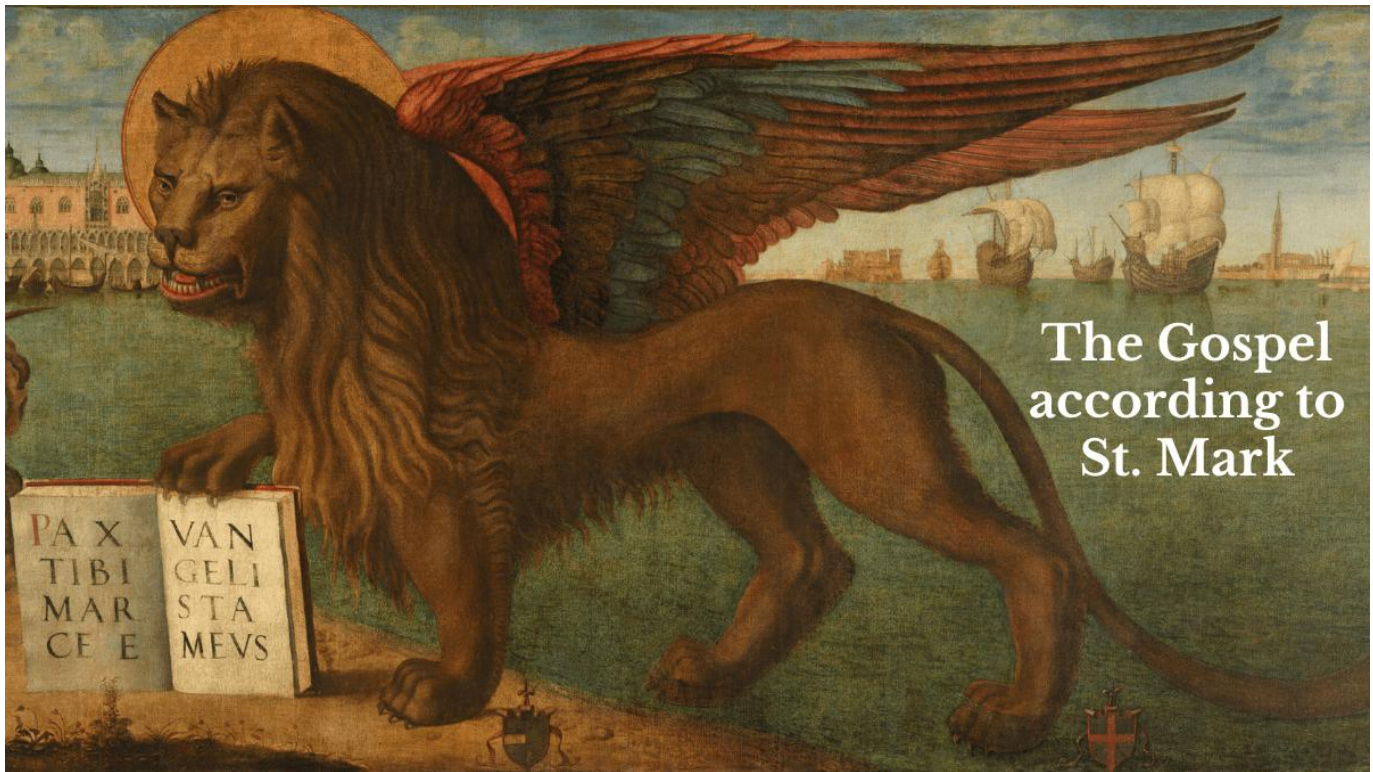


The End of the Gospel of Mark



The “gospel” may be a familiar idea in the Christian faith today, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy to believe or follow in the beginning. Think how radical were the claims of believers: Jesus of Nazareth was killed, rose from the dead and the risen Jesus is the true King of the world—follow him! The Gospel authors—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—took it upon themselves to explain this strange, good news in writing. These narratives have a twofold purpose, to present the life and teachings of Jesus and convince readers to follow Jesus in response. Common consensus holds that Mark was the first to embark on this epic task. But the Gospel of Mark has a peculiar feature that people don’t often talk about—a jarring, dissatisfying ending. What’s going on with the end of Mark’s Gospel?

The Addition of a Happy Ending

If you turn to the end of the book (Mark 16:9-20), you’ll find the account of Jesus appearing to his disciples after his death and resurrection. He leaves them with a motivating speech to preach the gospel to all creation (Mark 16:15). At first glance, quite satisfying. Jesus is alive and the way forward is clear.

But there’s a problem. Most scholars agree that this happy ending was a later addition, since it was not present in the earliest manuscripts. It seems that later scribes were uncomfortable with Mark’s inconclusive ending, so they provided an appropriate conclusion with what they knew had happened. (Scribal additions of this proportion are extremely rare, and can easily be discerned from comparison with earlier manuscripts). So what’s the real conclusion to Mark’s Gospel—and does that change how we respond to it?

The True, Abrupt End

Mark chapter 16 begins after Jesus’ death. Three women go to the tomb to anoint the body of their former teacher and friend (Mark 16:1-3). Instead of finding Jesus, they encounter a young man in a white robe, seemingly a messenger from God (Mark 16:4-5). He starts talking to the women, proclaiming that Jesus is risen from the dead! He then commands them to go and share this good news with the disciples in Galilee

(Mark 16:6-7). This command came with a promise—if the women believed and obeyed, they would see Jesus there when they arrived. (Mark 16:7).

How did these women respond to the first “gospel” message? Trembling, they flee the scene. It’s unclear whether they obey the command to go to Galilee. The final words of Mark’s “good news” leave us wanting more—“they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). So the gospel ends with fleeing and fearing! Why would Mark write this?

Erroneous or Intentional?

Remember, the gospel authors are supposed to be convincing us of the gospel. Although Mark gives readers a gripping tale of Jesus’ life, we arrive at the end, and it is missing everything we would expect. Why did Mark include women, who were culturally less-credible witnesses than men? Why didn’t he include a sighting of Jesus to prove he had risen from the dead? Why does he include the obvious human failure of the women’s fear and disobedience in response to the gospel? Did he forget to conclude the story?

But what if we asked ourselves another question? What if we asked ourselves to reconsider Mark’s abrupt ending as an intentional, compelling invitation to discover the risen Jesus?

Intentionally Open-Ended

First, let’s look at what Mark did include in his ending—an empty tomb and a promise. We may not see the risen Jesus, but we do know his tomb is empty. This should stir up curiosity—if Jesus is not there, then where is he? The promise that follows gives an answer to that question. You will see Him, if you believe he’s alive and obey the command to seek him. The only obvious response to this message—then and now—should be to set off on a journey to meet the risen Jesus for yourself.

The women’s response of incomprehension, fear, and disobedience seems all the more unfortunate. But perhaps this is actually a subtle encouragement. The early church had a practice of reading the gospels out loud, together. Imagine yourself hearing this abrupt conclusion decades later in an ever-expanding room full of Jesus-followers. Just by standing in that room, you would know the gospel had overcome the women’s failure! Despite your doubts, maybe you too could step forward in obedience to the gospel, just like these women must have.

But if Mark means to encourage our faith, then why doesn’t he mention an interaction—even a sighting—of the risen Jesus? This was his opportunity to prove the resurrection, the hinge of the gospel. Mark’s Gospel drew heavily from the eyewitness account of the apostle Peter. Why didn’t he include stories of Peter’s interactions with the risen Jesus (e.g., John 21) or the five hundred witnesses of the resurrection like Paul (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)? Clearly, Mark could have told the story of how others were convinced of the risen Christ. But this clever omission sheds light on his true intention—for you as a reader to become a character in the story and participate in the ending yourself.

An Invitation to Participation

Like a snoozing passenger in a vehicle that comes to an abrupt stop, Mark’s readers—including us—should spring up from our seats and ask, “What’s going on?” We are startled into engaging with the gospel message and responding appropriately. Mark leaves us to wrestle with all the questions and implications surrounding the good news. It would seem no one else can do that work for us. If we experience fear or disbelief like the women at the end of Mark’s Gospel, he assures us that we are in good company. (And remember that these women went on to become the first proclaimers of the resurrection to their community!) However, we are left with a challenge to continue where the story leaves off.

Maybe we should have expected this ending all along. Mark opens his gospel saying, “this is the beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ” (Mark 1:1). To Mark, his gospel story was not the end, but the beginning. The risen Jesus continues to reign as the King of the world, and the Gospel of Mark invites us into experiencing this and participating in spreading that good news. The invitation to set off on this journey to meet the risen King for yourself still stands.

Source: Morna Dorothy Hooker, Endings: Invitations to Discipleship. London: SCM Press, 2003.