

“Unlikely Witness”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 4/19/2020
Text: Mark 16:9-20 at FBC of Newport, NH

//9 When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. 11 When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.//

—Mark 16:9-11 (NIV)

Let me refresh for you last week’s text. It starts off saying: “*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb*” (MK 16:1-2) And now, just a few verses later, it starts all over again with Jesus rising early on the first day and with an introduction of Mary Magdalene. It reads like it’s been a while since we’ve talked about this event, so we need a new start. Which works fine for us today since it’s been a week since last Sunday’s message. But it reads oddly when it’s right in the middle of Mark’s last chapter.

And that’s my point. This isn’t really the middle of Mark’s last chapter. Mark either ended his Gospel right where we left off last week, like the greatest cliff-hanger ever, or else he didn’t get to complete it the way he wanted, maybe due to martyrdom. Either way, it was the way God wanted it. And so the earliest copy of Mark went out to the church without verses 9-20.

Do you remember the movie “The Passion of the Christ”? That had an even shorter ending than did Mark. However, being a movie, it took us right into the tomb and showed us Jesus just as he was rising from the dead. And then the credits rolled. No women at the tomb, no appearances, though all of that is implied. The same would be true of Mark’s short ending as most who would read it already had heard the Story.

Mark, by God’s design, gave us the life and passion of Christ. And then gave just the first sign of Jesus’ resurrection. Leaving the reader with the sense of amazement which has been highlighted all through the Gospel—beginning, middle and ending. However, sometime later there were these twelve verses added to make a kind of second ending to the Gospel of Mark. They didn’t try to make it sound like Mark. They didn’t try to add the unique kinds of details which Mark was so good at doing. They just wanted to put something there to highlight the numerous stories which came *after* that first shocking scene of the empty tomb. And so they came up with these dozen verses. We don’t know where, but most everything it says can be found in sections of the other Gospels. Soon the church embraced this second ending as fitting the Story of Jesus.

Even today, with scholars drawing a line between verses eight and nine and footnoting that the last twelve verses were probably not original to Mark, these verses still gravitate back to Mark. It’s kind of like the account of the “Woman Caught in Adultery” found wedged into the Gospel of John. It’s not

original to that book, people can question if it belongs there and if it still has the same authority as the original. But meanwhile it is simply telling its part of the story, bearing its awkward, unlikely witness to Jesus—even if it wasn't planned to be that way by any of us originally. It *is* a very old record. It's been literally bound together with the Gospel for centuries. And people *are* paying attention to these unlikely verses as they point to Jesus.

I'll bet if you took most people's Bibles and looked at what they kept under the front and back covers of it, you would find things in keeping with it. Oh there might be some funny exceptions, a lottery ticket or speeding ticket. (I had a warning from the Newberry police department in my Bible for quite a while.) But the vast majority of examples, I'll bet you, would be fitting. And telling.

These things would bear witness not only to what is in that Bible, but to what is in the person holding that Bible as well. I have some odd things in mine, most all of which are not only in the Bible, but are in keeping with it. A prayer list. A Committal prayer. A hymn. A sticker with the air flight numbers of the planes that took me to Israel. And more. They don't need to be inspired to have their say. And their importance.

And this takes me to the *original* unlikely witness for Jesus. Mary Magdalene, who has been introduced twice to us now, once by Mark and once again by this second ending attached to Mark. It tells us this Mary, from the city of Magdala on the shore of Galilee, was the very first eye witness of the risen Jesus. What a privilege. What a place in history. When you think about it she holds a place in the history of "Firsts" more important than that of the Wright Brothers or even Neil Armstrong. Jesus gave this honor to Mary Magdalene.

But she was not believed. She did not even seem believable. She didn't have the right credentials. So what good was she? She wasn't a man. Men were the ones taken most seriously back in that day. A credible witness should have been a man. She'd also had seven demons cast out of her at some time in just the past three years. And now she alone was claiming she had seen Jesus alive after he'd been crucified and entombed! Not likely. Atheists and Agnostics love to insist that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." But God seems to think just the opposite. There was nothing extraordinary about Mary. (Even her name was common and completely ordinary.) And that, evidently, was good enough for God.

Sometimes God calls us to be an unlikely witness and servant for him, for reasons only he understands. This means your testimony may not go as expected. Others may not believe you, nor admire you, or follow where you point. Everything may be so clear to you, but to no one else, at least for now. Still, you just need to concentrate on what he's asking of you—and do it, with all your heart. God will make sense of it... no, no, no. Actually it already makes sense. But it's a big Story, this Gospel. And it takes a lot of time, patience and faithfulness to tell it properly.