

Mark 16:8 (NRSV) So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

What a strange way to end this gospel! What an abrupt conclusion to “the greatest story ever told.” We expect to hear Easter “Alleluia’s.” We expect herald angels with trumpets that compel us to hark! We expect faith, not doubt; hope, not fear; we expect certainty that answers all the questions.

Instead, we get what may be the most controversial verse in Biblical studies. We get a passage that raises more questions than it answers. We get embarrassment when we were expecting exaltation. We get a silent alarm when we were waiting to hear a trumpet blast.

We get the witness of Mark, Peter’s right hand man, to the event of Easter, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He doesn’t give us what we expect. He doesn’t fill in all the blanks. He simply invites us into the events of that first Easter morning so that we can raise our own silent alarm.

— Questions and Answers

Mark 16:8a may be the most controversial verse in the Bible. We can see how controversial it is by looking at the brackets and squiggles and footnotes that most Bibles wrap around verses 9-20. I found this out the hard way years ago when I was called upon to read verses 9-20 in the Revised Standard Version Bible I was given in third grade; that version included verses 9-20 in a footnote in fine print!

Is Mark 16:8 the last verse of Mark? Are verses 9-20 later additions, or was there another ending to Mark that was lost? Did he really mean to end “*for they were afraid?*”

The deeper question is can we rely on Mark? Can we put our faith in Jesus based on these words? Or do the many writers and television programs that poke at the holes in the story have a point? Is the historical distance between the first Easter and Easter 2012 so great that we cannot know for certain? Do we have to turn off our minds to open up our hearts and believe?

Fear not; we will not depart at this point down the delightful rabbit trail of the textual

history of the Bible. Is Mark 16:8a the last verse of Mark’s gospel? Significant scholars say, “Yes;” and significant scholars say, “No.” Unless archaeology makes a find that would be even greater than the Dead Sea Scrolls; a copy of Mark from the first or second century; learned arguments will be made by learned scholars on both sides of this question until the kingdom comes.

Oddly enough, this ongoing question points us to the answer to the deeper question – can we rely on Mark? He is a witness; a witness whose testimony is based upon what he heard from other witnesses; probably Peter, and possibly some of the women who went to the tomb.

This isn’t their bright shining moment. “Go, tell his disciples and Peter” is an all-too-clear reminder of the fact that the last we saw Peter, he was denying Jesus over and over in that courtyard; the last we saw the disciples, they were running every which way to avoid a Roman round up; and now, Salome, Mary the mother of James, and Mary Magdalene, who have been so faithful throughout the gospel, even they fail. They don’t go and tell “for they were afraid.”

It’s not what you’d call a ringing endorsement is it? It’s not the testimony you’d want if you were on trial. Can’t we get some better witnesses with a more convincing story? They raise more questions than they answer: Why didn’t the women think about rolling away the stone before they left? Why didn’t they anoint Jesus’ body when they buried him? Were they really going to open a tomb on the third day after Jesus’ death?

The women do not appear to have their act together; they don’t have their story straight; and from an historical perspective, that makes them eminently believable.

Historians call it “the criterion of embarrassment.” When a story fills in all the blanks and makes the witness look good and heroic and noble, chances are they’re making something up. They may be covering up something they don’t want us to know, or they may be trying to convince us of something they want us to think. When the story benefits the speaker, historians raise a questioning eyebrow.

When the story doesn’t benefit the speaker, when it makes them look bad and calls their credibility into question, or when there are awkward silences and uncomfortable

pauses, historians invoke “the criterion of embarrassment” and conclude that the story is plausible and believable. The only reason why someone would tell this story this way is if it were true. The questions provide the answer.

Rely on Mark. Believe the good news – Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified has been raised! Celebrate and let those trumpets blast, not despite but because of Easter’s silent alarm.

Silent Alarm

When the stone rolled away from the tomb did it make a sound? We don’t know. No one knows. No one was there. No one sounded the alarm that The Great Grave Robber was on the loose.

The silence of Easter is deafening. No one heard a thing. No one saw a thing, until Salome, Mary the mother of James, and Mary Magdalene show up. But they arrive after the fact. They don’t see what happened. They just see *Mark 16:5–6 (NRSV) a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they [are] alarmed. But he [says] to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. So they look. They see the place. The tomb is empty. Has Jesus been raised? They don’t know. They weren’t there. They only have this “young man’s” word to go by. They’re second rate witnesses offering testimony they heard second hand.*

That’s not the way we would have done it. This event deserves more than their silent alarm. We need George Lucas and Stephen Spielberg! We need John Williams to write the sound track! We need lights, cameras, and action! And when Jesus steps out of that tomb, we need James Earl Jones or Morgan Freeman to tell us what we’re seeing: “And now, you saw Him die; see Him live! The Messiah, our Savior and Lord, Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ!” Fireworks explode! A trumpet fanfare erupts. A heavenly choir crescendos a “Hallelujah!” That’s the way to do it! That’s the way to sound the alarm! Caiaphas and Pilate wouldn’t sleep through that!

That’s the way we would do it, but it’s not the way God chose to do it. God chooses to

stay hidden. God chooses to be humble. God chooses to trigger a silent alarm.

The silence of Easter is deafening; which reminds us that just because it's quiet doesn't mean that nothing is happening. Silence can be pregnant with possibility. Silence can be the prelude to a transformation that is so complete and so radical that it changes everything we ever thought, hoped, and believed! Silence may be just what we need to hear that “still, small voice” that speaks the Word; the Word that gives us hope; the Word that gives us strength; the Word that makes us new.

Silence puts us next to those women in that tomb. We're second rate witnesses offering testimony we heard second hand. We don't have all the answers, but in the silence, we've learned that questions point to the Answer. We don't know all the details, but in the silence, we've learned that God is “who” and love is “why” and that is enough.

Easter occurred in silence. Easter occurred in darkness. No one heard a thing. No one saw a thing. But God was up to something! God is still up to something! The Great Grave Robber has stolen the power that sin and death held over us. We are free from the chains of guilt and shame; we are free from the pain of what was; we are free to live into the promise of eternal life in Christ today,. Tomorrow, forever.

God is “who.” Love is “why.” That is enough. That is Easter! Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, is not here! He has been raised! The Great Grave Robber is on the loose! Believe the good news! Rejoice, and let your voice be heard, not despite, but because of Mark's silent alarm! Hallelujah! Amen.