

April 12, 2009; Easter The Mystery of Death and Resurrection

To celebrate the mystery of Jesus' death and resurrection

Key Bible reference: Mark 15.21-16.8

Key Verse: Mark 16.6

Biblical Background

This lesson deals with Jesus' death and resurrection, the climactic events of Mark's Gospel. Mark's Passion narrative, beginning in 14: 1, takes the reader on a step-by-step journey to the cross.

In Mark 15:21-32, the verses immediately prior to our Bible lesson, the crucifixion of Jesus is described. As usual, Mark gives a straightforward account without any personal details. He describes the actions rather than the emotions of the characters involved. Even though Mark does not quote Old Testament Scriptures, he shows how Jesus fulfills the messianic prophecies in Psalm 22 and 69 as well as the role of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. Above all, Mark wants us to understand that the events of Jesus' death are part of God's plan of salvation for the world.

Mark 15:33. A supernatural darkness descends over "the whole land." Mark wants us to see that the whole universe is affected by Jesus' death. The darkness could be a sign of God's judgment on the injustice of crucifying an innocent Jesus.

Verse 34. Mark quotes Jesus' words on the cross in Aramaic, Jesus' native language. Commentators point out that Jesus is quoting the first verse of Psalm 22, a lament of a righteous sufferer. This psalm, which begins with a cry of abandonment, ends with praise of

God for vindicating the sufferer. Psalm 22 also fits well with Jesus' presumed emotions. Note that even in this cry of abandonment, God is addressed as "my God," showing the devotion of the sufferer.

Verse 35. Elijah, considered the forerunner of the Messiah, was believed to appear to people in times of trouble and distress.

Verse 36. The action of an unnamed person trying to give Jesus some sour wine is puzzling. It is possible that this was an act of kindness by a Roman soldier. Soldiers often drank a mixture of water, vinegar, and egg. However, Luke 23:36 makes clear that this action was one of mockery. Both the presenting of the sour wine and the offer of myffh and wine in 15:23 seem to be based on Psalm 69:21:

Verse 37. Jesus' death is described simply and directly. There is no speculation on Jesus' feelings or a record of any "final words" as in Matthew, Luke, and John. The "loud cry" is surprising because those crucified die of exhaustion leading to suffocation. Again, this action has a tie-in to the Psalms. Both Psalm 31:22 and 39:12 speak of "crying out" to the Lord. Some commentators believe Jesus' cry was one of triumph, as he won a victory over the powers of evil, suffering, and death.

Verse 38. The tearing of the curtain separating the holy of holies from the rest of the Temple precincts is a symbolic effect of Jesus' death.

This tearing, could signify several things: (1) the removal of the barrier between God and humans, (2) the end of the need for Temple rituals, (3) the future destruction of the Temple.

Verse 39. A Gentile is the first to understand the significance of Jesus' death. The centurion's affirmation of faith serves as the climax of Mark's Gospel. His statement can be translated both as "a Son of God" or "God's son." Given the emphasis Mark places on the centurion's confession, it seems that the latter translation makes more sense. The centurion's confession is in contrast to the religious authorities who have Jesus killed and the disciples who do not (yet) comprehend the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion.

Mark 16:1. The custom of relatives going to the tomb of a person three days after burial was well established in Jesus' time. The fact that these women bring "spices" to anoint Jesus assumes that he was given a hurried burial. The two Marys and Salome were witnesses to the Crucifixion (15:40). They go after sunrise, "when the Sabbath was over."

Verse 2. The time of the women's arrival is restated. This is in contrast to John's account of the Resurrection, which places Mary Magdalene at the tomb before sunrise. The "first day of the week" was Sunday in the Jewish calendar. This explains why Christians gathered for worship on Sunday in contrast to the Jewish Sabbath (on Saturday).

Verse 3. It is puzzling that the women had not considered the difficulty of moving the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb in advance. In Mark there is no mention of sealing the tomb or of anyone guarding the tomb (as in Matthew 27:62-66).

Verse 4. Mark makes it clear that the women could not have moved the stone because it was very large. The implication is that divine intervention rolled back the stone.

Verse 5. Mark intends for us to see the "young man" sitting in the tomb as an angel (as in Matthew and John). The man is wearing a "white robe," a sign of his heavenly origin.

Verse 6. The appearances of the Greek word translated as "alarmed" here and in the previous verse are the only times it is used in the New Testament. The word indicates an overwhelming feeling of awe and fear. The angel's first words to the women are reassuring, a common feature of encounters with angels in the Scriptures. The angel uses the word raised for Jesus' resurrection, showing that it was by God's action. The angel shows the women the place where Joseph of Arimathea "laid him [Jesus]" as evidence that Jesus' body is gone.

Verse 7. The significance of the Resurrection is to be explained by an encounter with the risen Lord in Galilee. Peter is singled out from the disciples, perhaps because of his earlier denial of Jesus or perhaps because he is the spokesperson for the disciples. The words going ahead echo Mark 14:28, where Jesus tells the disciples during the Last Supper, "But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee."

Verse 8. The women do not immediately follow the angel's command to tell the disciples what they have witnessed. They flee the tomb in "terror" and "amazement." At this point in the story, there is no faith, only confusion. The women keep silent because of fear.

Scholars debate whether Mark's Gospel originally ended with 16:8 or continued. The ending in 16:8 seems abrupt and incomplete,

leading some scholars to speculate that Mark was interrupted at this point in writing his Gospel by illness or death. The NRSV includes a "Shorter Ending of Mark" and a "Longer Ending of Mark." These additions to Mark's Gospel might have been made as late as the second century. Whether these endings were written by the Gospel's original author or added later, however, does not diminish the impact of their witness to the Resurrection. These "post-resurrection" stories are as much a part of the New Testament canon as are the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion.

Prayer

Loving God, bless us with your resurrection power. Shape our lives by your love. Use us as vessels of divine reconciliation to heal the broken places in our world. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.