

Miracle market: Mark's enigmatic ending

by [John Dart](#) in the [April 18, 2006](#) issue

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.

—Mark 16:8

At the end of the Gospel of Mark, three women come to Jesus' grave, where they encounter a young man sitting in the empty tomb who tells them that the crucified Jesus has risen and left for Galilee. Mary Magdalene; Mary, the mother of James; and Salome run from the tomb. And though the young man instructs them to tell the disciples and Peter to meet Jesus in Galilee, the women say nothing to anyone.

That's the end. The earliest Gospel never mentions—at least not in the best ancient manuscripts—the risen Jesus' reunions with his followers as described in Matthew, Luke and John. Accounts of the appearance of the risen Jesus were added to the end of Mark by later scribal hands. The NRSV labels these as “shorter” and “longer” endings, and relegates to footnotes a discussion of how these endings were fashioned.

A few New Testament specialists maintain that the original ending to Mark was lost. But most scholars of Mark today accept the likelihood that the original first-century author meant to end the narrative exactly—and abruptly—at chapter 16, verse 8.

One of those was Donald H. Juel, a Lutheran minister and longtime professor at Luther and Princeton seminaries, who died three years ago. In honor of Juel's work on the ending of Mark, Princeton professors Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller edited essays by colleagues for a book published last year as *The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God* (Westminster John Knox).

The essay by Juel that opens the book says that “the history of the Markan ending in manuscript and commentary betrays an unwillingness or inability to take the disappointment seriously.” Juel differed with scholars who turn the women at the

tomb into heroic figures or who try to transform the trio's trembling and astonished response into "positive emotions."

Nor did Juel adopt two increasingly popular ways of understanding Mark's disturbing ending. One is the belief that Mark implies that the women would have eventually overcome their fear and told Peter and the disciples of the resurrection, reminding them of Jesus' earlier prediction: "After I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee" (14:28). But the three women, Mark emphasizes, tell no one. Juel observes that like Peter, the women "come closer to genuine greatness than the other disciples, only to fall further. Even in the face of an empty tomb and testimony to Jesus' resurrection, the women cannot believe in such a way as to perform the most basic task of disciples: testimony." Juel continues: "They tell no one the good news. They flee, and we are left to imagine what became of them, and we are left to imagine the fate of Judas, and the young man, and Peter, and the Twelve."

Another favored solution, based on what some call "reader response" analysis, is to say that this pioneering Gospel writer sought with the sudden ending to challenge Jesus' followers to overcome their own lapses of understanding, courage and loyalty. The audience circa AD 70 presumably would say something like: "If the closest male and female followers failed Jesus and still became admired figures and leaders in the churches, surely we too can be forgiven and serve God."

Juel insists on the enigmatic nature of the ending. "If the unresolved ending offers promise, it surely is not because we are encouraged to believe we can do better than the disciples or the women," he writes. "We do not 'have' Jesus even at the end of the story, and there is no guarantee that we can wrest a promise from him or lock him safely away by hermeneutical tricks."

Juel chose an open-ended stance, one that defies containment of Jesus and God when reading or hearing Mark. "Jesus is out of the tomb; God is no longer safely behind the curtain (torn asunder in the Temple as Jesus breathed his last)," he writes. "Jesus has promised an end; that end is not yet."

Viewing Mark through a literary-theological lens, Juel and other scholars working in narrative criticism have contributed to a new appreciation of Mark as a storyteller. In an earlier time, when historical and source criticism held sway, Mark's Gospel was often considered a collage of episodes, miracles and teachings leading up to stories about Jesus' arrest, trial, crucifixion and resurrection. "Narrative criticism has

recovered the story as a whole, instead of the fragmented pieces of historical criticism,” says David Rhoads, whose *Reading Mark: Engaging the Gospel* (Fortress) reprints seven of his articles.

The colorful, fast-paced Markan story is said to lend itself to public recitation (and not merely because it is the shortest of the four Gospels). Juel and his students sometimes read aloud sections of the Gospel. Rhoads and Richard W. Swanson (*Provoking the Gospel of Mark*, Pilgrim Press) are among those who have done oral performances of Mark. Whitney Shiner suggests in *Proclaiming the Gospel* (Trinity Press) that the chiastic, or concentric, word patterns in Mark were likely fashioned as memory aids to performers.

Mark’s writing techniques are pleasing for audiences that recognize the author’s use of tripled actions (for example, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection three times and tries three times to rouse the sleeping disciples before his arrest). Furthermore, Mark’s distinctive “sandwiched stories”—he starts an episode and then tells another before finishing the first one—offer ironic commentary on the interwoven episodes. Readers and listeners are “insiders” to Mark’s plot; they are informed very early of the divine identity of Jesus (and even told at times what Jesus and his opponents are thinking). The audiences can alternately wonder at those who misunderstand Jesus and admire those who immediately grasp his divine mission.

In Mark, those closest to Jesus tend to be dense, quarrelsome or fearful. Paul L. Danove’s *The Rhetoric of Characterization of God, Jesus, and Jesus’ Disciples in the Gospel of Mark* (T & T Clark) deals with Mark’s negative treatment of the followers of Jesus, showing that at times the denigration is even harsher than is evident in English translations. The fear and silence of the women at the tomb is an obvious failing. A more subtle negativity is found in the language. When the young man says, “Do not be amazed, you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified,” the innocuous-sounding *seek* (RSV) or *looking for* (NRSV) translates the same Greek word used when Jesus’ mother and brothers, hearing rumors that Jesus had gone out of his mind, were “asking for” him. Elsewhere in the Gospel, religious authorities seek signs or seek how to destroy Jesus, and Judas seeks to betray him. In all, the last eight of nine uses of the word usually translated as *seek* (*zeteo*) in Mark have negative connotations.

Readers puzzling over the text’s abrupt ending are left asking how the “good news” ever got out. Danove notes that “the implications of the women’s failure to deliver

the young man's message could be circumvented if another appropriate bearer of the message could be found." Who would that be? John the Baptist would know, but he was beheaded. The disciples are absent.

How about the "young man" in the tomb? Danove rejects that notion, saying that the youth's white robe and the fact that he is portrayed as "sitting on the right side" of the tomb "assert a heavenly origin for the young man and preclude his consideration as a disciple." However, this does not appear to be a figure like the one the Gospel of Matthew portrays—an explicit "angel of the Lord, descending from heaven [whose] appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow." Nor is he like what the Gospel of Luke describes as "two men in dazzling clothes" before whom the women bowed down. Marvin Meyer and Herman Waetjen are among scholars who see the youth in Mark not as an angel but as an exemplar or "idealized disciple."

This positive character portrayal—together with Mark's negative treatment of Jesus' family and the 12 disciples—arguably constitutes a full-scale polemic against the earliest church leaders. The details are too complex to cover here, but the fact that the young man in the tomb is sitting on the right side may be the author's last dig at James and John, who had asked to sit on either side of Jesus "in glory" (10:35-37). This young man, perhaps initiated into the faith by Jesus on an earlier occasion, appears to be the one destined for that spot in the next life.

The young man is one of many exceptional figures in Mark who make cameo appearances and who seem to have the perception needed to spread the good news. Another is the woman in Bethany who poured costly ointment over Jesus' body, as if anointing him for burial. At this Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her" (14:9). Unlike the three women who went belatedly to the tomb, this unnamed woman braved criticism about wasting money and performed the Gospel's "first complete and unequivocal act of faith in Jesus' suffering and rising destiny," according to John Dominic Crossan, known for his studies of the historical Jesus.

Besides the young man in the tomb, other enigmatic figures are the "young man" who barely escapes capture at the time of Jesus' arrest (14:51-52) and the awed centurion who sees Jesus die and says, "Truly, this man was God's son" (15:39).

The Roman soldier's "confession," as it has been called, has been read as sarcastic by Juel and others. Because the wording is not "the" Son of God, but should be translated, "a son of God" or "God's son," the comment has been likened to the preceding taunts by soldiers, priests and bystanders. The centurion "witnesses Jesus' miserable death and guffaws, 'Yeah, right, this guy was the Son of God,'" writes Brian K. Blount of Princeton Seminary in the book published in memory of Juel.

By contrast, an essay by C. Clifton Black, another Princeton specialist in New Testament, emphasizes the significance of the voice from heaven that proclaims at the start and middle of Mark that Jesus is "my Son, the beloved," and relates it to the centurion's observation. Black concedes that there is an ambiguity in the centurion's statement, but he sees its placement as a sign that it should be read positively. Believers reading Mark "have been given access, at Jesus' baptism and transfiguration, to faith's evidence that what the centurion says is indeed true—whether he knows it and believes it or not," Black says.

After the disciples deserted Jesus upon his arrest, "a certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and [fled] naked" (14:51-52). Some scholars have called this mysterious young man a symbolic representative of the just-scattered disciples (who also "fled," as would the three women from the tomb). But his fleeing should not be taken as a defining act of character. Equal weight should be given to his other actions in a narrative loaded with irony. The young man is "following" the arrested Jesus so closely that he risks arrest himself. Guards grab his covering, but he escapes naked. This youth has literally left everything to follow Jesus.

Is this the same young man who appears in the empty tomb? Probably not. More likely, both symbolize in Mark the faithful and usually unnamed followers of Jesus, such as those given the "secret of the kingdom of God" (4:11).

The first young man wore a "sindon," or burial cloth identical to the material wrapped around Jesus' body. The second young man simply wore "a white robe." Studies of early Christian baptisms, as reflected in Pauline letters and writings of the church fathers, indicate that converts to the faith wore a garment symbolic of the old life, and when they arose from baptism their new life was symbolized by the donning of a white garment. The Roman Catholic Church still uses similar baptismal rites for adult converts. Some conjecture that the two young men were the same new recruit of Jesus, but Mark's storyline seems to preclude that the two figures are

the same character. If Jesus was initiating the young man in the faith in the Garden of Gethsemane (besides prayerfully agonizing over his own fate), it would seem from the youth's burial-cloth garment that there was no opportunity to complete the rite.

Narrative critics have long noticed parallels in words and images between the beginning and ending of Mark. These parallels seem to enhance the positive roles of the Roman soldier and the young man in the white garment.

At Jesus' baptism, the heavens open (*schizo*) as the spirit (*pneuma*) descends on Jesus, whereupon a voice (*phone*) from above says, "You are my Son, the beloved." At death, Jesus gives a loud cry (*phone*) as he breathes (*ekpneo*) his last; the curtain of the Temple rips (*schizo*) and the centurion says, "Truly, this man was God's son."

Also, at the very start (1:2) a prophesied "messenger" is "sent before thy face" to prepare the way of the Lord—just as at the very end, the young man in the tomb is the only human left to testify to the risen Jesus, who "went ahead" to Galilee.

In *Provoking the Gospel of Mark*, storyteller Richard Swanson, who teaches at Augustana College in South Dakota, says the difficulties of Mark's ending become very clear when one performs it. The story leaves "the young man onstage alone at the end with no clear notion of what to do next."

Swanson does not suggest this possibility, but one can imagine the audience at a performance of Mark shouting, "Author, author!" The young man could then open his arms as if to say, "That's me."

If the evangelist John hinted that he is the unnamed beloved disciple in his Gospel, perhaps Mark did the same with the young man in the empty tomb. At the least, there is a messenger at the end of the story bearing good news, who with the others who met Jesus "on the way" can tell the story.