

April 12. Read Mark 15:40-47. Modern readers may feel like skimming over Mark's account of Jesus' burial. But to Mark, it was vital to record the burial because Hebrews saw burying the dead as a moral duty. And scholar N. T. Wright also saw it as setting the stage: "We might suppose the burial narrative to be a sad and not particularly interesting appendix to the story of Jesus' death; for Mark, it trembles with the suppressed excitement of what he knows is going to happen next." Jesus' ministry was not just Jesus and twelve men. Picture the devotion Mark 15:41 summed up: "When Jesus was in Galilee, these women had followed and supported him, along with many other women who had come to Jerusalem with him." Have you ever poured your heart into a ministry or cause, and seen it seem to fail? How much hope do you think the women (who hadn't scattered like the men) held onto after Jesus died? Some skeptics claim the women went to the wrong tomb, found it empty and fancied that Jesus had risen. Scholar Craig Evans said, "The literary, historical and archeological evidence points in one direction: the body of Jesus was placed in a tomb, according to Jewish custom.... there is no good reason to think that family and friends of Jesus had no idea where Jesus was buried." Matthew added that the authorities guarded Jesus' tomb, because they feared claims of him rising (Matthew 27:62-66). Would those first Christians have risked their lives declaring that Jesus was alive if they thought his body might just lie in some misplaced tomb?

April 13. Read Mark 16:1-8. The oldest existing manuscripts of Mark's gospel ended at verse 8. It's unlikely that was how Mark intended to end his gospel. The evidence suggests that somehow an early copy lost the original ending. However, even as it stands in those manuscripts, Mark shared the most vital news. Verse 6 said Mary and her companions heard the central message of that resurrection Sunday: "He has been raised. He isn't here." N. T. Wright wrote of the women in Mark 16:1, "We may note, already, what they are not saying to themselves (as they might be if this story were a later pious fiction). They were not going in order to witness Jesus' resurrection. They had no idea that any such thing was even thinkable. They were going to complete the primary burial." Jesus had told his followers he would rise again, but that just puzzled them (cf. Mark 9:9-10). How did Mark's honesty about the women and disciples make his resurrection account more credible? Mark's resurrection story contained one vital extra. In Mark 16:7, the angel told Mary Magdalene and the others, "Tell his disciples, especially Peter that he is going ahead of you into Galilee." Jesus' message specifically named Peter, who had publicly denied even knowing him, lest Peter feel he was no longer welcome after his failure. What does this tell you about Jesus' grace? Can you trust Jesus to treat you the same way when you fail?

April 14. Read Mark 16:9-20. As we've seen, the oldest existing manuscripts of Mark's gospel end at Mark 16:8. Some later manuscripts contain these two efforts by well-meaning copyists to fill the gap. Differences in details (e.g. was there one angel at the tomb, as Mark and Matthew wrote, or two, as Luke and John said?), and Mark's lost ending, make some people doubt that they can trust the gospels. Author Phillip Yancey said such variations actually point toward the gospels' reliability: "Accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb sound breathless and fragmentary.... the early reports seem wispy, mysterious, confused. Surely conspirators could have done a neater job of depicting what they would later claim to be the hinge event of history." If you find the gospels largely credible, how does that shape the way you live your daily life? Mark's ending, missing by intention or accident, gives us cause to reflect. Day-by-day, each of us is "writing" our witness to Jesus. How will you complete the "gospel" story your life tells?

April 15. Read Matthew 28:8-20. Almost all scholars agree that Matthew and Luke used Mark's work as a key source for their gospels. We're going to read them as possible indicators of what might have been in Mark's original ending. Like Mark, Matthew (and Luke and John) said women were the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection (hardly a fact one writer, let alone four, would invent in that male-dominated culture). Matthew noted the plot to spread a false story of what became of Jesus' body. He ended with a grand summary of Jesus' mission challenge and promise to all his followers (the "Great Commission"—verses 19-20). Matthew's account of the women's reaction—"with great fear and excitement"—echoed Mark 16:8, with a slightly more positive connotation. We often feel that way when we meet something amazing that will cause huge changes in our life. What is there about having God at work in your life that has made, or might make you, afraid? What about it fills you with the greatest excitement and joy? If the sealed, guarded tomb with a huge rock over its door (cf. Matthew 27:57-66, Mark 16:3-4) was empty, it became a big problem for the Roman and Temple authorities. All they needed to stop the Jesus movement for good was his dead body—but it wasn't there! Matthew said they claimed Jesus' followers stole the body, an absurd charge considering their precautions. Christians travel from all over the world to Jerusalem to see a place that has nothing to see. What role does the empty tomb play in your decision to place your faith in the risen Jesus?

April 16. Read Luke 24:13-35. In Luke's ending, we see that his research (cf. Luke 1:2-4) found this unique story (probably echoed in Mark 16:12, part of the longer later ending). Unrecognized, Jesus walked with two disciples (likely husband and wife) discussing recent events. They were disillusioned ("we had hoped" —verse 21), sad about the crucifixion, and stunned that some women said Jesus' body was not in the tomb. Note: these two followers didn't say they believed the women's report—just that it puzzled them. Scholar N. T. Wright noted, "It wasn't simply... that they couldn't recognize him. This is a strange feature of the resurrection stories, in Matthew (28:17) and John (20:14; 21:4, 12) as well as here.... Jesus' body, emerging from the tomb, had been transformed. It was the same, yet different—a mystery we shall perhaps never unravel until we ourselves share the same risen life." Does the Easter story move you to yearn to share that risen life, to experience dimensions that for now remain mysterious to us? Cleopas, like the other disciples, was still in the grip of preconceived ideas of what the Messiah would be and do (cf. Mark 9:31-32). Have there been times when preconceived ideas made it harder for you to trust the story of Jesus? Can you recall finding greater joy and peace after letting God alter or overturn some fixed idea you may have held for years?

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