

9 August 2015

The Beginning of the Story
Mark 15-16

To go back to where we left off last week. On Passover night, after eating the meal with his friends, Jesus had gone out to a garden to pray. One of the Twelve, Judas, led the temple guards to the garden. Jesus was arrested and dragged off to the High Priest's house to face a trumped-up trial that would give them an excuse to put him to death. While Peter, outside in the courtyard, pretended that he'd never heard of Jesus, the priests found their pretext and condemned him to die for blasphemy.

It's not that simple for the priests, though. Whatever power they hold in Judea they hold with the permission of Rome. Judea's a conquered country, after all, and Rome reserves to itself the right to put people to death. Now the priests have to persuade Rome to carry out the actual execution. That shouldn't be hard: Rome has no problem killing people. Their power is based on fear. But blasphemy against the Jewish God is probably not enough for them. So the priests have to adapt their story. Jesus had said he was the Christ, and since the popular understanding was that the Christ would overthrow Rome, they prepare a case of treason against Jesus.

The Roman governor at that time is a man named Pontius Pilate, a man who has no affection for Jews, especially for the priests. He looks down his nose at them and rolls his eyes. "King of the Jews? Really?" He looks at Jesus. "Is that so?"

"Whatever you say."

Pilate's not impressed with their case. The priests hastily begin listing every other charge they can think of. It takes a long time. Finally, hushing the priests, Pilate looks at Jesus again. "You heard all that. You have any response?" Jesus is silent.

Puzzled, and perhaps a little offended, Pilate waits. Still nothing. Finally, he looks back at the priests. "We have this tradition that at your big 'Passover,' I release one Jewish prisoner from the jail – a reminder of the goodness of Rome's heart. Whom shall I release this year? Me, I'm thinking this silent king of the Jews."

"No!" shout the priests. By this time, a crowd of Judeans had gathered to watch, and they take their cue from the priests. "No!" they shout.

"Who then?"

Someone – perhaps one of the priests – calls out, "Release Barabbas!" and soon all the crowd is shouting, "Release Barabbas!"

"Barabbas?" snorts Pilate. "Barabbas is scum. He's a thief, a murderer, and a danger to decent people of every nation. You want me to release a mad dog?" They clamor still louder for Barabbas. Pilate shrugs. "And what about the King of the Jews?"

Again, a single voice – “Crucify him!” – is taken up by the whole crowd. Pilate shrugs again. He knows perfectly well that Jesus has done nothing wrong, but he’s ordered the crucifixions of thousands. One more means nothing to him. He gives orders for Barabbas to be released and for Jesus to be flogged, then crucified. Then he goes in to breakfast.

If Pilate despises the surly, stubborn, rebellious Jewish people, his soldiers positively hate them. Given the “King of the Jews” to crucify, they make the most of it. After flogging him cruelly, they drag his limp body into the palace courtyard, throw a purple robe over him and weave a crown of thorns to press into his forehead. “Hail, King of the Jews!” they call, gleefully. “Here’s a scepter for you!” they shout, as they beat him with a stick. “Let’s anoint him!” they cry, spitting in his face. When at last they tire of mocking the silent, bleeding figure, they push him out and give him a cross to carry out of town.

Jesus can’t do it. Maddened with pain and weak from loss of blood, he stumbles under the weight of the cross. “Get up!” He tries, but he can’t. One soldier grabs a horrified onlooker, a Jewish man named Simon from Cyrene, in North Africa, who has made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the Passover. “You carry it, Jew.” This Simon has no idea what he’s about to begin. He – along with his sons Alexander and Rufus – would one day be well known in the early church founded by this man’s followers. Now, for the first time, Simon takes up a cross and follows Jesus.

They crucify Jesus on a hill called Golgotha – “Skull.” The soldiers nail him up, hoist him high, then gamble for his pitiful few personal possessions. On his cross is nailed a mocking inscription “King of the Jews,” and even those crucified nearby hurl taunts at him. The crowds who just a few days earlier had sung his praises and called for him to deliver their nation now sneer at him: “You can’t even deliver yourself!” The priests come to smile at their success. “Prove you’re the Messiah! Come down here!” Only one man standing nearby refuses to ridicule Jesus. The Roman centurion in charge of the crucifixion detail just watches.

At noon, a dark shadow falls over the land, as if night itself has fallen, and for three hours, as Jesus hangs in agony, even the sun hides its face. Finally, at about three in the afternoon, Jesus opens his cracked lips and croaks, “*Eloi eloi lema sabachtani.*” It is the Aramaic for the first verse of Psalm 22. “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?” Some of those standing nearby think he’s calling for help from Elijah – in Aramaic pronounced *Eliya* – and begin looking to the skies to see if heavenly help is on the way. But Jesus only cries out once more, then breathes his last.

And the curtain of the temple, the veil that hid the inner holy place of God from the common people, that curtain is torn in two, top to bottom. A new covenant has begun. Amid the voices of mockery and shouts of triumph, the Roman centurion says simply, “Surely this man was the Son of God.”

And where, during all this, were Jesus’ friends? No one knows. The only witnesses from his band of followers are some of the women who had accompanied him on his journey. There was Mary Magdalene, Mary his mother, and a woman named Salome. They watch as he dies, and they’re still watching when – to their amazement – a priest comes to claim the body. This

priest, named Joseph, from the town of Arimathea, had been on the council that condemned him, and yet here he is, with Pilate's permission, taking Jesus' body down from the cross, carefully wrapping it in linen, taking it to a rich tomb carved in the rock, weeping. The women watch as Joseph directs servants to roll a boulder over the mouth of the tomb.

The next day is Saturday, the Sabbath. All Jerusalem shuts down on this day. The women spend their time inside, quietly mixing aromatic spices with which they intend to anoint the body of their friend, son, master. They don't even know how they'll get to the body, what with that boulder there, but as soon as the sun's up the next day, the first day of the week, they take their offerings to the tomb.

The stone is already rolled back. The mouth of the grave is open. The women peek inside. The shelf where the body should be is lying empty, and a young man is sitting quietly nearby. "Good morning," the young man says. The women jump and stare. "Don't be afraid. You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. But he's been raised."

The women stare at him. The young man takes a breath. "He's not here," he says. Still they stare. "Look. There's the place where they laid him. I'm telling you he's . . . been . . . raised. And now it's time for you to tell others. Go to his friends, and make sure Peter's there. Tell them what you've seen. Tell them to go back to Galilee. Jesus will meet them there. Tell them."

In a daze, the women leave the empty tomb. They're afraid. They're confused. So they decide not to say anything to anyone.

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In all the oldest, best preserved, and most trustworthy manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark, that's where the book ends: *And they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.* Not a very satisfying ending, is it? We like everything to be tied up neatly at the end of our stories, thank you. So it's easy to see why some other manuscripts have various alternative endings tacked onto this abrupt conclusion.

But I'm convinced that this is where Mark meant the gospel to end. Let me tell you why. The whole final two chapters of Mark are set up as a challenge to Jesus' followers. All through Jesus' ministry, he had singled out the Twelve. To them alone he had explained his parables. They alone witnessed all his mighty works. Only his inner circle had been granted the vision of Jesus, transfigured, with Moses and Elijah. And where were they when Jesus was crucified? They're not mentioned. Who is it who stays beside him as he dies? Some of the women. Who is it who risks offending everyone by caring for his body, treating it like the body of a king? Joseph of Arimathea, who had sat on the council that condemned him. Who is it who grasped the ultimate truth about Jesus – that he was not just King of the Jews, not just the Jewish Messiah, but the Son of God? The Roman who supervised his execution. Where were his disciples when it was time to stand for Jesus?

And where are we when it is time today?

There's another challenge. All through Mark, Jesus had told people to keep his miracles secret. He heals a blind man and says, "Don't tell anyone." He heals Jairus's daughter and tells the parents not to tell. He won't let the demons identify him. He won't even let Peter, James, and John tell anyone about the transfiguration. He clearly does not want to be known as a miracle worker, a community organizer, a military leader. He doesn't want to be the next sensation. So he strictly tells people, "Don't say a word." Now, at the end, through this young man at the tomb, he finally says, "Now! Go and tell. Tell the disciples, so they can tell everyone who I really am: the one who conquered death. Tell." And the women say nothing.

Will we?