

Snakes and Other Dangers in The Gospel of Mark

April 24, 2016 -- The Feast of St. Mark

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Mark 16:15-20

On this day we celebrate our patronal feast, to use an old expression. April 25, tomorrow, is the feast day of St. Mark – our saint. And while it is not compulsory that anyone who attends St. Mark’s must like Mark’s gospel the best, it is perhaps helpful to look to St. Mark as a guidepost in the vast symbolic world of Christianity, arbitrary as it might be, and to look to Mark as a way of making sense out of Christianity and community.

We make an attempt at unifying our community around Mark’s gospel in our Life, Community, and Faith classes. This class is over many weeks and looks at the issues and concerns of our lives and how they apply these practical experiences to theological categories – as opposed to applying theology to our lives.

One of the most popular activities in this class, according to my short experience with it, is when the group reads the gospel of Mark in its entirety, from start to finish in one sitting. Most of us don’t read whole books of the Bible all at once. Even we clergy usually read scripture in the bits and pieces we dole out for daily reading. Reading the whole gospel allows one to see the sweep of the narrative, to be taken up by the full story.

If you’ve done this activity, and I know some of you have done it many times, you might be confused by this reading. “When did this happen?” you are probably saying to yourself. “I don’t remember this bit at all.” And you’d be right, because this ain’t the gospel of Mark. It’s an ending that somebody or somebodies tacked on sometime after Mark wrote it, but before the end of the 2nd century.

The actual ending goes something like this: Mary and the other women go to the tomb and see that Jesus isn’t there. An angel tells them that Jesus has risen and to go and tell the others that he has gone ahead of them to Galilee. It ends with this inspiring sentence, “So they (the women) went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8)

That’s it. That’s the end. That’s the Easter story. “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Alleluia!

No wonder someone came along and made it a little tidier. Many, many years later, in the 16th century, the Council of Trent decided it was good enough for them and voted it canonical. After all it basically summarizes the other gospels’ post resurrection events, so it’s not entirely off base. It’s so canonical that it is one of two choices for the reading on the feast day of St. Mark.

So why did I choose this one and not the other one (which was our traditional advent reading of John the Baptist crying in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey)? Well, I’ll tell you; when I have a choice of readings for a sermon I use two criteria: which reading is harder? I

always like to go with the reading that seems more difficult to me because it pushes me to think harder. And two, are there snakes? The answer was yes to both of these questions – yes it is harder and yes there are snakes. So here we are!

And it is good to hear this reading on our patronal feast day when we are taking stock of who are as the community of St. Mark's and as we seek to share ourselves in a more determined and focused way with the larger world. For this addition to Mark's gospel, though it may seem like just a simple summary of the endings of the other gospels, is, in fact, a betrayal of the gospel. Let me add this caveat that the post resurrection stories in the other gospels make sense in their context and have something important to say in their narratives, but this rewrite of those stories neatly gives us a happy ending to a narrative that's meant to leave us breathless and wondering. Wondering, if the women told nobody how did the story ever come to us? And, most importantly, what would I do?

Understanding exactly how this ending betrays the gospel of Mark might give insight into what the core of the gospel is. In other words, pointing at it and saying, "Not that!" gives us a clue as to what it is.^[1]

The first betrayal of this false ending is a denial of the real struggle of unbelief that is honored throughout the gospel of Mark. The disciples wrestle with faith and most often fall short and Mark is sympathetic to their plight. It is hard to believe; maybe it's even too difficult. Remember Mark 9:24, "I believe; help my unbelief!" a bereaved father cries out to Jesus. His ambivalence is treated as a reasonable confession of faith.

The extended version turns a community of failure ridden but beloved disciples into the good guys versus the bad guys; believers versus unbelievers. And once you have that, then you have the believers judging the unbelievers and the cross becomes a sword.

The second betrayal is the promise that miracle working will guarantee belief. The disciples, if they believe, will be able to produce signs such as the ability to handle snakes or drink poison without coming to harm and these signs will persuade others to believe. Again, this argument undoes the work of the gospel. Jesus debates the Pharisees on just this issue. And while it's easy for us to scoff at snake handling and faith healing, there are all sorts of gospels of success at work around us – from the prosperity gospel to a gospel of positive thinking – that teach the false idea that being a Christian means demonstrating visible power.

The third betrayal is the removal of Jesus from earth to heaven. The original gospel has no ascension story. Jesus has not left earth, but has gone ahead of the disciples to Galilee. We are called to meet him there. We discover Jesus' presence not by looking up to the sky, but by the practice of discipleship in the world.

Sad to say, the Council of Trent got it wrong and this ending to Mark is just about the worst way to honor the saint who brought us a striking story of ambivalent belief, a commitment to powerlessness, and an earthy Jesus. We at St. Mark's can be comfortable with much of Mark's core: the struggle with belief and doubt, the skeptical attitude toward miracles and signs, a more mysterious resurrection. But what does that mean for our lives? Because if Mark's Jesus changes

Yahweh's great declaration, "I am" into a question, "Who am I?" then we must be able to answer if, even in ambivalence. Sometimes, our commitment to living the questions merely hides behind questions – not going ahead to Galilee, but standing around Jerusalem pondering over what happened. We have to ask, and then answer for ourselves, just what a life of discipleship looks like and decide if we are going to meet Jesus who has gone ahead of us.

So, let's go back to those snakes for a moment. David Lott^[2] an editor of religious books here in DC and who meets with a group of us on Capitol Hill each week to discuss the lectionary wrote an interesting piece a couple of years ago reflecting on the practice of snake handling in West Virginia as it was portrayed in two articles in the Washington Post. The first was called "Keeping the Faith" and it followed the Pentecostal Church of Randy "Mack" Wolford who led his congregation in, among other activities, the handling of poisonous snakes as a sign of their faith in God. The follow up article was called, "Why I watched a snake handling minister die for his faith." The photographer, Lauren Pond, who had become friends with this preacher was present taking pictures when he was fatally bit by a Timber Rattlesnake.

Her story is about her ethical struggles of whether or not to call for medical help (she does not) and whether or not to keep taking pictures (she does). David Lott is most interested in how she takes this preacher's faith seriously. See, it's easy for us to look on this practice as foolish and risky and not even a good understanding of the gospel. But the photographer treats this community and the preacher with dignity. David Lott points out the many overwhelming struggles this particular community faces: extreme poverty, alcoholism, joblessness – many little deaths he calls them. Surviving snake bite, of which this preacher survived many, and poison surely does seem like God's work in action.

I see preacher Mack Wolford's strange and risky practice of snake handling that led to his death as a kind of symbolic action. He committed his life to believing that God is present even when it seems foolish and failure seems inevitable. I certainly don't advise handling dangerous snakes or drinking poison. Let me be clear, not a good idea. But I do think that Mark is warning us as well as inviting us. Discipleship is not going to be easy. Fleeing in fear is a reasonable response. Love and justice hasn't had a good record historically. Pursuing it might be as dangerous as picking up a rattlesnake. Just look at what happened to Jesus.

The power of Mark's gospel lies not in what it tells the disciples/readers, but in what it asks of them. We are compelled to reveal where we stand. Revealing our commitments and following Jesus in the work of making the kingdom of God present to all will make us look foolish and it is risky. There is certainly no promise of success.

As the people of St. Mark's or St. Mark, we have to ask ourselves, is there any other path available to us. Realism, cynicism, avoidance, have not yielded much success either in preventing us from going down a path of economic and environmental destruction. Perhaps the way of Jesus is the only option, no matter how risky. So our other work is simply to keep one another's courage up as we struggle to give our answers.

[1] This reading of the epilogue of Mark is influenced by Ched Myers' *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) 402-409.

[2] David Lott's reflection on snake handling and the trinity is available as a public note on Facebook and <https://www.facebook.com/notes/10152838393164240/>. The articles references from the Washington Post are found here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/in-wva-snake-handling-is-still-considered-a-sign-of-faith/2011/10/18/gIQAmiqL9M_story.html and here: https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/why-i-watched-a-snake-handling-pastor-die-for-his-faith/2012/05/31/gJQA3fRP5U_story.html