

We Are the Lost Ending to Mark's Gospel
Easter Sunday, Year B
12 April 2009

Just suppose that you have gone to the local DVD rental store, and have discovered there a favourite thriller series you had been hoping to find for a long time. Scarcely believing your luck you take it out, and set several evenings aside to watch all the episodes. As you proceed chapter by chapter towards the conclusion your anticipation grows as to how the suspense filled ending will turn out. At last you are up to the last episode, and as it gets under way your attention is totally drawn in as the startling denouement begins to unfold. But then, just as the unexpected and intriguing conclusion starts to emerge – horror of horrors – the film stops. Frantically you press buttons, and try to overcome some unknown technical difficulty. When that doesn't work you race back to the video parlour and ask if there is a clean copy that works properly. To your astonishment you are told that no such thing exists – the director never got around to completing the episode – what you see is what you get.

This is the dilemma that we are confronted with in the 16th chapter of Mark's gospel, as he gives us his account of the resurrection. It ends with the women running in terror from the empty tomb. That is it. The finish. The end.

Of course there are a few more verses after verse 8, and very weird they are too. That is the bit about handling snakes and drinking deadly poison and coming to no harm, and about preaching the word with miraculous signs following. But as even the most conservative biblical commentators agree, this is a later add on to cover over the embarrassing lost

ending to Mark's gospel. Even if you can't read New Testament Greek, it is obvious from a quick flick through how utterly different it is in style and content. By the way, did you know that there is a church in Tennessee where they take the words of the ersatz ending literally, and handle poisonous snakes at the climax of the Service? I'll bet they don't get bored at that Church on Sunday morning!

So what are we to make of this lost ending, which no one can account for? We will never know if the manuscript was accidentally ripped out, or whether the author decided to tantalise the readers for all time.

Of course Mark is a bit like that anyway. It is the most compressed and condensed of the gospels, setting each scene in minimal detail, giving us the dialogue and the action in a few sentences. One commentator has called this the "add water gospel." Much is left to the reader's imagination. Like all good books the reader has to do some work, bringing their active intelligence into play to make the text come alive in all its richness. So our contribution is vital. We make each scene fully realised and further developed by what we add to it. But of course to do that well we must read the clues effectively.

So what exactly took place inside that tomb? The text reads:

On entering the tomb they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right-hand side, and they were struck with amazement. But he said to them, "There is no need for alarm. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified: he has risen, he is not here. See, here is the place where they laid him. But you must go and tell his disciples and

Peter, "He is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him, just as he told you."

Galilee is the place where it all started. It is the homeland of Jesus and his immediate followers. Within that small slice of territory, making up the northern borderlands of their country, most of the action in the gospel story takes place. Now the main protagonists are told to return to the centre stage where this drama got started.

Some years ago I read a fascinating take on Mark's gospel that argues that its end is a go back to the beginning message in every sense of the word. In Galilee the story will begin all over again. A figure of hope will emerge out of nowhere, a group will gather around him, works of power and wonder will be done, opposition will gather, a tragic showdown ensues, an amazing God given resolution will come like a lightning strike.

In a sense that is exactly what happened. Forty years after the death of Christ the Roman legions cut a swathe through the Galilean border zone en route to Jerusalem to crush the Judean revolt at its source. As they went they killed and burnt everything in their path, including presumably the Galilean churches that had emerged in the in between time.

But this particular writer is driving at a more universal truth. He argues that wherever the gospel is heard and responded to, the Mark story takes place all over again. In that sense we are one of the latest groups in a long line of varying accounts of the Markan drama, played out by many different gospel troubadours in many different times and places. We stand in succession to the begin again momentum of this powerful story.

And that helps me to make sense of the lost ending to Mark's gospel. We are the lost ending to Mark. The way the resurrection is told in this gospel throws the what next question on to us. What the resurrection will mean, the shape it will take place in its effects on other people's lives, is up to us right here and now. For the fact is that nowhere in the New Testament is the particular moment of Jesus Christ rising from the dead described as it actually happened in specific details? What we get is the after effects, the follow on, fall out consequences as it affected other people's lives.

And Mark in a sense has taken that even further. He has skipped the Galilean resurrection narratives, and is interrogating us right here and now about how the story will play out in our midst. What will we make of it, and how will we respond to it, and what will happen as we encounter the risen Christ in this Galilee that is called Avonside?

Hans Urs Von Balthasar called the empty tomb the darkling question followed by God's luminous answer. What I like about the ending of Mark's gospel is its utter credibility. I completely understand why the women fled in fear from that light-radiating tomb. And the open-ended way the story ends fits well with our sceptical age. Above all this conclusion works brilliantly from a literary point of view.

What makes a thriller deeply satisfying is when our curiosity becomes deeply engaged by the rising tension of the plot? What happens next, where is this going, are the questions that drive a successful novel, or play, or sermon. And when at the end the tension is finally released, the skilful writer will do it in such a way as to resolve many of the curiosity

points about what was going on beneath the surface of things, while at the same time generating other mystery points that keep us thinking and intrigued.

That is exactly what Mark has done. By not laying it on with a trowel, by not spelling it out in great detail, by leaving us guessing about some things, he has said more by saying less. What is more he has drawn us in to the point where we are left imagining what happens next in Galilee. And he has aroused our interest to the point where we cant just leave this as an exercise in literary speculation as to how the story turns out. We here in this church right now that have just heard the story are part of the answer as to how the story turns out. Because as I said before, we are the lost ending to Mark, and what we do next as we leave this church will determine how the story ends. That is perhaps the biggest curiosity filled, tension point of all.