

Snakes in the Church?

Mark 16:1-20

April 30, 2023

Kory Wilcoxson

Snakes in the church...I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but I want to know how many people are expecting me to name names. And I really want to know how many of you are worried I'll say your name! Well, everyone just settle down, that's not what this sermon is about. No, it's about the weird endings of the gospel of Mark – yes, that's plural – and how we make sense of the Bible when the Bible doesn't always make sense.

To understand the challenge this passage poses, I encourage you to open your Bibles with me to page 55 in the New Testament. It will help you to look at the passage with me if you are able because of the structure of the end of Mark's gospel. Chapter 16, the last chapter in Mark's gospel, starts with the resurrection story and shares a lot of similarities with accounts in the other gospels. Some women go to the tomb on Easter morning, only to find it empty. They encounter an angel who tells them that Jesus has been raised and they are to tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where Jesus will meet them.

Verse 8 says, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Period. End of sentence. And that's where things start to get a little dicey. If you'll notice, in between v. 8 and v. 9 is something called "The Shorter Ending of Mark," which says (read it). That completely contradicts what v. 8 says about the women telling no one, and it sounds like a narrator inserting a comment to bring some kind of closure. Only then do we move onto the next section, labeled "The Longer Ending of Mark," which tells of several resurrection appearances and gives some perplexing quotes from Jesus. Here's what it says: (v. 9-20).

I'm a big fan of the Indiana Jones trilogy. "Raiders of the Lost Ark" is still one of my favorite movies of all time. Kind of appropriate today, right? "Snakes...why did it have to be snakes?" You'll notice I said trilogy, but the astute cinephiles among you will note there is a fourth Indiana Jones movie and a fifth one is set to be released on June 30. I refuse to acknowledge the existence of the last two films. We don't need any more Indiana Jones movies. Why mess with perfection? Did Michelangelo draw a smiley face on the statue of David? Did Van Gogh add a hot air balloon to "Starry Night?" Sometimes it's OK not to add onto what already exists.

Which brings us to Mark. Did you know that Mark had three endings? The gospel ends...then ends...then ends again, with each ending getting weirder. This passage is further proof that the Bible must be interpreted in order for it to make any sense to us in today's world. You simply can't take it literally. We have to do the responsible work of translating these ancient living words into our modern-day context in order for them to speak to us again.

The most reliable Greek manuscripts of Mark, which was the first gospel written, didn't have either the short or long ending in them. They end at v. 8, with the women being afraid, with the other endings being added much later. What's the problem with ending at v. 8? "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid." Well, if you're a fledgling group of believers who needed a little assurance that this Jesus guy is really the Savior, an ending with no resurrection appearances doesn't inspire a lot of confidence. So, at some point, Mark or Mark's editor tacked on an additional ending that gave more credence to the resurrection story. Then Matthew and

Luke wrote their gospels and added a bunch of resurrection stories. Mark's ending was probably edited to sync with Matthew and Luke's ending, which leaves us with this patchwork ending of Mark that we have now.

For me, that's an example of the human side of this divine-human collaboration we call the Bible, because we humans don't like leaving things open-ended. We want closure. We like our stories wrapped up with a nice little bow. So, to end this story at the empty tomb with women seized by terror and amazement wasn't good enough. Someone had to add some closure, forgetting the divine side of this divine-human collaboration, which says that the good news of Jesus Christ doesn't end at v. 8, or at v. 20, or at the end of Revelation. The story of God's work in this world will always be ongoing. God's story is always "to be continued."

The endings that were eventually added were pulled together from other oral and written sources about Jesus. We have Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and to two travelers, what Luke calls the road to Emmaus. Then, starting with v. 14 Jesus appears to the disciples and upbraids them for their stubbornness and lack of faith, because they didn't believe the resurrection stories they were hearing.

That seems a little harsh to me. After all, these eleven have dedicated the last three years of their lives to serving with and learning from Jesus. Sure, they've had their moments of dumb-headedness and, yeah, they did kind of flake out there at the end, but to call them stubborn and accuse them of faithlessness seems a little insensitive. We all have our moments of unbelief, don't we? So let's cut the disciples some slack here.

Or...maybe this is exactly what they needed to hear. After all Jesus told them what was going to happen with him and yet they still didn't believe. Are we any less culpable? We have a whole book telling us who we are called to be, but if Jesus appeared to us would we get upbraided, as well, for our lack of faith? In other words, are we letting our fear keep us from living out our faith? The risen Jesus doesn't wait for a group of doubting disciples to get their spiritual house in order before giving them work to do. If Jesus' story is to be continued, it's going to have to happen through this rag-tag group of misfits and oddballs and people who aren't even always sure what they believe. That describes the disciples. That also describes us. Mark concludes by saying, "And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it." The Lord worked with them. See, we're not alone as we try to figure out this faith thing. We're not called to be perfect, only to follow Jesus.

OK, so what do we do with the stuff about snakes and poison? I honestly don't know. Really. I don't believe Jesus meant this literally, although some churches take it that way. Our state is notorious for snake-handling preachers. When people find out I'm a preacher in Kentucky, I have to immediately say, "But not one of those!" The pastors who do this honestly believe they are doing what Jesus calls them to do. One of those pastors might say to me, "Oh ye of little faith!" but I'd rather think I'm "Oh ye of a lot of common sense!" So...why would Jesus say this?

I want to read to you a passage from the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, and this is one of Paul's traveling companions speaking: "After we had reached safety, we then learned that the island was called Malta. <sup>2</sup> The local people showed us unusual kindness. Since it had begun to rain and was cold, they kindled a fire and welcomed all of us around it. <sup>3</sup> Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. <sup>4</sup> When the local people saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, 'This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not

allowed him to live. <sup>5</sup> He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. <sup>6</sup> They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god.” Snakes... why did it have to be snakes?

Now, I'm just spit-balling here, but could it be that, when the writers were adding the last ending to Mark, they recalled this famous incident and decided to add a line from Jesus that explained this miraculous occurrence? After all, Jesus DID say he would work with them. So, because this supernatural story about Paul was probably making the rounds through the church parking lots and women's circles, the writer decided to give it some spiritual authority by attributing it to Jesus at the end of Mark's gospel. I think God probably said, "Wait...you're gonna put THAT in my Book? Sigh. OK. I'll work with it. But do me a favor: Can you not put it in the Kentucky translation? I don't anyone to die of a snakebite because of me."

What do we do with this? Well, first of all, we don't take it literally. But we do look at the deeper message, which is about faith over fear. Remember the original ending of Mark? "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." You can't very well show people the good news of Jesus if you're afraid. Instead, I believe Jesus is calling us to face the fears that keep us from living out our faith, whether that's fear of embarrassment or fear of family members who believe differently than us or fear we'll get it wrong. Remember, Jesus is working with us on this.

So, the Bible is a weird, wild book, and yet we are called to take it seriously, but not literally. There's truth in every word, but sometimes it takes a lot of interpretation and digging to get to it. That's why God gave us brains. And we are called to move past the fears that keep our faith to ourselves, and instead live out our faith in a way that people see in us God's expansive love and radical inclusion and unending grace. And remember: God didn't stop speaking at the end of Mark or the end of Revelation. Our presence here is proof that God is still speaking, and believe it or not, God is working with us to make this earth look a little bit more like Heaven. So don't be afraid to lead with your faith, no matter how imperfect it is. Because God's story is to be continued...