not alive. If the church does not actively live like Jesus is alive, we will miss this great commission. Notice what he says here in verse 15, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel.” If the church does not actively live like Jesus is alive, the church will be fooled into thinking that they are working for Jesus, not with Jesus, alongside Jesus, and through Jesus.

The end of this in verse 19 tells us the same thing that Jesus says in the other gospels and in Acts 1—that Christ ascends and sits at the right hand of God the Father. It is the seat of power and seat of intercession. So, God through Christ has gone to the place where he literally is there to empower us and our work. So when we work and do things that are kingdom-building things, we are not doing them for Jesus like he is an absentee manager. We work through him and through his power. Philippians 2:13 “For it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.” It’s not just us working through our own power but us working through Christ.

If we work for Jesus and not with Jesus, it will produce two things that are destructive and detrimental to the church. One is pride and the other pathetic-ness. If we are constantly working for Jesus, we can look at the things we have done and take credit for them. That produces destructive pride. We serve but the outcome is always up to the Lord.

But it also produces pathetic-ness. What can we do for Jesus? We are just merely sinners, fallen, wretched. We can't go out and do anything because we feel like Jesus is not here, and we are working for him rather than living in the truth that he is alive, that he lives within us, and he sits at the right hand of God the Father.

Christ comes and he empowers us, but he doesn't just leave it to us. He comes and works through us and with us. When we work hard and leave the actual outcome up to him, it frees us to just serve him.

If the church does not actively live like Jesus is alive, they will always focus inward. In verse 14 this happens and in John 20. The disciples are not out telling people what Jesus said. They are not corroborating the stories of the women that were at the tomb. They are in a room afraid. Thomas doesn't even show up. He will not believe it unless he can put his hands in Jesus' side. They focus inward rather than looking for him or telling others what Jesus taught.

The church that actively lives like Jesus is dead has nothing to say to the world outside the four walls of the church. We can say we believe the Apostles Creed, that Jesus died and on the third day he rose again, and that we celebrate Easter. You can say those words, but do you live them? Do you know them? Do you work them out in your life? If you don't, the consequence is you don't say anything to the outside world.

Is evangelism important to you? Do you tell people about Jesus? Because if you don't, you are practically living like he is not alive. If you don't have a risen Savior to speak to someone about, you are just saying, "Hey come and be a part of our tradition." Does that sound like good news to you? I don't need any new traditions.

The good news is that someone came and took my debt of sin and death and shame and paid it. He died and now he lives so that I can live and have a relationship with him. "Hey, can I introduce you to my living Savior?" That is way different than saying, "Hey, come be a part of our tradition." The church that believes Jesus is not alive has nothing to say to the world, and it is evidenced by the fact that they don't share the good news of Christ's resurrection. Evangelism is not "come to our tradition"; it's "come meet our risen Savior."

The church that actively lives in the truth that Jesus is risen from the grave can live with joy through trials because they understand and know that Jesus has the last word on everything. Whether you look at this text in Mark or turn to Matthew, Luke, or John, you don't see the last chapter as being one more story about

Jesus. You see the last chapter of each of these gospels include the words of Jesus after his resurrection. You see his words, his testimony, his commission, his challenge, his rebuke. He gets the last word. Even if you look in Revelation 22, he says three times, "I am coming soon."

Here is the part that is frustrating. You know that your taxes are due and will be done on April 15th. You know that during Christmas, your shopping will be done on December 24th. We know in August/September, school will start. The problem with this coronavirus is that we don't know when it's going to be done. But what we do know because we know Jesus is alive, is that he has the last word. He is still reigning and glorious. Sin and death are still defeated because Jesus has the last word.

So we as a church must not live as if Christ is dead and that's the end of the story because we will have nothing to say. We will constantly look inward. We won't know what to do with ourselves inviting people to see our traditions. But because Christ is alive, we can invite people to meet our living Savior.