

## Mark Commentary: Part One

# Cross and Resurrection

a commentary on the last three chapters of the Gospel of Mark

It is fair to say that the symbols of *cross* and *resurrection* are as central to an understanding the Christian revelation as *meditation* and *enlightenment* are to Buddhism. Yet both cross and resurrection seem cryptic to many, even weird.

The last three chapters of Mark's 16-chapter narrative are about the meaning of *cross* and *resurrection* as understood by Mark, the name given to a mid-first-century author. I know of no better way to introduce the symbols of cross and resurrection to a contemporary explorer of Christianity than with a commentary on the last three chapters of Mark's Gospel.

Members of a our current scientific culture may be excused somewhat for having a weak understanding of resurrection. Most of us know, if we are honest, that belief in a literal return to life of a three-day-old corpse is superstition. Yet this meaning of resurrection has been paraded as Christian by many. Mark did not see resurrection in this light. Or perhaps we might better say, "Mark did not see resurrection in this darkness," for a literal return from the dead means nothing deeply religious to Mark or to you or me. If such an event were to happen today, it would be open to hundreds of speculative explanations, none of which would be profoundly or convincingly religious.

Mark's understanding of the cross is equally opaque in our culture. Some modern authors even accuse Christianity of having a morbid preoccupation with death, suffering, and tragedy. The crucifix, or even a bare cross, is viewed by some as silly and grim—like hanging a guillotine on your wall or around your neck. But for Mark the horror of the cross is seen as priceless food for the soul. How can that be? Surely, we have some thoughtful exploration to do, if we are to grasp the Gospel (the good news) that Mark claims to be announcing.

So here is what I am going to do. I am going to quote in order the Markian text in chapters 14-16.<sup>1</sup> After each section of the narrative, I will do a commentary on the quoted verses and follow that with a few discussion questions. I will assume the best of New Testament scholarship, but will be doing what I call "21st century theologizing for the ordinary reader."

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<sup>1</sup> The Scripture quotations from Mark's Gospel are taken from J. B. Phillips translation. I have chosen this version because of its ordinary and personally effective language. While there may be better translations of the literal Greek, it is also true that Mark used a street Greek. Mark spoke in ordinary speech to ordinary people. Most of the first hearers of Mark's text heard it read aloud. J. B. Phillips captures, I believe, this sense of ordinary story telling.

## Mark 14:1-9 A Holy Waste

In two days' time the festival of the Passover and of unleavened bread was due. Consequently, the chief priests and the scribes were trying to think of some trick by which they could get Jesus into their power and have him executed. "But it must not be during the festival," they said, "or there will be a riot."

Jesus himself was now in Bethany in the house of Simon the leper. As he was sitting at table, a woman approached him with an alabaster flask of very costly spikenard perfume. She broke the neck of the flask and poured the perfume on Jesus' head. Some of those present were highly indignant and muttered, "What is the point of such wicked waste of perfume? It could have been sold for over thirty pounds and the money could have been given to the poor." And there was a murmur of resentment against her. But Jesus said, "Let her alone, why must you make her feel uncomfortable? She has done a beautiful thing for me. You have the poor with you always, and you can do good to them whenever you like, but you will not always have me. She has done all she could—for she has anointed my body in preparation for burial. I assure you that wherever the Gospel is preached throughout the whole world, this deed of hers will also be recounted, as her memorial to me."

The story of Martin Luther King Jr. has become a treasure in our recent common memory. We can see how he and his leadership team were supported by the crowds while being opposed by establishment enemies. If there were no crowds, no swath of the population and its social forces hearing his message and supporting it, King's enemies would have simply shut him up in one way or another. These dynamics are present whenever something new is breaking upon the scene. We can see it in early labor movements, in the apartheid struggle of South Africa, in Gandhi's freedom fight in India, even in the Beatles impact upon popular music. The prophet is the bringer of new truth to the dynamics of society. There will always be enemies of any new truth. The prophet goes to those who will hear and then confronts his enemies with the crowds who support him or her. The enemies have to listen to the prophet because of the crowds. Otherwise they would simply dismiss him or her. The existence of the listening crowds makes conversation with the prophet's truth a possibility even for the prophet's enemies.

Mark has begun the closing chapters of his story by showing us Jesus' relation to his crowds and to his establishment enemies. Mark is leading up to telling us about Jesus' arrest, crucifixion, and burial as well as its vital meaning for our lives. Next Mark tells us a story about a woman anointing Jesus' body in preparation for his burial. Mark views Jesus as the Anointed One, the chosen of God for illuminating the Truth about every event that happens to human persons and societies. This whole-hearted and enthusiastic woman is pouring out her expensive perfume on Jesus' body. This event provides the only anointment ritual that Jesus is going to receive. Jesus is also being prefigured as being himself a precious perfume that is going to be wasted, or so it seems.

The crux of the story is the dialogue between Jesus and those who see this woman's deed as a wicked waste of expensive perfume: "It could have been sold and the money

given to the poor.” Jesus’ reply indicates that honoring a prophet in our midst has an importance even more valuable than giving alms to the poor.

Jesus is surprisingly direct. “You have the poor with you always, and you can do good to them whenever you like, but you will not always have me.” It may now be possible to do away with poverty, but there will always be opportunities for charity and reform rather than the deeper thing that Jesus was doing. Clearly, all values do not revolve around improving the economic conditions of humanity. The value of truth and the value of the truth-teller are even more precious. And these truth values deserve whatever resources we need to honor these rare gifts. In terms of the more typical values of human living, honoring Jesus with a precious ointment may seem like a waste. For Jesus did not change the economic and political conditions, and it is still unclear to many people how he reset our whole sense of truth. Indeed, this entire sadistic and violent pouring out of Jesus’ life can still seem like a waste.

*When have you felt that something precious has been wasted?*

*What might it mean to find other meaning within that seeming waste?*

### **Mark 14:10-26 Betrayal by One of the Twelve and a Last Meal**

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went off to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. And when they heard what he had to say, they were delighted and undertook to pay him for it. So he looked out for a convenient opportunity to betray him.

On the first day of unleavened bread, the day when the Passover was sacrificed, Jesus' disciples said, "Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?"

Jesus sent off two of them with these instructions, "Go into the town and you will meet a man carrying a pitcher of water. Follow him and say to the owner of the house to which he goes, 'The Master says, where is the room for me to eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upstairs room all ready with the furnishings that we need. That is the place where you are to make our preparations."

So the disciples set off and went into the town, found everything as he had told them, and prepared for the Passover.

Late in the evening he arrived with the twelve. And while they were sitting there, right in the middle of the meal, Jesus remarked, "Believe me, one of you is going to betray me—someone who is now having his supper with me."

This shocked and distressed them and one after another they began to say to him, "Surely, I'm not the one?"

"It is one of the twelve," Jesus told them, "a man who is dipping his hand into the dish with me. It is true that the Son of Man will follow the road foretold by the scriptures, but alas for the man through whom he is betrayed! It would be better for that man if he had never been born."

And while they were still eating Jesus took a loaf, blessed it and broke it and gave it to them with the words, "Take this, it is my body."

Then he took a cup, and after thanking God, he gave it to them, and they drank from it, and he said to them, "This is my blood which is shed for many in the new agreement. I tell you truly I will drink no more wine until the day comes when I drink it fresh in the kingdom of God!"

Then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives.

Mark does not do a psychological analysis of Judas' motives. He just confronts us with the plain fact that one of the twelve betrayed Jesus to his enemies. The story also points out that the enemies will pay money for such betrayal. The story does not indicate that Judas did this deed simply for money. We can surmise that he was discouraged or upset with Jesus for his own reasons. Perhaps some expectation was disappointed, or one of his favored overviews of life was undermined by Jesus or by some challenge presented by Jesus. Perhaps the whole Jesus mission was just too overwhelming. Whatever it was, Judas bolted.

This incident also tells us about a universal pattern in all prophetic movements. Some people bolt. Some of these people may have been members of the inner circle. Some of these people may have been chosen by the prophet and seen by him or her to have had great potential.

Mark does not sweep this dynamic under the rug as if a movement should be ashamed of such betrayals. Rather, Mark communicates that such betrayals are to be expected. Such betrayals do not indicate that something is wrong with the truth that Jesus is saying and being and doing. Truth, when pristinely lived, spawns betrayals as well as enemies.

Mark's narrative about Jesus' last meal, a Passover meal with his disciples, was created as an interpretation of Jesus' death. Throughout his book, Mark has been talking about eating and feeding. He has been building up to this "final feeding." Having just told us a story about the woman anointing Jesus' body for burial and the story of Judas' decision to betray Jesus to his enemies, Mark tells us about a meal.

Those who first heard Mark's gospel knew what the Passover was all about. The word "Passover" called up in their minds the sacrifice of a lamb and the scattering of blood on the door posts of each Jewish house. The Passover feast called to mind the people of Israel preparing to leave Egypt and pass through a great Exodus from their slavery within hierarchical society toward a new life in the wilderness beyond corrupt civilization.

Mark is not just relating details that he thinks may have happened. Mark is telling us that Jesus' death needs to be understood as something more than another miscarriage of justice, another irrational violence toward a good and promising young man. Jesus' death, according to Mark, is to be understood as a meal, a feeding, a source of food for our deepest lives.

Mark is also giving a new twist to the entire meaning of the Passover heritage. A new lamb is being sacrificed. A new deliverance from slavery is being accomplished. A new freedom is being won. A new wilderness is being entered.

At this meal Jesus says, “One of you is going to betray me.” What a shocking way to begin a meal conversation! Why does Mark tell this story? Why does he tell it in this way? We move off the track if we ask how did Jesus know that one of the twelve was going to betray him. Mark is writing this story, not Jesus. Mark knew that one of the disciples had betrayed Jesus. Mark also knew that betrayal was still a possibility for himself and everyone else listening to his gospel.

So Mark knew that his audience would identify with hearing the disciples say, “Surely I am not the one.” Perhaps we also identify with these disciples. Mark indicates that such betrayal is quite serious: “It would be better for that man if he had never been born.” This saying is still capable of effecting a sober feeling in the pit of the stomach.

But Mark turns immediately from this sober beginning to some deep symbolism. Jesus tells them the significance of his death. “This piece of bread I am passing around to you is my body, take and eat.”

“Then he took the cup and after thanking God . . .” (let me pause in the middle of this sentence to note that Jesus, the hero figure in Mark’s story, is thanking God for this cup, this cup which Jesus is going to associate with his own death, his own blood.) A very deep journey of Spirit is being indicated by Jesus’ remarkable gratitude. Mark is sharing his own journey (as well as that of many others) from being shocked and horrified by Jesus’ early and tragic death to being grateful for the “food” that this same death brought to many lives.

“Then he took the cup and after thanking God, he gave it to them, and they all drank from it, and he said to them, ‘This is my blood which is shed for many in the new covenant.’ ”

So what is this new covenant? It is a new agreement with the Final Mystery—a new covenant that renews the covenant made at the first Passover. In the Exodus events we, the people of God, were delivered from slavery into freedom. We found new life in making that first covenant with the Final Mystery? Now we are going to be delivered even more decisively from slavery into freedom through a new covenant with that same Final Mystery.

The whole idea of a covenant or agreement implies a choice on our part. We have to enter into this agreement by being part of the agreement. The idea of covenant also implies an offer on the part of the Final Mystery—an offer to lead us across the Reed Sea

into a fresh experiment in authentic living on behalf of all the nations of the Earth. So what is this new offer that the Final Mystery is making in Jesus' death? The offer is leading us across the deep river of Jesus' death into a fresh experiment in authentic living on behalf of all the nations of the Earth.

The death-crossing with Jesus replaces the Reed Sea crossing in the older story. Why does Mark and the entire Christian heritage place such emphasis upon Jesus' death? Why all this interest in blood and a physical body broken on our behalf. How is it that we are fed by this bread and wine?

There is no special magic in the bread and wine that is sanctified by an authorized Christian priest. And there was nothing magical about Jesus' own blood or body or about his particular death. Jesus was just one more realistic, down-to-Earth person who offended people with his realism and got violent responses from those who preferred their familiar illusions. His blood was the same as any one else's blood. His body was the same as the body of any other human being.

To understand how Jesus' sacrificed body and blood became food for us, we have to imagine how our own sacrificed body and blood might become food for still others. Since our body and blood is the same as his, if our body and blood does not potentially have the same power as his, then his body and blood had no power either.

The key to this story, is that Jesus' death, our death, death itself is a Reed Sea that can be passed through to the other side where freedom and authenticity are to be found. The thing that traps us in our lousy, inauthentic living is our fear of death. Death has made us slaves to some sort of Egypt-type hierarchy. Picture yourself on the other side of the Reed Sea looking back at all the bodies of the drowned Egyptian soldiers, dead bodies that could have been your own. In this picture, you have passed through death, yet you are alive—more alive than ever before.

Jesus' death is like that Reed Sea crossing. Picture yourself among the disciples of Jesus who had expected grand historical victories of some sort. Instead, they faced the disgrace and utter put-down of their leader. They also felt disgraced and put-down. All their expectations had been killed. With his killing they were also killed. Imagine them coming to realize that this killing of all their expectations was an experience that rendered them more alive than they had ever been before. Imagine them realizing that passing through this death-experience was actually food that fed them in a way that they had never been fed before. Imagine them coming to realize that this feeding had delivered them from the fear and control of death. Imagine them discovering that this deliverance from the fear and control of death was like a fresh offer from the Final Mystery of a new way to live their entire lives.

So can we also accept this offer? Can we make this agreement? Can we join Jesus in the quality of life that he lived? Indeed, those who make this agreement become members of that “kingdom” Jesus spent his entire ministry announcing. We democracy-loving modern people understandably have difficulty with “the Kingdom of God” symbol. “The Reign of Reality” might suit us better. Jesus knew of no other temporal social reign than a kingdom of some sort. He was not anti-democratic. He might even be viewed as pro-democratic. Nevertheless, he meant something very understandable by “the Kingdom of God.” In opposition to the kingdoms of this world, built on illusion and sustained by oppression and harsh violence, there is a Rule of Reality that will in the end rule over all illusion-based human constructions. This Rule of Reality is dawning in the teachings of Jesus, and in the people who hear him and follow him.

In addition, understanding the word “God” through the word “Reality” helps us understand Mark’s New Testament language. Like all biblical writers Mark uses the ancient story-form of a Creator in a parallel realm acting in this temporal realm. If we notice the text of both Old and New Testaments carefully, we can see that their use of the word “God” points to something we have experienced—that this Infinite Reality confronts us in every event that happens to us, and to our societies. We all experience this Infinite Reality as surely as we experience breathing. When we see an Old Testament passage speak of “the Lord, our God,” we need to understand that this phrase is pointing to the experience that we might verbalize as, “the Final Reality, our core devotion.” The story-form of God as an otherworldly Actor visiting us in this world’s events is narrative, fiction made up by human beings. That fiction, like all fiction, can express truth. Jesus’ “Kingdom of God” has come in our lives when we are unreservedly dedicated to the realism the Jesus event reveals. Living such realism is what following Jesus is about.

If we truly follow Jesus, we become the body of those who are the living body of Jesus here on Earth. And what specifically does following Jesus mean? *Cross and Resurrection!* Mark claims that passing through Jesus’ death, we have been fed a new life that is no longer threatened by death, a new community, a new kingdom, a new aliveness.

Do we simply see Jesus’ death as one more unfortunate tragedy? Or can we imagine how, spiritually speaking, we can eat this dead corpse and drink this spilled blood as a life-giving food?

*What might it mean for you to “eat” the death of Jesus and thereby pass beyond the fear and control of death into a quality of life that is more alive than you have ever known before?*

### **Mark 14:27-42 The Night Vigil**

"Every one of you will lose your faith in me," Jesus told them, "As the scripture says: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered'.

Yet after I have risen, I shall go before you into Galilee!"

Then Peter said to him, "Even if everyone should lose faith, I never will."

"Believe me, Peter," returned Jesus, "this very night before the cock crows twice, you will disown me three times."

But Peter protested violently, "Even if it means dying with you, I will never disown you!" And they all made the same protest.

Then they arrived at a place called Gethsemane, and Jesus said to the disciples, "Sit down here while I pray."

He took with him Peter, James and John, and began to be horror-stricken and desperately depressed.

"My heart is nearly breaking," he told them. "Stay here and keep watch for me."

Then he walked forward a little way and flung himself on the ground, praying that, if it were possible, he might not have to face the ordeal.

"Dear Father," he said, "all things are possible to you. Please—let me not have to drink this cup! Yet it is not what I want, but what you want."

Then he came and found them fast asleep. He spoke to Peter, "Are you asleep, Simon? Couldn't you manage to watch for a single hour? Watch and pray, all of you, that you may not have to face temptation. Your spirit is willing, but human nature is weak."

Then he went away again and prayed in the same words, and once more he came and found them asleep. They could not keep their eyes open and they did not know what to say for themselves. When he came back for the third time, he said "Are you still going to sleep and take your ease? All right—the moment has come: now you are going to see the Son of Man betrayed into the hands of evil men! Get up, let us be going! Look, here comes my betrayer!"

"After I am raised again I will go on before you into Galilee." Let us ask why this rather cryptic phrase about Galilee was thrown into this story. We might consider this question unimportant if this reference to "going before you to Galilee" were not repeated in the very last chapter of Mark's gospel when the angel speaks to the terrified women at the empty tomb. Galilee means something special to Mark. Most of his story takes place in Galilee. Why must the disciples meet the resurrected Jesus back in Galilee? And what is resurrection anyhow? Was resurrection going on back in Galilee? If we read that part of the story again would we see more clearly what resurrection means? Mark will return to these themes later.

The story about Peter's confidence that he will die with Jesus rather than flee is not a condemnation of Peter in relation to the other disciples. They all fled. The shepherd was struck and the sheep scattered. This is probably what actually happened. They all fled. Even Simon, also called Peter, the rock, a leader in the Jesus movement, fled. Indeed, when it comes to dying with Jesus, we all flee. (At least that is our first response.) Plain human fortitude does not extend into the depths of the dying that

Jesus will pass through—will lead us through. No one by sheer will power takes this path. No one knows what he or she will do at this full extremity.

Soldiers quite commonly die for their country. People risk their lives in many situations. Why is following the path of Jesus so hard? The death involved here is a death to all elements of the self. The soldier can die for his country without dying to his patriotism or his honor. Parents might die for children, but they do not thereby die to their parental bonds and parental selfhood. Let us notice that it is often easier for people to commit suicide than to die to their particular attachments, longings, or tragedies that characterize their “normal” living. Following Jesus to and through the cross has to do with dying to our attachments, our cravings, and our most cherished self-images. For all of us, this may be far harder than we think it will be.

This exchange with Peter sets up a later part of the story in which Peter actually does what Jesus predicts, disowns Jesus three times before the rooster crows twice. In that second story the crowing cock will mean Peter’s realization that he is far weaker than he thought. Peter’s story challenges us to wonder about our own strength and weakness.

Then, in Mark’s Gethsemane story, Mark tells us something extremely profound. He tells us that Jesus is a real human being with all the feelings of a real human being. Many view Jesus as some sort of super-person who does not have anxieties, or anguishes, or intense sorrows. In general, people in our culture are inclined to think it is unbecoming for our super-heroes to feel as bad as Jesus does in Mark’s Gethsemane. Even the translators of this passage have struggled with how to say how horrific Mark means to picture Jesus’ interior state:

*The Revised Standard Version:* (He) began to be greatly distressed and troubled. . . . “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.”

*J.B. Phillips:* (He) began to be horror-stricken and desperately depressed. . . . “My heart is nearly breaking.”

*The New English Bible:* Horror and dismay came over him. . . . “My heart is ready to break with grief.”

*The Five Gospels:* . . . he grew apprehensive and full of anguish. . . . “I’m so sad I could die.”

These are the feelings that occur to human beings at the full extremities of our humanity. Two of the translations imply the possibility of suicide. The other two speak of “breaking.”

Maybe that is what suicide is, “a breaking.” Anyhow, Jesus does not break. He does not commit suicide. Unlike his sleepy disciples, he stays awake to his actual feelings and to the actual horror of his situation.

When life becomes that horrific, most of us ask for sleeping pills or we simply doze off. But Jesus asks his three most intimate associates to stay awake. Perhaps Mark is implying that Jesus is asking these three disciples to stand guard over Jesus, deemed vulnerable to committing suicide. After an hour of prayer, Jesus returns to them and finds them asleep. He chastises them, “Couldn’t you stay awake for one hour? Be alert and pray that you won’t be put to the test! Though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak.” Even after being chastised, they can’t stay awake. Jesus, however, stays awake to his life. And he does so without support from his closest friends.

The line “Though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak” deserves a bit of explanation. What is “the flesh”? Flesh, in this vocabulary, meant more than muscles; it also meant mind, emotions, and desires. All these dynamics of our temporal being are weak when facing the sort of extremes faced in the above story. Only spirit is willing. So what is spirit, and is there such a thing? Spirit is not some spook from outer space. Spirit is our profound consciousness in an attitude of “Yes” to living our real lives. Spirit, my spirit, your spirit, everyone’s spirit, when activated, is willing to deal with anything—any challenging circumstance, all the way up to being tortured to death.

The flesh does not go away, and the flesh remains weak. When faced with extreme challenges the flesh is not up to the task. So there is no such thing as a “spirit person” for whom challenges are not challenges. Rather, for every person, freedom must be accessed, and freedom must be freely enacted in each situation of our lives. The Spirit is indeed *willing*. And such *willing* or active *freedom* is an aspect of our essential Spirit or Holiness along with love and trust and tranquility.

Also, what does Mark mean by what is here called “prayer”? Jesus is asking his three friends to be alert—that is what prayer means—prayer means to be alert, to be the alert to that profound freedom that human beings can sometimes access to deal with whatever situation is taking place.

Jesus remained alert, and that is the core content of Jesus’ prayer. He addresses that Final Mystery *for whom all things are possible* with his affectionate form of address, “Abba” (something like Papa). Clearly Mark assumes (and Mark assumes that Jesus assumes) *that all things are possible* for this Infinite Reality to whom the freedom of prayer is properly addressed. Mark’s implication is that “Papa” will be *permitting or not permitting* this horrific destiny that appears imminent. Jesus is indeed facing death at the hands of his enemies; and, he is also facing death at the hands of the Oneness of Reality he calls “Papa.”

Clearly this stretches trusting God (trusting Reality) to the furthest extreme (to the breaking point). And what does Jesus ask of this all-is-possible God? It is a very simple request, one that all of us might make: "Let this cup pass." The use of the word "cup" here is significant. "Cup" associates Jesus's horror with the wine cup at the "last meal." Jesus is saying, "Let me drink another drink than this." This request is not weakness or selfishness; it is simple honesty: "This is not what I want." This story gives us full permission to pray for what we want—to expect Final Reality to listen and give consideration to what we want and what we don't want.

But Jesus' prayer does not end with expressing his wants. Jesus surrenders his wants to what God wants. This is the depth of the test that Jesus faces—to trust rather than flee from the Final Reality at this extremity of possible experience. Jesus is choosing to pray something like this: "I am clear what I want, but what Reality wants is best for me and for all involved."

The disciples were not ready to pass this test at this time in their lives. They don't pray this through. They fall asleep. They cannot inwardly deal with the situation. Jesus, however, does not give up on these sleepy friends. He rouses them from sleep and says something like this: "We're done here. Up, let us go forward. Here comes the one who is going to turn me in." This line expresses as well as can be expressed the profound courage that profound freedom is found to be.

*When have you found your life being so horrific that you could not stay awake to it?*

*How do you feel challenged by this story about the persistently praying Jesus?*

*When have you prayed through a challenge and actually faced what may have seemed to be the un-face-able?*

### **Mark 14:43-65 Betrayal to the Religious Authorities**

And indeed, while the words were still on his lips, Judas, one of the twelve, arrived with a mob armed with swords and staves, sent by the chief priests and scribes and elders. The betrayer had given them a sign; he had said, "The one I kiss will be the man. Get hold of him and you can take him away without any trouble." So he walked straight up to Jesus, cried, "Master!" and kissed him affectionately. And so they got hold of him and held him. Somebody present drew his sword and struck at the High Priest's servant, slashing off his ear. Then Jesus spoke to them "So you've come out with your swords and staves to capture me like a bandit, have you? Day after day I was with you in the Temple, teaching, and you never laid a finger on me. But the scriptures must be fulfilled."

Then all the disciples deserted him and made their escape. There happened to be a young man among Jesus' followers who wore nothing but a linen shirt. They seized him, but he left the shirt in their hands and took to his heels stark naked.

So they marched Jesus away to the High Priest in whose presence all the chief priests and elders and scribes had assembled. (Peter followed him at a safe distance, right up to the High Priest's courtyard. There he sat in the firelight with the servants, keeping himself warm.) Meanwhile, the chief priests and the whole council were trying to find some evidence against Jesus which would warrant the death penalty.

But they failed completely. There were plenty of people ready to give false testimony against him, but their evidence was contradictory. Then some more perjurers stood up and said, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this Temple that was built by human hands and in three days I will build another made without human aid.'"

But even so their evidence conflicted. So the High Priest himself got up and took the centre of the floor. "Have you no answer to make?" he asked Jesus. "What about all this evidence against you?"

But Jesus remained silent and offered no reply. Again the High Priest asked him, "Are you Christ, Son of the blessed one?"

And Jesus said, "I am! Yes, you will all see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, coming in the clouds of heaven."

Then the High Priest tore his robes and cried, "Why do we still need witnesses? You heard the blasphemy; what is your opinion now?"

And their verdict was that he deserved to die. Then some of them began to spit at him. They blindfolded him and then slapped him, saying, "Now prophesy who hit you!" Even the servants who took him away slapped his face.

This arrest is being accomplished by the chief priests, lawyers, and elders of the religious community of which Jesus is a member. They are being assisted by "one of the twelve" most trusted persons in Jesus' life. Being opposed by anyone is painful enough. How much more painful it is to be opposed by those closest to you, those you attempted to serve, those you chose to be your companions in doing your life work. The sadness of such opposition is dramatized by Mark's picturing Judas betraying Jesus with a kiss.

Jesus did not oppose the arrest, but he did step into the situation with a challenging comment that both indicated his surrender to them and yet his criticism of their behavior. Let us look at these words, "Do you take me for a bandit, that you have come out with swords and cudgels to arrest me? Day after day I was within your reach as I taught in the temple, and you did not lay hands on me." These words imply that those arresting Jesus were cowards with respect to the crowds who revered him as a teacher of truth. So what is this opposition to Jesus about? Mark wants us to notice that it was a sneaky and irrational refusal to accept the truth spoken by and represented by this man.

Mark's narrative also implies that Jesus did a strategic act in not violently resisting arrest, but surrendering to this unfolding destiny. Rather than being killed, all the disciples ran away. Mark seems to see a double meaning in this running away. First of all it seems to be part of Jesus' action to encourage them to run away. There is no use resisting this arrest. The value here is to save the lives of those who were to continue the mission that Jesus began.

But secondly, Mark sees this running away as part of the humiliation through which the disciples are going. Perhaps Mark places himself in this story in the person of the

young man who is grabbed by his clothing and who leaves his shroud behind running away naked.

“Naked” is a powerful symbol for the final humiliation through which the followers of Jesus are passing. They are powerless to do anything to stop the tragedy that is unfolding. They are robbed of their hopes that their cause is going to win the day in some obvious fashion. They are left with nothing but bare skin, with bare human life as it comes from the womb.

No disciple was there to observe the trial of Jesus. This story was written later, made up to teach a theological perspective. Two aspects of the story stand out. Those testifying against Jesus were twisting the facts and their testimonies did not agree. A weak case was being trumped up to cover the truth that the opposition to Jesus was actually a spirit malady within the religious establishment. The second feature that stands out is that Jesus does not argue with these confusing charges. He is silent. And his refusal to answer is not passivity: it is his action. His refusal to speak is his opposition to their falsity. Their case is so weak, so confused, so off the wall that it does not deserve an answer.

Indeed, the action these religious authorities are doing is a judgment upon themselves. Nothing needs to be said. An innocent man is being put to death. This is Mark’s judgment upon the evil quality of these vigorous religious opponents who still exist in the world of Mark’s day.

Next, the religious authorities question Jesus about his view of himself. They ask him if he is “the Anointed One, the son of the Blessed One.” They ask him this, knowing that they disagree with this assessment, and they are going to use any positive answer against him. Indeed, they consider it blasphemous for Jesus to make such a claim.

This time Jesus does answer. He says, “Yes, I am,” to their question and he underlines his “Yes” with some firm expansion on what this “Yes” means. He attacks their entire context and he does so knowing that this will only confirm their opposition to him. Furthermore, this is not some sort of defensiveness or self promotion. Jesus represents a life that is devoid of self promotion. This is part of Mark’s message to us: Being devoid of self promotion is the quality of the Anointed One. A life surrendered to Reality, without self promotion, is the Blessed One of Reality, the true leader of the people of God, the exemplar of a renewed humanity. Mark wants us to face this paradox: the Anointed One is a weak, powerless, misunderstood, utterly human person who is soon to be tortured to death as a disturber of the status quo.

Mark is also telling us with this story that making accommodations for the sake of persuading people does not work when your audience is committed to profound

illusions. Those illusions have to be undermined, whether the hearers have ears to hear or not. Perhaps some will hear later, even if it is generations later.

What does it mean when Jesus says, “You will see the son of Adam sitting at the right hand of Power and coming with the clouds of the heaven”? Clearly “the right hand of Power” refers to God (The Infinite Power that powers all). “Coming with the clouds of the heaven” refers to the final judgment of God on all evil. For Mark “the son of Adam” refers to Jesus and this phrase also means “the coming of the true humanity” in which Mark also participates. For both the religious authorities and Mark, “the Anointed” means the Messiah, the Christ, the final arrival of God’s ultimate purpose. And “the son of the Blessed One” means being in the intimate family of God—a representative of God’s new humanity.

Most scholars doubt that the historical Jesus actually referred to himself as the Christ. But most scholars do admit the possibility that Jesus used the messianic phrase “son of Adam.” I am willing to guess that the historical Jesus identified with his picture of a coming humanity, and that he strove in every way to manifest this new humanity. So, I am comfortable with Mark calling Jesus the Christ, the Anointed One, the new Adam. And for our full understanding, I want to add “the new Adam and Eve,” for this new humanity is clearly not for men only—however unclear and unconscious much Christian reflection has been about the equal role of women in this already here and still coming profound humanity.

Further, all this strange talk about God’s Anointed One remains cryptic until we identify in our own experience with what Mark is pointing to with the word “God.” Here is my carefully thought-through conclusion about biblical interpretation. The meaning of most biblical texts are indecipherable until we understand that “God” means the Mysterious Source of every reality, the Irresistible Power going on in every event, the Power experienced in the relentless movement of *time* itself. Furthermore, God is that Final Tomb into which all things are returning. All of us experience, or can experience, this Final Power in our own lives. But until we name this Final Power “God,” very few verses in the Bible can be understood fully. In the biblical writings, “God” is not an idea that makes sense of things. “God” is not a person in some other realm. When the biblical writers picture God as a personal being living in heaven, we need to remind ourselves that this is story-telling theology: this is ancient poetry for talking about our experiences of that Final Mysterious Power which we all confront in our daily lives. The word “God” means devotion to this Final Mysterious Power as my God-Devotion.

Thus to be “a son or a daughter of this Power” means to be on the winning side in all of history. Being “the son or daughter of the Blessed One” means being obedient to that Power which is the Power that actually powers all things. To be “the Anointed One” means to be the manifestation of what devoted to this Final Power looks like. To be

“sitting on the right hand of God” means to be a friend and ally of the Ultimate Reality, a devotee of flawless realism as our obedient dedication to our God.

Clearly, the religious authorities did not wish to grant such standing to this Galilean upstart who preached full forgiveness and acceptance to all sinners and outcasts as well as freedom from (indeed repentance from) all hypocrisy. Jesus’ calling is addressed to the outcasts and the in-group alike—a calling to a life of selfless servanthood toward all beings. In the view of the religious establishment (even the disciples) Jesus as the arrival of the Messiah fails to fulfill the common expectations with regard to that expected event, namely rewarding those who, unlike the common riffraff, had practiced a strict observance of the law of Moses.

Jesus’ claim to be offspring in God’s family did not strike these religious authorities as merely meaningless prattle; rather, it struck them as blasphemy. Jesus was using their own language against them: he was implying that they were the actual blasphemers of God. Jesus was confronting these authorities with a decision for or against the truth about the way life actually works. And Mark, by elaborating and including the above stories in his gospel (good news), is confronting us with the same choice that Jesus, in this story, is putting to the religious authorities. Are we going to live Jesus-wise or otherwise?

So we are left with this raw challenge: Are we going to be the blasphemers of the biblical God or are we going to follow Jesus in being the sons and daughters of this Infinite, all powerful “Silence” that nevertheless speaks loudly in every event?

*When have you been challenged to stand up to people who were committed to illusions?*

*How have you experienced challenges to your own illusions.*

### **Mark 14:66-15:21 Humanity on Trial**

In the meantime, while Peter was in the courtyard below, one of the High Priest's maids came and saw him warming himself. She looked closely at him, and said, "You were with the Nazarene too—with Jesus!"

But he denied it, saying, "I don't understand. I don't know what you're talking about." And he walked out into the gateway, and a cock crew.

Again the maid who had noticed him began to say to the men standing there, "This man is one of them!"

But he denied it again. A few minutes later the bystanders themselves said to Peter, "You certainly are one of them. Why, you're a Galilean!"

But he started to curse and swear, "I tell you I don't know the man you're talking about!"

Immediately the cock crew for the second time, and back into Peter's mind came the words of Jesus, "Before the cock crows twice, you will disown me three times." And he broke down and wept.

The moment daylight came the chief priests called together a meeting of elders, scribes and members of the whole council, bound Jesus and took him off and handed him over to Pilate.

Pilate asked him straight out, "Well, you—are you the king of the Jews?" "Yes, I am," he replied.

The chief priests brought many accusations. So Pilate questioned him again, "Have you nothing to say? Listen to all their accusations!"

But Jesus made no further answer—to Pilate's astonishment.

Now it was Pilate's custom at festival-time to release a prisoner—anyone they asked for. There was in the prison at the time, with some other rioters who had committed murder in a recent outbreak, a man called Barabbas. The crowd surged forward and began to demand that Pilate should do what he usually did for them. So he spoke to them, "Do you want me to set free the king of the Jews for you?"

For he knew perfectly well that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him through sheer malice. But the chief priests worked upon the crowd to get them to demand Barabbas' release instead. So Pilate addressed them once more, "Then what am I to do with the man whom you call the king of the Jews?"

They shouted back, "Crucify him!"

But Pilate replied, "Why, what crime has he committed?" But their voices rose to a roar, "Crucify him!"

And as Pilate wanted to satisfy the crowd, he set Barabbas free for them, and after having Jesus flogged handed him over to be crucified.

Then the soldiers marched him away inside the courtyard of the governor's residence and called their whole company together. They dressed Jesus in a purple robe, and twisting some thorn twigs into a crown, they put it on his head. Then they began to greet him, "Hail, your majesty—king of the Jews!"

They hit him on the head with a stick and spat at him, and then bowed low before him on bended knee. And when they had finished their fun with him, they took off the purple cloak and dressed him again in his own clothes. Then they led him outside to crucify him.

They compelled Simon, a native of Cyrene in Africa, who was on his way from the fields at the time, to carry Jesus' cross.

The cock-crowing story is a wondrously perceptive tale about how disquieting it is for self-knowledge to dawn upon us. As we heard earlier, Peter imagined himself a strong person who would follow Jesus into death itself. Jesus predicted that this would not be so. But Jesus' words alone were not convincing to Peter. Even Peter's own behavior did not convince him until the cock crowed a second time. Then Jesus' prediction and Peter's own behavior came together like an explosion that rocked Peter, the rock, into viewing himself differently. Sadness and tears swept over him.

As we may have experienced, such tears can express many things all mingled together and not too clearly distinguished: shame over having been so wrong about ourselves, shame over having been so weak in relation to our commitments, relief over no longer having to pretend to be something different than the weak persons that we are, and perhaps gratitude over being able at last to have an honest cry about all of these things.

This was indeed a moment of humiliation for Peter, but as some Eastern sage put it, "Humiliation is the path to enlightenment." In this case, humiliation was Peter's path to the healing that made him the true rock of leadership which he did indeed become.

In order to get Jesus put to death, the Jewish temple leaders had to get the Romans to do the grim deed, for the death penalty was reserved for the Roman government. Pilate, in disbelief, asks Jesus, “Are *you* the king of the Jews?” Pilate seems to be implying a second question, “How could a man of your humble station be considered a king?” Clearly, Pilate is feeling no threat from this so-called king.

Jesus’ answer to Pilate is difficult to translate. It is not clear whether his answer means “It is as you say,” or “Such words are yours not mine.” I think Mark means to say to all of us that we have to decide whether or not Jesus is the King of the People of God. However that may be, Mark, it turns out, is setting up another of his secret ironies. On the one hand, we see Jesus’ kingship from Pilate’s point of view: for Pilate this kingship is a bitter joke about the weakness of the Jewish people. At the same time, Mark wants his readers to get the secret that Jesus is indeed King of the Jews—that is, Jesus is the foremost leader of the people of God.

Mark is a theologian: he has experienced in the events of Jesus’ life and death the “holy” life of authenticity which he associates with an invisible but very real “kingdom of Final Reality.” But Pilate is not interested in such theology. According to Mark’s story, as Pilate listens to the fabricated charges against Jesus, he does not believe any of them or even care about them. He asks Jesus if he has anything to say about these charges. But Jesus, to Pilate’s astonishment, makes no further reply. Apparently, most people in such a situation have a detailed defense. But Jesus’ silence is all Pilate needs to convince him of Jesus’ innocence. Pilate knows that these religious authorities have brought Jesus to him out of spite.

So Pilate has some fun with the Jewish leaders and the Jewish people. He asks them if they would like for him to release to them the King of the Jews. No, they would rather have Barabbas, a murderous rebel. Pilate keeps after them, “So what would you have me do with the man you call ‘King of the Jews?’” “Crucify him,” they reply. To satisfy the mob, Pilate has him flogged and hands him over to be crucified.

What a story! And it is a story. Pilate was indeed ruler at the time, and Jesus was crucified, but whether Jesus ever actually came before Pilate, no one knows. This entire narrative is created by the early church and elaborated here by Mark to express a theological truth about messiahship.

Mark wants us to be clear that it was the so-called “moral” religious authorities who wanted to get rid of Jesus. Pilate was not able to see a threat to the Roman state. As it turned out, Jesus and Christianity became a threat to the Roman state. This threat began by bringing deep healing to singular persons—persons sick with the illusions of both Jewish and Gentile cultures. Mark’s narrative treats the Judean religious establishment harshly: Mark pictures these authorities telling lies and enduring Pilate’s put-downs in order to get rid of this supposed monster in their midst.

The guilt of the Roman world is not an open hostility toward Jesus. Rather the guilt of the Roman world is being completely oblivious to the whole thing. It does not matter to them one way or another. Pilate has his agenda, keeping the peace in a volatile and distasteful part of the world. He couldn't care less about these religious wranglings. Such unconsciousness of the deep spirit matters is the guilt of the Roman world.

*When have you observed contemporary secular and religious structures acting in ways that are similar to the ones in this story?*

*What is the most sobering truth that this story brings to the surface for you?*

### **Mark 15:22-39 Tortured to Death**

They took him to a place called Golgotha (which means Skull Hill) and they offered him some drugged wine, but he would not take it. Then they crucified him, and shared out his garments, drawing lots to see what each of them would get. It was about nine o'clock in the morning when they nailed him to the cross. Over his head the placard of his crime read, "THE KING OF THE JEWS." They also crucified two bandits at the same time, one on each side of him. And the passers-by jeered at him, shaking their heads in mockery, saying, "Hi, you! You could destroy the Temple and build it up again in three days, why not come down from the cross and save yourself?"

The chief priests also made fun of him among themselves and the scribes, and said, "He saved others, he cannot save himself. If only this Christ, the king of Israel, would come down now from the cross, we should see it and believe!" And even the men who were crucified with him hurled abuse at him.

At midday darkness spread over the whole countryside and lasted until three o'clock in the afternoon, and at three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'

Some of the bystanders heard these words which Jesus spoke in Aramaic - Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?, and said, "Listen, he's calling for Elijah!"

One man ran off and soaked a sponge in vinegar, put it on a stick, and held it up for Jesus to drink, calling out, "Let him alone! Let's see if Elijah will come and take him down!"

But Jesus let out a great cry, and died.

The curtain of the Temple sanctuary was split in two from top to the bottom.

And when the centurion who stood in front of Jesus saw how he died, he said, "This man was certainly a son of God!"

Mark's narrative continues the "King of the Jews" theme. The soldiers dress Jesus in a purple robe and make fun of him. The placard that names his crime says, "King of the Jews." This is a joke to the Romans, and it is a blasphemous and embarrassing harassment to the Judean religious authorities. But to Mark, who is putting this story together, "King of the Jews" is simply the truth. Jesus is being crucified for being the preeminent leader of the People of God.

To the Christian community and to potential members of the Christian community, Mark is saying that such rejection and scorn are the marks of leadership. Power and purple robes are not the marks of leadership among the people who serve the Infinite

Wholeness of Being. Rejection, scorn, suffering, and death take the place of worldly power and purple robes. This proclamation is a reversal of the typical view of leadership in any age.

Among those who expected a Messiah with purple robes and power—one who would do something about Roman rule and other miseries—seeing the suffering Jesus as King, as Christ, as Messiah was an appalling interpretation. The assertion of “Messiahship” was like a slap in the face. To make this claim even more biting, Mark pictures nature (and by implication God) participating in this drama. Darkness spreads over the whole countryside and lasts until three o’clock in the afternoon when Jesus dies. And when he dies the curtain of the Temple sanctuary splits in two from top to bottom.

This curtain of which Mark speaks separates the holy of holies from the people. Only the priests enter this room. So Mark is implying that the death of Jesus, seen as King of the People of God, is opening the holy of holies to everyone. All hierarchical views of religious authority are demolished. Experiencing the holy is an intimate experience open to all—as open to everyone as dying itself.

Jesus models such an attitude toward dying. He does not avoid it or drug his way through it. He cries out in a loud voice quoting the first verse of Psalm 22 “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” and then lets out another great cry and dies. The Roman captain of a hundred men who is standing by knows nothing of splitting temple curtains or Old Testament scriptures. He simply sees the quality of Jesus’ dying and exclaims, “This man was certainly a son of God.” Mark seems to be implying that any awake person might see in Jesus an amazing Holiness.

Mark has written a victory narrative. This is not a story of tragic demise. Its tragic elements are merely aspects of this overall drama of victory. This victory does not mean some sort of immunity from full participation in suffering, rejection, and dying.

Mark has woven into this story the emotionally moving 22nd Psalm. After “My God, my God why have you forsaken me,” the Psalm continues, “and are so far from saving me, from heeding my groans? O my God, I cry in the daytime but thou does not answer, in the night I cry but get no respite.” The soldiers casting lots for Jesus’ clothes is an allusion to the 17th and 18th verses of that same Psalm: “I tell my tale of misery while they (a band of ruffians) look on and gloat. They share out my garments among them and cast lots for my clothes.”

Jesus, like all of us at such extreme moments, experiences God as Silent, as unresponsive, as not answering our urgent pleas nor heeding our laments. Mark is implying that this Silence of God is the answer, and that our proper response is to keep on saying, “my God, my God.” To the gifts of life and pleasantness we say “my God.” And to the gifts of suffering and death we also say “my God.” And this is what it means to be God’s son or daughter.

This strange attitude of persistently saying “my God” to all the events of our lives is the power that splits the temple curtain from top to bottom. The wretched of the Earth are not excluded from the holy of holies. Their very wretchedness is a doorway to holiness.

In Mark’s picture of Jesus uttering “Why have you forsaken me?” from Psalm 22, some interpreters of this passage imply a loss of faith on the part of Jesus—that Jesus has descended into apostasy—that he has given up trusting Reality. I do not believe that needs to be our interpretation of Jesus or of the 22rd Psalm. We can view Jesus as trusting God in spite of a profound ignorance of God’s actions. He asks “Why?” because he, like all other humans, is profoundly ignorant before the Final Holiness. In spite of his ignorance of Infinite Realty, Jesus trusts Infinite Reality as his God and delivers himself into God’s power. This trusting surrender is the victory into which we are all asked to follow Jesus. We can ask “Why?” and still trust.

*What elements of this emotionally gripping narrative affect you most?*

*What fresh perspective on the crucifixion story is emerging for you from these reflections?*

### **Mark 15:40-16:8 Women of the Resurrection**

There were some women there looking on from a distance, among them: Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of the younger James and Joses, and Salome.

These were the women who used to follow Jesus as he went about in Galilee and look after him. And there were many other women there who had come up to Jerusalem with them.

When the evening came, because it was the day of preparation, that is the day before the Sabbath, Joseph from Arimathaea, a distinguished member of the council, who himself prepared to accept the kingdom of God, went boldly into Pilate’s presence and asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate was surprised that he should be dead already and he sent for the centurion and asked whether he had been dead long. On hearing the centurion’s report, he gave Joseph the body of Jesus. So Joseph brought a linen winding-sheet, took Jesus down and wrapped him in it, and then put him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the solid rock, rolling a stone over the entrance to it. Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Joses were looking on and saw where he was laid.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint him. And very early in the morning on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb, just as the sun was rising.

“Who is going to roll the stone back from the doorway of the tomb?” they asked each other.

And then as they looked closer, they saw that the stone, which was a very large one, had been rolled back. So they went into the tomb and saw a young man in a white robe sitting on the right-hand side, and they were simply astonished. But he said to them, “There is no need to be astonished. He has risen; he is not here. Look, here is the place where they laid him. But now go and tell his disciples, and Peter, that he will be in Galilee before you. You will see him there just as he told you.”

And they got out of the tomb and ran away from it. They were trembling with excitement. They did not dare to breathe a word to anyone.

A group of women who had followed Jesus saw the crucifixion from a distance. This group of women included two women named Mary who had looked after him in Galilee. These women also learned that a man named Joseph asked for Jesus' body, wrapped it in a linen sheet, and laid it in a tomb. This Joseph was said to be a distinguished member of the ruling religious council, a man who was nevertheless open to the kingdom of God.

These two Marys and this enigmatic Joseph are not Jesus' parents. Mark does not tell a story about Jesus' birth. He does not say what names Jesus' parents had. The only reference to Jesus' family in the gospel of Mark implies that Jesus' mother and brothers consider him to be insane. Jesus' father does not appear at all in Mark's gospel. Jesus himself says that his family are those who believe his message and follow it.

Two Marys and a Joseph take on the family duties of Jesus' burial. The male disciples, remember, had all fled. We need to be aware that this tender touch of Jesus' burial is more of Mark's poetic narrative. Some scholars speculate that the actual body of Jesus of Nazareth was most likely thrown on a pile along with others and eaten by the birds.

But in Mark's narrative this loyal group honor and treasure Jesus' body, taking the role of his true family. This story is important for Mark to include, because Mark views his own body and the bodies of his companions "in Christ" as the body of Jesus being honored. Their own bodies are being treasured as bodies of the living "body of Christ." If we too see our bodies as bodies of Christ, then our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Such bodies deserve an honored place. In Mark's view of things, the human body is not despised or irrelevant. The human body is the medium through which God is experienced and through which body flows the Holy Spirit response to God (to Reality). Honoring Jesus' body is honoring the whole body of Christ.

On Sunday morning the women visit the tomb intending to further honor Jesus' body. They are surprised they find the stone rolled away. They are shocked to find a figure in white sitting alive in the tomb. Some have suggested that this figure is the same young man that ran away buck naked when Jesus was captured. Perhaps tricky Mark is painting himself into his narrative. Mark (or you or me) is the young man fleeing unclothed from the crucifixion, but reappearing at the tomb in clothes of white.

According to Mark's story, these women are terrified by what they find. They experience "great fear," according to some translations. The women run from the tomb. They can't even speak. "Trembling with excitement" may not be the best translation. Why are these women pictured as apprehensive, even terrified? Most congregations of current Christian practice interpret the resurrection as a relief, a happy ending to a grim story. But such a happy-ending "resurrection" would not make anyone apprehensive. Therefore, when the young figure at the tomb says to the women, "Don't be alarmed," this can seem strange, for why should we fear Jesus' resurrection? Why should we be

alarmed by the message that Jesus is not in the tomb but risen? Why would Mark end his gospel with this picture of women running from this tomb in terror and saying nothing to anyone?

Clearly these women were not responding with: "Thank God, we won't die." Rather, they were terrified by the appearance in their consciousness of a dread secret which seemed to them too overwhelming to even talk about. Later, of course they did find the courage to talk about it. Mark does not tell this part of the story, but he implies it.

So, what is this dreadful secret called "resurrection"? The clue verse in Mark's story is in the instruction of the young man to the women, "But go and tell his disciples, including 'Rock' (Peter), that he (Jesus) is going ahead of you to Galilee! There you will see him, just as he told you." The reader is meant to recall these earlier words in Mark's gospel (Mark 14:28) in which Jesus says, "But after I'm raised I'll go ahead of you to Galilee."

What is this "going ahead of you to Galilee" all about? This is a key part of Mark's literary innovation. He ends his gospel with the male disciples fleeing back to Galilee, the place where in Mark's story all the wonderful healings and feedings took place. The women at the empty tomb are running too--in the same direction. Strange as it may seem to our too-literal minds, Mark is apparently saying to us, "If you want to understand the resurrection, you need to read the first three-fourths of my book again, because I have been talking about resurrection from start to finish."

In order to further understand what Mark means by "resurrection," we have to set aside our literalistic perspective and read the healing stories again, viewing each story as a potential story about our own lives. We will get to see that "resurrection" is a Spirit level happening that has something to do with having demons cast out; being lifted up from a disabling fever; overcoming a paralysis like death; having an unclean leprosy healed or a disgraceful flow of blood stopped; experiencing a rising from a sleep like death; overcoming our deafness with hearing, our dumbness with speaking, our blindness with seeing, our hunger for food with abundance; and many more wondrous events *about resurrection!*

Mark will show us how "resurrection" transforms some quite ordinary people who are also profoundly sick in a spirit way into a powerful historical movement. These same persons were unconscious of their profound greatness, but had instead become ambitious fools who are also cowards in the living of whatever authenticity they are currently experiencing. Their experience of "resurrection" released into history an alive group of people, one among whom creates the gospel of Mark.

Mark is a literary trickster: his whole gospel is a kind of secret poetry that needs to be decoded in a spirit manner. Mark's story of the physical healing of a woman with a 12-year-long disgraceful flow of menstrual blood can be read as a parable. The 12-year old

girl raised from a sleep like death can be read as a parable. These stories have *resurrection* meanings. “Twelve” is a symbol for the twelve tribes of Israel. Israel is the unclean women, the dead girl, the outcast leper, the demon-possessed person, the deaf-and-dumb person, the blind person, etc. There are 12 healing stories of Israelites in the Gospel of Mark. (plus one gentile woman who eats crumbs beneath the children’ table.) Israel (the 12) is being healed from her disgraceful spirit sicknesses, her incompetences, and her corpse-like existence. It is the people of God who are being healed by Jesus’ words of judgement, forgiveness, and his call to rise up to an authentic life. Such is the *resurrection* that we can still enjoy and hope to participate in today.

A spirit-level transformation of the people of God and of humanity is the miraculous happening being poeticized by Mark’s fantastic stories. How do such “miracles” happen? Here is the path Mark lays out for us: we follow Jesus through the *cross* of our own complete humiliation of the false understandings of our lives and of our false expectations about the future, including what the Messiah is supposed to look like. In the tortured death of Jesus we see our own paralyzing addictions to our familiar lies about ourselves and our world. Only then can we know in our own experience *resurrection*, a rather startling experience. Yes, “resurrection” is the terrifying experience of being fully alive in spite of this thoroughgoing killing of our lies.

*After exploring this far Mark’s text and the text of this commentary, what insight about resurrection has been most memorable?*

*How are you experiencing this resurrection discussion emotionally?*

*What questions about resurrection remain for you?*

## **Concluding Words for Part One**

Mark’s remarkably innovative narrative can trick us into noticing where humiliation is about to happen to our own lives, a happening that can be a doorway into a strange new aliveness that is truly beyond the control of death. This resurrection of aliveness renders even our suffering and death to be a lively part of our living, a resurrection of aliveness that makes all our living and dying LIVING?

In instructing the women to return to Galilee, Mark is asking his readers to read again the first 13 chapters of his narrative. As we reflect on these earlier chapters in Part Two of this commentary, let us notice which of these miracle stories assist us to see something about our own journey into the realism of profound humanness, and into these strange profound-humanness-pointing symbols: cross and resurrection.