

Women in Mark's Passion Narrative

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Published in Immaculate Heart of Mary Newsletter, March 1997.

Mark opens and closes his Passion narrative with stories of women who wish to ritually anoint Jesus for burial (14:3-9; 16:1ff). The function of this bracketing is to give the reader hope that, even though the male disciples abandon the Way of the cross, there are female disciples who understand and accept it. Let us look at these "bookends" of Mark's story of the *via crucis*.

Mark 14:1-9. In 14:1 we are plunged back into the heart of the Judean social order: Jerusalem on the high holy days of Passover. These feast days always occasioned political turmoil in Roman-occupied Palestine, for it was a time when the people reflected on the Exodus story of liberation. It is in the context of this concern to keep public order that Mark re-introduces the government conspiracy against Jesus (14:2).

Jesus is at table with a leper, practicing solidarity with the "least" to the end (14:3). He is interrupted by an anonymous woman who, judging by her bold approach and the expensive perfume, probably was a prostitute. Once again those with Jesus object, this time out of a concern for "wasteful spending" (14:4f). It is of utmost irony that the same concern for cash will shortly lead Judas to defect to the authorities (14:10f).

In her defense Jesus first addresses her critics' alleged commitment to the poor. The saying of 14:7, so notoriously used in the history of the church to justify the existence poverty, is a statement not about the poor but about the social location of the discipleship church: "You will always be among the poor and can do the right thing for them at any time." He then interprets her action as a "beautiful thing" (14:6) and calls it an "anointing" (14:8). Jesus dramatically recasts her pouring oil over his head in terms of Samuel's prophetic anointing of both Saul and David as king (see I Sam 10:1; 16:12ff). Obviously this story subverts traditional ideas of both kingship and male leadership!

"Let her be! Why do you make trouble for her?" shouts Jesus (14:6). In Mark it is women who, because they embrace the Way of the cross and servanthood, can act as true leaders. This is an embarrassment to a patriarchal church that has long "made trouble" for women. "Wherever the good news is announced in all the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her!" (14:9). This extraordinary commendation of the woman is also an unambiguous *instruction* that places the struggle against patriarchy at the heart of the message of the church. It has,

however, gone unheeded in Christendom, past and present.

Mark 15:39-46. The immediate aftermath of Jesus' death presents us with three reactions: that of the centurion (15:39), of the council-member Joseph (15:42-46), and of some female followers of Jesus (15:40f, 47). Contrary to traditional interpretation, two of these three cannot be considered discipleship stories!

The Roman soldier's utterance is indistinguishable from that of the demons who are forever trying to control Jesus by "naming" him (see 1:24; 3:11; 5:7). After all, the centurion does not respond in discipleship, but remains in his role, dutifully reporting back to Pilate Jesus' death (15:44f). In Mark it is *only* the divine voice which provides a reliable witness to Jesus as "Son" (1:11; 9:7). The centurion's words must be seen as the triumphant conclusion of the soldiers' mockery begun in 15:16-20.

Joseph's mission is to beg the body from Pilate -- evidence of how firmly in control of events the procurator was (15:43,45). This is not done out of compassion, but in order that the corpse not profane the Sabbath (15:42). While Joseph may have been "looking for the sovereignty of God," he is also a "wealthy member of the council" that condemned Jesus (15:43). Nor are his actions that of a disciple. He hastily wraps Jesus' corpse in the linen cloth of "betrayal" (see 14:51). He then throws it in a tomb, disdaining even the most rudimentary obligations of a proper Jewish burial (15:46). Like the centurion, this steward of the Sabbath seem to have had the last word over the "Lord of the Sabbath" (2:28).

It appears, then, that the authorities have prevailed after all! It was not "Elijah" who took Jesus from the cross (15:34f), but a member of the Sannhedrin. The rolling of the stone over the tomb entrance symbolically closes the story (15:46). Jesus is dead, the Powers have taken over the narrative, and the disciples are nowhere to be seen. Except for some women.

Mary, Mary and Salome now represent the lifeline of the discipleship narrative. These three women have replaced the male "inner circle" of James, John and Peter, who are long gone (14:50). They are given a remarkable description: "When Jesus was in Galilee they followed him and served and, with other women, came up to Jerusalem with him" (15:40f). In other words, from beginning to end of the story these women, unlike the men, understood the vocation of discipleship as servanthood. That is why they are here, "witnesses" to the terror of the cross. But they are about to witness something even more disturbing.

Mark 15:47-16:3. When Joseph rolls the stone against Jesus' tomb, the discipleship narrative slams shut with the stupefying crunch of a prison door. The only lifeline we have now is Mark's simple indication that the same three women who observed Jesus' crucifixion (15:40) also "saw where Joseph put him" (15:47).

Included is a Mary who is presumably Jesus' mother (see 6:3), though it is significant that she is not so identified here, perhaps in conformity with the teaching of 3:31-34. The fact that women, in the background throughout the entire story, suddenly emerge here as the true disciples is perhaps Mark's most radical social reversal.

Charitable guilds of Jerusalem women were known to be present after executions in order to assure proper burial. This is the scene presented in 16:1-4 – except these are not Jerusalemites, but Galileans. It would have been a risky act for these women to demonstrate solidarity with so notorious a political dissident. Nevertheless, these three women persist in attempting to salvage some dignity by re-burying Jesus according to custom. As Joseph bought a linen in which to wrap Jesus' corpse, the women buy spices in order to properly anoint it. As he threw the corpse into a tomb before the Sabbath, they go there early in the morning after the Sabbath (16:1f).

This dawn brought them only the numb duty of last respects and that aching, unconsolable emptiness that comes from hope crushed. Yet cruelly, even the therapeutic ritual of weeping over Jesus' corpse and mustering brave eulogies is denied. For the entrance to the makeshift tomb is sealed shut by a boulder that "was very large" (16:5). They halt in their tracks, pulled up short. "Who will roll away this stone?" they cry to no one in particular (16:4). Is there not in this anguished question an echo of Sisyphean tragedy? This stone blocking their way terminates, without explanation, the discipleship journey. What an abrupt and bitter closure to the story! But there is one more scene in Mark's gospel, and upon it hinges the possibility of the Christian church.

Mark 16:4-8. The depressing narrative inertia of Jesus' trial and execution, which culminated in Joseph's sealing of the tomb with this stone, now suddenly begins to be reversed. "When they *looked again*, they saw that the stone had been rolled away" (16:4). The verb "to see again" was used by Mark in his stories of the two blind men (8:25; 10:51f). It is now revealed here as the expression of "bifocal vision" that characterizes apocalyptic faith. To the world of the Judean Temple-State and Roman colonialism, Jesus is just another imperial statistic. But to those who "look again" the great stone of impediment has been removed.

As they enter the tomb the women become the "witnesses" to resurrection. "Don't be incredulous," a mysterious young man tells them. "You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the one *they* executed? He is risen. He's not here where *they* put him. See for yourself." (16:6). The authorities thought this annoying episode of messianic pretension had been laid to rest. But it is just beginning. Then comes one last word from this enigmatic messenger: "Get up, go tell his disciples and Peter that he's going on ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, as he told you" (16:7). This is the "third call to discipleship" in Mark (see 1:17; 8:34). It is a prospect the women -- the reader -- never considered. Our knees buckle at this invitation to

resume the Way -- for now we know its consequences all too well. From deep within us, from that unexplored space beneath our profoundest hopes and fears, roars a tidal wave of "trauma and ecstasy" (16:8). Terrified, we race with the women out of that tomb as if we have just seen a ghost. And so we have. For in Jesus' empty tomb is nothing but the ghost of our discipleship past and our discipleship future.

"But they said nothing, for they were afraid" (16:8). The genius of this "incomplete" ending, like a painting lacking the finishing stroke, is that it demands a response from its audience. Mark leaves us not with a neat resolution but with a terrible ultimatum. Who *will* tell this "good news"? For it is not only the women who "know" -- we know now as well. If we wish the story of discipleship to continue we cannot remain mere spectators.

This epilogue presents us with the most dangerous of memories, a living one; the most subversive of stories, a neverending one. Mark's resurrection tradition offers no visions of glory or triumph. It leaves us only with a God who hears our brokenhearted cries before the stone of impediment, and with the executed-but-risen-Nazarene who calls us to discipleship as many times as it takes. Mark refuses to "show" the Risen Jesus to us. If we wish to "see" him, we must listen to the women and journey to Galilee. Jesus has gone on *ahead* of the church. Only by responding to the invitation to discipleship can we join him where he already is: on the Way.