

#747 A reading of St. Mark, Crossings-style (Part 5)

This week brings the fifth and final installment of my fellow Thursday Theology editor Jerry Burce's reading of the Gospel of Mark, first presented during the pre-conference to the Fourth International Crossings Conference this past January.

As you may recall from the first part of Jerry's presentation ([ThTheol #742](#)), he set out to articulate how it is that this particular Gospel—with its abrupt and disheartening ending, its terse style, its focus on fear, its lack of joy—can possibly be read as good news for us today. In this last part, we get Jerry's compelling answer to that question. He builds his answer on his central thesis (para. 17 of [ThTheol #742](#)): "When reading Mark, the secret of the kingdom (i.e. of what God is up to for us in Jesus) lies in the hidden recesses of gaps." Thus we, like disciples listening to Jesus' parables, are meant to hear Mark from a more informed perspective, drawing on our insiders' knowledge of the scriptures so that we can truly see and hear—rather than looking without perceiving, or listening without understanding. The first "gap" to which Jerry drew our attention was the allusion to Malachi's prophecy of Jesus' temple-based agenda, in the opening verses of Mark 1. In his conclusion, Jerry now focuses on the "gap" at the end of Mark's Gospel, and on what that gap has to tell us when we read it with disciples' opened eyes.

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

1. OK, so J. dies. We've noticed already how he's done in by

the blind and the deaf. The betrayers: Judas, the Council, Pilate. The spitters, the mockers, both Jew and Gentile. Disciples, of course, still don't see what's going on, and their ears are stopped. What J. said on the road did not sink in. What he says in the anointing episode at Bethany, 14:1ff, and repeats in starker detail en route to Gethsemane, doesn't sink in either. When J. is arrested they melt into the night, except for Peter, who bawls his way into the darkness a couple of hours later.

2. As to what this dying signifies or accomplishes, Mark has little to say. His style is to report. He doesn't interpret, leaving that for the likes of St. John. Those of us old enough to remember Dragnet might describe Mark as the Sgt. Joe Friday of Gospel writers. "Just the facts, ma'am." For the meaning of the facts he points us to the prophetic witness he invited us to wallow in when he kicked things off in chap. 1, the stuff lurking in the gaps of things alluded to but not spelled out in full. Remember, we're disciples. We're meant to know our Scriptures, we're meant to let them chime in with their clarifying information as we go along. A reading of Mark that's true to Mark's intent will do exactly that. And as at the beginning, here too dear Handel is of great help. So when soldiers beat Jesus, or when the nails are pounded through his hands, we should absolutely hear the music in our heads. "He was wounded for our transgression, bruised for our iniquities." And when he agonizes in the garden, the song is "surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows." "I'm so sad I could die," Jesus says to Peter, James, and John. That's 14:34 in a recent translation.
3. As I've mentioned already, Mk. himself is specific about the grief J. bears in the garden. It's the same astonishment, the same amazement, the same baffled not-

getting-it that has so troubled others as they've watched him in mysterious action around the sea or on the road. Now it's his turn to be baffled and amazed, ekthambeisthai, 14:33. We can suppose he succumbs to this for at least two reasons. On the one hand there's the blindness, the deafness, the doltish unbelief, the outright hostility that has so irked him all along. Now it's rising up in tsunami proportions to sweep him away. How do you wrap your mind around something like that, the astonishing durability of oppositional unbelief, the blindness that won't be healed, no matter what? Coupled with that, 14:36, is the will of the Father for whom all things are possible, who now exercises that will not by withdrawing the cup but instead by insisting that J. drink it down, thus becoming the camel of camels who makes the first excruciating passage through the eye of the needle. That too is one of those things that's possible for God, as Jesus himself had said, 10:27. Away he'll go to open the needle's eyes so that other camels, rich and poor alike, can follow him when following him is the only option they've got left, either that or perish. By the way, I don't think it at all fanciful to presume that Mark invites us to draw connections like these. To the contrary. It's his modus operandi as a good news teller. Drop the hints. Leave it to them to put the two and two together, the seed growing secretly (4:26-27).

4. As in earlier sections, there are places in the Golgotha movement where Mark has J. quoting directly from the Old Testament, in each case drawing our attention to interpretive material. There are three of these quotations. Let's look at them quickly.
5. The first will be unfamiliar to almost all of us. Zechariah 13:7-9, the opening of which J. quotes on the way to Gethsemane, 14:27-7 'Awake, O sword, against my

shepherd, against the man who is my associate,' says the Lord of hosts. Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones. 8 In the whole land, says the Lord, two-thirds shall be cut off and perish, and one-third shall be left alive. 9 And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people' and they will say, 'The Lord is our God.' You'll be struck here by the echoes of the material in the Malachi gap of 1:2, silver being refined and gold tested in fire. The aim is to purge impurities and forge a new and faithful relationship between the people and their God. That's why the shepherd is struck and the sheep scattered. That's what the pending crucifixion will accomplish. And that's as far as Mark will go, even by allusion. He won't pull an Anselm and trot out a theory on the inner workings of the mind and heart of God. Instead, "to you has been the secret of the kingdom of God," 4:11, where secret is mystery, a thing to be preached as reality and accomplished fact, but still, a mystery. I have no clue why God should love me, or Christ be patient with me even unto death. He just is, and does.

6. Daniel 7:13 is the second quotation. It comprises part two of J.' response to the high priest's demand, "Are you the Christ, God's Son?" (14:61). Response Part One is a simple (and astonishing) Ego eimi. I AM. That's burning bush talk (Ex. 3). Jesus has used it before, with his disciples (6:50). Response Part Two, i.e. Daniel: "You will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power," etc. This cinches the case for the prosecution. The fellow has to die. What else can be done with a flesh-and-blood human being who claims an identity that belongs exclusively to the God of Israel, the great I AM? Blasphemy, pending as a

growing suspicion ever since 2:6, is now the explicit charge; and given what the high priest et al. are now able to see and hear, conviction is the only possible option, as in the only righteous option. "Hear, O Israel, this God is the one, the only" (Deut. 6:4). How can any responsible person allow a Nazarene bumpkin to worm his way into that one-and-only-ness, however flashy and impressive said bumpkin may be? Ego eimi indeed! Proper sin management begins and ends with shutting the blaspheming mouth once and for all. Ergo God's own move in the beginning when he pushes the first blasphemers away from the tree of life (Gen. 3:22-24). So God's high priest has got to dispatch this one to the tree of death, with Moses' stamp of approval on the entire operation. Of course there's no way that anybody at all can begin to guess that for once and only once a one-and-only non-blasphemer is about to breathe his last. That will become apparent post-Easter, but only to those with eyes that see and ears that hear and hearts that really beat. Meanwhile, chances are that hearing ears will pick up on the possibility that J. is injecting a paradoxical twist into Daniel's word. "You will see the Son of God sitting at the right hand of power when he comes in glory. " Yes, and the first will be last and the last first, the greatest are the least and the least greatest, and is Mark inviting us to understand that when the chief priests et al. see J. hanging on the cross, it's precisely in that moment that they'll be seeing the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power? John certainly wants us to think that. Is this Mark's way of conveying the same idea, that ultimate power for us is exercised by J. in his death? Jesus, who in his dying secures and underwrites his authority as the Son of God to keep on forgiving sins, or more to the point, perhaps, to keep on being patient with doltish, feckless disciples

like you and me? Again, whether Mark intends this is at best a guess. By contrast, his *modus operandi* requires us to use the rest of the material in this “Daniel gap” to shape our understanding of who Jesus is post-Easter. See Dan. 7:14 in particular: To him was given dominion and glory and kingship, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that shall not pass away, and his kingship is one that shall never be destroyed. Or to put that succinctly, Jesus rules.

7. The third great Scriptural quote is from Psalm 22: “My God, why have you forsaken me?” This, in Mark’s telling, is J.’ sole word from the cross (15:34). Am I the only who hears the widow groaning this same word as she throws her last penny in the temple coffer? Or how about those folks back in chapter 5, Jairus and the bleeding woman? Aren’t they groaning it too? And isn’t this word the constant undercurrent in the noise of those frantic, teeming crowds that hem J. in again and again at the seaside, or dog his heels every step of the way to Jerusalem.? I hear Mk. saying, see how J. makes our groan his groan; and I hear Mk. inviting me to add, see how in J. case it’s a one-and-only righteous groan, i.e. of someone—the only one—whose eyes and ears have always been open to God and who has never broken faith with him.
8. That noted, when we follow Mark’s prompt and turn to the psalm we again find an abundance of material that serves as commentary on the event he reports, in this case the crucifixion:

From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him. 26 The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord. May your hearts live for ever! 27 All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the

Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. 8 For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations. 9 To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. 30 Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, 31and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

9. By pointing to this, Mark invites at least two conclusions. a) Because of J.' crucifixion, "the poor shall eat and be satisfied; and those who seek the Lord (e.g. poor widow) will praise the Lord." Praise him as opposed to cursing him, as one guesses the widow may have done after tossing in her whole living and then heading off to die. b) Because of the crucifixion "all the ends of earth will turn to the Lord and all families of the nations worship before him." In other words, the crucifixion will accomplish the very thing the temple was meant to accomplish—nations streaming to Zion, etc.—but hasn't, and won't. Mark doesn't speculate on how this will happen; but, via the psalm, asserts merely that it will happen, and that the death of J. is of essence in making it happen. Again, this is a Sgt. Joe Friday assertion, just the facts: it will happen; there's no need, at least for now, to go into the whys and hows.
10. What this Psalm 22 gap information does tell us is that J.' death will do what God's temple arrangements aren't doing—extending mercy, that is, and drawing the nations into God's praise. And now we also understand why, in the moment of J.' last breath, the temple curtain is torn in two, from top to bottom, the latter being a hugely important detail. (If from bottom to top, human beings could have done it. God alone can rip the other way, from

top to bottom. Thus Harry Wendt of Crossways.) Now J. hangs as the sole source of divine life and mercy flowing into the world and drawing the world to God. Not that J. will do that if he stays dead, or if nobody bothers to talk about him. Which brings us to the last great problem of St. Mark's Gospel, namely its abrupt ending on an apparent note of abject failure.

11. Mark 16-When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' 4When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' 8So 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.
12. So women say nothing to anybody because they're afraid. They're not the only ones. This is standard operating procedure in our own congregations today. Folks will swarm on Easter Sunday. And when they go home they'll say nothing to anybody, because they're afraid. Every pastor has run across parents who say nothing about J. to their own children, refusing even for their sake to underscore that with J. alive, well, and in charge (cf. the Ps. 22 gap material above) they don't need to be afraid. Why the

mute parents? Because they're afraid—of “imposing their beliefs” on their children in violation of emerging mores in the wider pluralistic culture, a culture that finds the likes of Tim Tebow to be deeply annoying.

13. I wonder if that isn't the Sitz-im-Leben into which Mark sends this Gospel. First century churches were also comprised of feckless believers who were scared to death of telling it like it is in the post-Easter era when Jesus, the Son of God (1:1), rules, governs, and manages sin via the new forgiveness regime (cf. [ThTheol 742](#), par. 19). Instead of touting and celebrating this they play the games that Peter played at Antioch (thus Paul, Gal. 2:11-12), still pretending that Gentiles should become Jews if they want to be real Christians. And maybe they're feeling ashamed of that too—ashamed, that is, of saying nothing as they cave to the Zeitgeist. I know I feel ashamed of it. And I'll bet the folks in the congregation I serve are ashamed of it too, or at least the thoughtful ones are.
14. Parenthetically, I'll also bet that Mark was thinking about this back in chapter 8, when J. expands on the first passion prediction with a comment about the Son of Man being ashamed of people who are ashamed of him (8:38).
15. Mark's first point to the churches, whether 1st or 21st century, is that that there's nothing new about the fear and shame we feel today as disciples who, saying nothing to anyone, fail to pass along the good news and to exercise our authority to invite repentance, heal the sick (especially the sick at heart) and give the boot to unclean spirits (cf. 6:12-13).
16. His second point is to underscore the ongoing mystery of faith in Jesus and of the unfolding reign of God's new forgiveness regime that this specific faith gives rise to. He achieves that underscoring through the stunned,

dumbfounded silence that necessarily follows on 16:8, from which silence arises an embryonic “Aha” and with it a pressing and inescapable question: if those women, minds thoroughly blown, said nothing to anybody because they were afraid, then how is it that you and I are talking about J. today and are able sometimes and in some setting to blab madly away, at least to each other, about God mightily at work for us in his death and resurrection? Or more succinctly, how is it that we celebrate Easter at all?

17. Mark’s answer, as in the only possible conclusion we can come to: “It’s a miracle!” A miracle, moreover, that only a Jesus-risen-from-the-dead could pull off.
18. Looking back we suddenly see how Mark has been setting us up for this conclusion all along, via the accumulation of material he’s been trotting us through. Those spit miracles, for example—big sigh and double pass, the deaf guy hearing and blabbing, the blind guy seeing at last. Couple that with Mark’s witness to J.’ dogged, unrelenting determination to stick with dense and timid disciples no matter what, and somehow in some way to bring some confidence and genuine understanding to life in them. This has been the toughest miracle of all for Jesus to effect, and by 16:8 it still hasn’t happened. From the ensuing silence comes the message that not even then did Jesus give up. Instead he has used his resurrection to pull off at last what eluded him around the sea and on the road, the miracle of seeing-and-hearing disciples accomplished not in a second pass but in a 222nd pass, for all we know. Else how could anyone have heard what we ourselves have come to believe imperfectly, in our own versions of the incessant flip-flop back and forth between the faith that follows Jesus and the demonic doubt that doesn’t (cf. Peter in 8:29-33)?

19. It seems to me that Mark supports this conclusion by hinting strongly at a miracle of faith effected by the risen Jesus—who else could it be?—already on Easter morning. The hint appears in the person of the mysterious young man—neaniskos in Gk.—whom the women find in Jesus' open tomb. He is anything but afraid, and imparts the news of J.' resurrection quite happily. Two significant details: first, he is dressed in a white robe, stole in Gk, a nice reminder for those of us who wear modern stoles about the essential nature of our vocation. Second, he is seated on the right side of tomb, a detail that calls to mind J. response to James and John, 10:40: "but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."
20. Two chapters earlier Mark told us of another mysterious neaniskos, this one dressed in a shroud. When grabbed he slips the shroud and runs naked into the night. This detail is famously unique to Mark.
21. A proposal: what if these two young men aren't two but one and the same? I find this idea compelling. Why else would Mark bother inserting the one neaniskos into the Gethsemane story? The classic explanation, that Mk. is pulling an Albert Hitchcock move and giving himself a cameo appearance in his story seems terribly weak to me. And on the other side, why is the figure in the tomb identified as a neaniskos and not as an angelos, an angel, as Matthew does? The choice of word, I think, is deliberate. Because, in fact, the two young men aren't two, but one and the same. This makes the point that the resurrected J. is operating with a new kind of power that grabs a stranger and turns him overnight, or in a moment's flash, into a genuine apostle, no longer naked with unbelief but clothed with the righteousness that comes of faith, as Paul will later say.

22. Speaking of Paul there too is neaniskos in whom Christ worked the miracle. And how about Francis, the pampered rich boy of Assisi who does what the pampered rich boy of chapter 10 is unable to do? Or how about Luther the law student? Or the British boys who piled into flimsy coracles and rowed across cold seas so they could talk about Jesus to the worshipers of Wotan in the dreadful forests of Germany? And of course let's not forget the women. Starting with these women, the ones too afraid to speak. Matthew adds to his version of Mark's report by sticking in a note about J. appearing suddenly to them on their way back from the tomb. Mark prefers to leave us reaching the conclusion on our own. It had to have happened. How else would you and I be talking today about the resurrection of the Son of God?
23. This brings me to another proposal I'd like to toss out, namely that by ending where he does Mark invites us to draw the life and witness of the Church into the work of interpreting and understanding the story he tells. It's the same move he keeps making with the prophets, only this time he's drawing from the opposite chronological direction. Here too, I think, we ought to take him seriously, more seriously than the rules and procedures of standard exegesis would permit us to do. So you want to make sense of Mark's Gospel? Then read the prophets. They'll clue you in. But go in the other direction too. Dig out, dare we say, the Augsburg Confession. This too is a testimony to Christ and his work produced in dark, tough times when institutions established to mediate God's mercy were corrupt and the beneficiaries of those institutions were strong and fiercely determined to hang onto the bennies they derived from them. And the last thing they are interested in is a Christ who behaves as J. does in Mark. Does anyone want to know what Mark's story about

this J. means for us? Then take a look at what they confessed about him in those reformation days, how, Art. 2, the fundamental problem we face is sin, which, Art. 3, Jesus the Son of Man and the Son of God addresses; which, Art. 4, is of use to us only when we grab hold of it by faith, which, Art. 5, is a miraculous gift and creation of the Holy Spirit who opens eyes and ears and hearts and operates mysteriously, working such faith if and as the Spirit sees fit. Try using that, sometime, as a template for reading Mark, and you too will be pleasingly amazed by the extent to which the witness of the confessing children illuminates the witness of the testifying evangelist parent from whom they drew their information in the first place, he among others.

24. Back to the point, and thus to Mark's ending point. Out there in the darkness and silence of the post-16:8 gap the risen Lord is at work. Disciples may be as thick and dense and scared as ever. Christ Jesus has not given up on them. His compassion (and God's) for the milling crowds remains what it's always been. They are his people and the sheep of his pasture. He resents the spirits that afflict and madden them and leave them unclean. He abhors the authority, whether God-given or not, that sucks them dry and leaves them without hope. He revels in the trust he finds in people who jump at him for the saving that he alone is able to provide as the Son of Man and Son of God with authority on earth to forgive sins. To keep his work going he needs disciples who are strong, confident, unafraid, and who talk about him incessantly as the good news for all that he alone is. Disciples of this ilk will count on him to do what he alone is able to do to create that faith. In the end this determination of J., his refusal to give up on us, is the Good News that Mark writes to tell us about.

25. With this in mind, keep praying that Christ will form that faith in you so that your eyes see, your ears hear, and your feet trudge gladly behind him as Bartimaeus once did.

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