

7.32

Mark 16:8 (Abrupt Ending of Mark)—Did Jesus’s Disciples Ever Learn of the Resurrection?

In Mark 16:6–7, the young man at the tomb tells the women,

“Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

But Mark 16:8 reads, “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.”

For many Bible readers, this raises a question: If the women said “nothing to anyone,” how did the disciples ever find out about the resurrection? Indeed, quite a few scholars have suggested that Mark intends to convey the impression that the disciples of Jesus did not learn about the resurrection; they did not reunite with Jesus, and so their apostasy was never remedied.

But this seems unlikely to others. Some considerations:

- Historically, there is no question that Jesus’s disciples did proclaim him as risen from the dead and did claim to have met with him after the resurrection (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 15:5).

This was common knowledge at the time Mark's Gospel was written. Is it really conceivable, then, that Mark could have hoped to perpetrate the notion that these disciples never even heard about the resurrection? Wouldn't his readers have known better?

- The words of the young man in 16:7 are a prediction, not a mere statement of intention: "There you will see him." Furthermore, the young man's words "as he told you" imply that Jesus himself has made a similar prediction (cf. Mark 14:28). Is it conceivable that Mark intended his readers to regard predictions by God's messenger and by Jesus himself as being ultimately unfulfilled?
- Jesus speaks elsewhere in Mark's Gospel about the role that the disciples will play after his resurrection: Peter, Andrew, James, and John will be brought before governors and kings to bear testimony for Jesus's sake (13:3, 9); James and John will share his "baptism" and drink his "cup" (10:39). Is it conceivable that Mark could attribute such a role to people whom he represents as never hearing of the resurrection, or that he would portray Jesus as being so wrong about this matter?¹

Still, the silence of the women is something of a mystery. Some scholars suggest that it must be taken as temporary: the women eventually did tell the disciples, but at first they said nothing to

anyone. Most scholars regard the silence as serving a rhetorical purpose: the story is left unfinished so that readers must put themselves into the narrative and discover what could happen next. The reader is left to ask, “What would I do?”

1. The essay assumes that the Gospel of Mark originally was meant to end at 16:8. This is the majority view in current scholarship. A minority position suggests that the original ending of Mark’s Gospel has been lost.