The Passion
and Resurrection Narratives of Jesus
Nihil obstat: Robert C. Harren, Censor deputatus.


Cover design by Ann Blattner. Cover image: Christ on the Cross by Peter Watts, British (1916–2002). From Chapel 17 in the crypt of Saint John’s Abbey Church, Collegeville, Minnesota. Photo by Alan Reed, OSB. Used with permission.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the New American Bible, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, DC, and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

© 1989, 2016 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John’s Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016935135

Contents

Preface  7

Introduction  9

The Passion and Resurrection according to Mark  13

The Passion and Resurrection according to Matthew  39

The Passion and Resurrection according to Luke  70

The Passion and Resurrection according to John  97
Preface

This book is a revision of the first manuscript I ever wrote. Although I first authored it in 1989, when I was fresh from completing my biblical studies in Rome and Jerusalem, it has remained my perennially bestselling work. This is due primarily to the fact that it was commissioned by Little Rock Scripture Study as the commentary for their Lenten study and has been used for nearly three decades for Bible studies around the world. Now revised, it will hopefully provide insight into the meaning of the Lord’s passion and resurrection for many more decades to come.

The passion and resurrection of Jesus is the core of the Scriptures. It is also the heart of faith, liturgy, and prayer for all Christians. Indebted to the ongoing biblical scholarship of countless others, I have synthesized and reshaped the research for the benefit of a wide audience. I hope the explanations and insights contained in this book will enrich the faith, worship, and prayer of all who look to the crucified and risen Jesus as the source of life.

Although this book represents many solitary hours of study, research, and writing, it is also the result of a community of people. A constant source of motivation and suggestions for this work are the participants and leaders of Little Rock Scripture Study. I am grateful for some of the founding leaders who encouraged me to write—Fr. Jerome Kodell, OSB; Fr. Richard Oswald; Lilly Hess; and Matt Mattingly. I also thank Catherine “Cackie” Upchurch for typing this manuscript for me back in 1989 and for her leadership of Little Rock Scripture Study today.

Above all, I thank my mother and father, my continual source of faith and life, to whom I dedicated this, my first book, in 1989, and to whom I rededicate this work in 2016.

Stephen J. Binz
Introduction

The very core of the good news of Christianity is the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Paul states the central message of the church’s earliest proclamation: “I handed on to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve” (1 Cor 15:3-5). All the writings of the New Testament demonstrate that the passion, death, and resurrection was the culmination of Jesus’ mission and brought all the words and deeds of his life to a climax.

The passion and resurrection accounts in each of the four gospels are remarkably similar, considering the vast differences in time and circumstance in which each author wrote. The similarities in the events, sequence, characters, and vocabulary point to the antiquity of the traditions and the deep respect of each writer for the historical remembrances of the original disciples.

Yet when comparing the accounts of the four gospels what stands out even more clearly are the differences. Too often we hasten to try to reconcile the differences rather than seek to understand what those differences mean. Each writer provides us with a profoundly distinctive contribution to our understanding of Jesus and his saving acts. Writing in a different cultural context with a new set of circumstances for the Christian community, each evangelist presented the early traditions in new ways. Presenting a detailed biography was not the dominant concern of each author; rather, they all interpreted the meaning of Jesus’ word and deeds as they listened to the apostolic preaching and followed the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The living Word took on new shape
according to the needs and circumstances of each community and each generation of Christians.

The early preaching of the church proclaimed that Jesus’ passion, death, and resurrection were “according to the Scriptures.” Through the Spirit’s guidance the church came to see how the saving deeds of Jesus brought the saving history of God’s people to a culminating fulfillment. They realized, through the prayerful and liturgical reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, how the tragedy and triumph they had experienced in Jesus was in conformity with God’s will. In writing their accounts, the evangelists drew on the words of the prophets, the prayers of the psalms, and other texts, to help the church see God’s presence in the paschal events.

Clearly the passion and resurrection accounts are colored by the relationship of the church and the synagogue in each particular generation and locality. The accusations of the Jewish leaders, the portrayal of Pilate, and the reactions of the Jews and the Romans at the final events of Jesus’ life vary in each gospel according to the religious and political climate in which the author lived. Hostile generalizations about the Jewish people, such as “all the people” in Matthew, and “the Jews” in John, reflect later developments in times of competition and persecution. Simplistic accusations about guilt for the death of Jesus, known so well from our painful history, occur when we read the gospels too literally and fail to critically interpret them.

Each gospel presents us with a different portrait of Jesus. Just as a scene can be photographed from several different angles to give us a better appreciation of the reality, the person of Jesus can be known and understood more fully because we have four different portraits. All of them are given to us by the inspiring Spirit, yet none of them exhausts the fullness of who Jesus is.

Through a detailed examination of the passion and resurrection accounts of each gospel, we can experience the person of Jesus more deeply. Through reflection on these accounts, we can understand more fully the central events of our Christian faith. Through seeing how each writer responded to the mystery of Jesus in his own life, we can enter more completely into the saving death and resurrection of Jesus for ourselves.

The gospel accounts are not just memories from the past; they are a living reality for the present. Like the early Christians, we can identify aspects of our lives with the fearful disciples, the hostile opponents, the vacillating crowds, the betrayer, and the one who denied Jesus. Yet above all, through reading the gospels we seek to conform our lives to the life
of Jesus. He was not just a victim of circumstances, but his suffering and death was the inevitable result of his commitments. By conforming our lives to his passion, not only are we better able to endure our own suffering, but we actively take up the cross, the necessary result of a life committed to others. Likewise, in the resurrection, not only are we assured of eternal life, but we are empowered to live the only kind of life worth living forever.
We begin our study of the passion and resurrection narratives with the Gospel of Mark. Though the narratives were formed from the earlier traditions of the Christian community, the accounts written by Mark are the earliest extant narratives of Jesus’ passion and resurrection. Mark’s accounts are also of primary importance because they are the principal source for the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and possibly even for John.

Though the passion and resurrection form the climactic final chapters of Mark’s gospel, the cross is embedded in Jesus’ entire life. Mark, throughout his gospel, shows how Jesus takes up his cross by choosing a way of life that inevitably leads to rejection, suffering, and death. Jesus’ ministry provokes controversy both in Galilee and in Jerusalem. These conflicts with the religious authorities lead to their plotting against Jesus to put him to death (3:6; 11:18). The passion of John the Baptist anticipates the passion of Jesus as it shows that the destiny of a prophet is suffering and rejection.

The question of Jesus, “Who do you say that I am?” (8:29), creates the centrifugal force of the entire gospel. The question implies that the gospel is about the identity of Jesus and the struggle of the disciples to understand that identity. The reader is told from the beginning that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God (1:1), and the disciples will continually struggle to understand this identity of Jesus. In his three predictions of suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), Jesus reveals that his identity is made known through his destiny. By using the title Son of Man, Jesus shows that he cannot be understood as triumphant except through his suffering and death.
Jesus is most fully revealed on the cross. He who is utterly abandoned by his disciples and seemingly even by God, is truly the Son of God. Jesus’ death becomes the moment of revelation, when the hidden identity of Jesus is made fully known. Through the paradox of the cross the true disciple is able to understand the full meaning of Jesus’ messiahship.

The cross not only reveals Jesus’ full identity, but it is also the test of true discipleship. “For whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it” (8:35). A disciple is one who willingly gives his life for others as Jesus did. The disciples, too, will be plotted against, betrayed, denied, mocked, abandoned, and persecuted as they anticipate the glorious return of Jesus. The suffering, death, and triumph of Jesus is also the passion of the community of his disciples.

Mark’s gospel is not a tragedy. The kingdom of God is already present in Jesus and in his community, yet it is hidden in lowliness, suffering, and persecution, just as the glorious identity of Jesus is hidden in his passion. The gospel anticipates the future as Jesus is confident the Father will raise him from death. Abandoned by his followers, Jesus knows that he will go again to Galilee to gather his scattered flock. There he will lead them in the way of discipleship as they anticipate his return in glory.

The Conspiracy against Jesus

Mark 14:1-2

The Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were to take place in two days’ time. So the chief priests and the scribes were seeking a way to arrest him by treachery and put him to death.

They said, “Not during the festival, for fear that there may be a riot among the people.”

Mark begins his passion account by placing these final events within the context of the Jewish Passover celebration. Each year Passover commemorated the redemption of the Israelites from slavery to freedom. It began, as all Jewish feasts, at sundown. In the afternoon before the feast, the Passover lamb was sacrificed in the Temple. With the Passover supper that evening, the events of the Exodus were retold and remembered. Only unleavened bread was eaten for the supper and for seven days thereafter, remembering the hasty departure from Egypt and the affliction in the desert. Since the Passover was to be celebrated from sundown on Thursday to sundown on Friday, Mark’s chronology would place the beginning of the plot against Jesus on Wednesday.
Mark identifies the chief priests and the scribes several times during his gospel. The scribes were the lawyers and theologians of the time. Jesus’ conflict with them builds from the beginning of the gospel (1:22) and comes to a climax at the passion. The chief priests served as advisors to the high priest of Jerusalem. Jesus begins to mention them in his predictions of the passion (8:31). Throughout the second half of the gospel Jesus continually foretells that the religious leaders will hand him over for death. The religious leaders decided not to arrest Jesus during the feast because they feared his impact on the crowds. Yet, they are not in control and Jesus will die on the very day of Israel’s feast of liberation.

The Anointing at Bethany

*Mark 14:3-9*

> 3When he was in Bethany reclining at table in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of perfumed oil, costly genuine spikenard. She broke the alabaster jar and poured it on his head. 4There were some who were indignant. “Why has there been this waste of perfumed oil? 5It could have been sold for more than three hundred days’ wages and the money given to the poor.” They were infuriated with her. 6Jesus said, “Let her alone. Why do you make trouble for her? She has done a good thing for me. 7The poor you will always have with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them, but you will not always have me. 8She has done what she could. She has anticipated anointing my body for burial. 9Amen, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed to the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her.”

Bethany, where Jesus was lodging during his stay in Jerusalem, was a small village over the brow of the Mount of Olives. No information is given about Simon the leper, but Mark shows how Jesus continued to dine with the outcasts of society. Attention here is on the nameless woman. The story of how she anointed Jesus is a striking contrast to the plotting and treachery of the scenes that precede and follow it.

The flask of oil was a rare and expensive ointment. The woman’s pouring it over the head of Jesus is clearly a reference to the Old Testament anointing of kings. Jesus’ anointing is a sign of his kingly messiahship, which is emphasized throughout his stay in Jerusalem (11:1-10). This extravagant gesture was challenger by some of the bystanders who argued that those three hundred denari could have been given to the poor. Giving alms was an important obligation, especially during Passover.
The response of Jesus is sometimes misinterpreted as showing the inevitability of poverty. His response echoes Deuteronomy 15:11, which is actually a command to give to the poor and needy. Jesus reminds them that after his departure, the poor will remain to be cared for. The emphasis here is clearly that they will not always have Jesus because of his imminent death. Jesus interprets the true significance of the scene, a prophetic sign that points toward his death.

The woman is able to understand his approaching death and respond in a lavishly generous way. What she has done will be told in memory of her because in the midst of betrayal the woman showed the response of a true disciple. She and many other women in the gospel (12:42-44; 15:40-41) respond far more authentically than the inner circle of Jesus’ disciples.

Mark ties this story into his passion narrative. It is a symbolic reminder of Jesus’ dying and rising. It is an anointing for burial, since the rapidly approaching Sabbath would leave no time for the customary anointing after his death. The story also hints at the resurrection that will make the later anointing by the women at the tomb impossible.

Verse 9 refers to the universal message of the Gospel that Jesus has instructed the community to proclaim “to all the nations” (13:10). This story will be told because it is the good news of Jesus’ saving death and the call to respond to it with generous service.

**The Betrayal by Judas**

*Mark 14:10-11*

> 10 Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went off to the chief priests to hand him over to them. 11 When they heard him they were pleased and promised to pay him money. Then he looked for an opportunity to hand him over.

Mark connects this scene with the rest of the gospel by stating that Judas Iscariot was one of the Twelve. Jesus had chosen Judas, as one of the Twelve, to be with him and had given him a share in his teaching and his mission. This scene forms a sharp contrast to the memorable scene of true discipleship that precedes it. The woman generously responds with costly oil, while Judas betrays Jesus for money. Mark uses the scene to contrast true discipleship with failure of discipleship for all future disciples of Jesus.

The words “hand over” are used through Mark’s gospel: from the handing over of John the Baptist (1:14) to the handing over of Jesus, to
the future handing over of his disciples (13:9). Those who precede Jesus as his prophets and those who follow him as his disciples are handed over while pursuing their mission.

Mark gives no motivation for Judas’ betrayal. The evangelist emphasizes Judas’ freedom in making his tragic choice, even though he is part of the cosmic drama of Jesus’ death. As he looked for his opportunity, the final plot picks up momentum.

**Preparations for the Passover**

*Mark 14:12-16*

12 On the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, “Where do you want us to go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?” 13 He sent two of his disciples and said to them, “Go into the city and a man will meet you, carrying a jar of water. Follow him. 14 Wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, “The Teacher said, “Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?” 15 Then he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready. Make the preparations for us there.” 16 The disciples then went off, entered the city, and found it just as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover.

Mark clearly stresses that the meal they were preparing was a Passover supper. He continually reminds the reader of the significance of Israel’s central feast of hope and liberation in the context of Jesus’ passion. It is now Thursday, the day before Passover, the day for the slaughtering of the Passover lamb. The festival would begin in the evening so all the preparations needed to be made beforehand.

Jesus gives detailed instructions to two of his disciples to go and prepare the room for the Passover meal. They find the man carrying a water jar, an unusual sight since usually only women carried water in such jars, and they find everything just as Jesus had foretold.

This unusually detailed directive is similar to the preparation for Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem (11:1-7). There two disciples were instructed to go to the nearby village where they would find a colt on which no one had ever sat. The two scenes are contrasted by their mood: the first of triumphal entry; the second of the imminent tragedy. Both scenes show the prophetic knowledge of Jesus and his deliberate way of entering into his passion.


The Betrayer

Mark 14:17-21

When it was evening, he came with the Twelve. And as they reclined at table and were eating, Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” They began to be distressed and say to him, one by one, “Surely it is not I?” He said to them, “One of the Twelve, the one who dips with me into the dish. For the Son of Man indeed goes, as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed. It would be better for that man if he had never been born.”

The Passover meal is surrounded before and after by Jesus’ prediction of betrayal and denial. Mark does not name the betrayer in this scene; he refers to all the disciples who will be shaken in faith and scattered. Mark lets his readers know that they could be the subjects of the same kind of betrayal, scattering, and denial against Jesus. The scene emphasizes that the betrayer is an intimate companion of Jesus. Notice the progression: “one of you,” “one who is eating with me,” “one of the Twelve,” “one who dips with me into the dish.” The betrayal is made even more grievous as the friendship is increasingly affirmed.

The reader is drawn into the shocked response. One by one they ask Jesus, “Surely it is not I?” The reader is called to repeat the question in turn. It is a failure of which every disciple is capable.

In the psalms of lament the righteous sufferer is betrayed by his friends. Psalm 41:10, “Even my trusted friend, / who ate my bread, / has raised his heel against me,” seems to be particularly echoed here (see also Ps 55:13-15).

Again Mark stresses the betrayer’s freedom to choose his action. He reminds us that even though the passion of Jesus unfolds in accord with the Scriptures, the betrayer holds full responsibility. The prophetic woe points up the wickedness of the betrayal.

The Lord’s Supper

Mark 14:22-26

While they were eating, he took break, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, and said, “Take it; this is my body.” Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many. Amen, I say to you, I shall not drink again
the fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” Then, after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The actions of Jesus with the bread, as he takes, blesses, breaks, and give it to his disciples, are the same gestures he performed at the feeding of the five thousand and the four thousand (6:41; 8:6). In the two feeding accounts the bread becomes a profound symbol for his messianic mission as he feeds both Jews and Gentiles. In the disciples’ failure to understand the meaning of the loaves (6:52; 8:17-21), Mark shows their failure to understand the person of Jesus and the meaning of his mission.

At the eucharistic meal, Jesus goes further and identifies the loaf with his body, his very self. As Jesus is about to be handed over, broken, and put to death, this ritual action expressed Jesus’ gift of himself for others. As Jesus broke the bread for the crowds, expressing his mission as the Messiah, so his action at the meal expressed the final act of that mission as he gives his very self.

The cup refers to the death of Jesus in other passages of the gospel (10:38-45; 14:36). In each passage, the disciples are invited to share in his sacrificial death. “To drink the cup God had mixed” was a Jewish expression for the martyrdom a prophet had to undergo. As the disciples drink from it they are joining themselves to a sharing in his death.

Jesus identifies the cup of wine with his blood, the blood of the covenant. Here he evokes the covenant ratified by Moses (Exod 24:8) as he sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice over the altar and on the people. Jesus is saying that his blood, which will be shed at this death, will establish a renewed covenant relationship. “For many” is a Semitic expression this is not limited, but indicates the inclusive scope of his mission (10:45).

With another prophetic “amen” phrase, Jesus gives both finality and hope to the scene. No longer will he celebrate the Passover with his disciples. Yet Jesus looks beyond death to the banquet of God’s kingdom. The wine of the banquet is an Old Testament symbol for the abundance of the kingdom (Isa 25:6-9). The cup of Jesus’ death will be transformed into the wine of the coming kingdom.

The thanksgiving hymn they sang, consisting of Psalms 114–18, concluded the Passover meal. These songs celebrate God’s liberating power in bringing the people to freedom. As they go out to the Mount of Olives, across the valley from Jerusalem, Jesus is preparing to fulfill the Passover for all his followers.
Peter’s Denial Foretold

Mark 14:27-31

27Then Jesus said to them, “All of you will have your faith shaken, for it is written:
   ‘I will strike the shepherd, / and the sheep will be dispersed.’
28But after I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee.”
29Peter said to him, “Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be.” 30Then Jesus said to him, “Amen, I say to you, this very night before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times.” 31But he vehemently replied, “Even though I should have to die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all spoke similarly.

The Last Supper is immediately followed by Jesus’ foretelling of desertion and denial by his disciples. Again, as Jesus addresses “all of you,” Mark intends to include his readers in this prediction of broken discipleship.

Jesus first tells his disciples that they will all stumble and have their faith shaken. The Greek here literally means “be scandalized.” Mark has used this verb before to mean encountering an obstacle that blocks one’s faith. In the “Parable of the Sower,” the seed that falls on rocky ground is like those who at first receive the word with joy. But when tribulation or persecution comes, they quickly are scandalized. The faith of the disciples is not deep enough to be ready for the tribulation of suffering and death.

Jesus explains their falling away by quoting from Zechariah 13:7. Sheep and shepherd were commonly used metaphors for God and Israel. The Messiah was to be a true shepherd whom God would set over the sheep (Ezek 34:23). Mark had already applied the image to Jesus in the first account of the loaves (Mark 6:34). Now the shepherd would be struck down, and the disciples would be dispersed in disillusionment and fear. Indeed, none of the chosen disciples would remain with him until his death.

As in his prediction of his passion, Jesus follows with a prediction of resurrection and hope. The messenger repeats this promise at the empty tomb of Jesus (16:7). The promised return to Galilee will end Mark’s gospel and fulfill Jesus’ promise.

Galilee is the center of Jesus’ ministry; Jerusalem is the scene of his passion and death. By going ahead of his disciples to the beginnings of his own ministry, he allows them to once more share in his ministry. This time they will walk the way of discipleship, understanding that it leads to Jerusalem, to death and resurrection.
Peter responds that even if all the others should be scandalized, he will not. Peter’s overconfident answer leads Jesus to introduce his third prophecy with the solemn “Amen,” again Peter’s inability to accept and understand the necessity of suffering leads to his failure (8:32-34).

Once more Peter rebukes Jesus with a vehement protest (8:32). The other disciples join in the rebuttal. The shallow loyalty of the disciples, as they fail to accept Jesus’ words about the cross, forms an ironic conclusion to the dark scene.

The Agony in the Garden

Mark 14:32-42

Then they came to a place named Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” He took with him Peter, James, and John, and began to be troubled and distressed. Then he said to them, “My soul is sorrowful even to death. Remain here and keep watch.” He advanced a little and fell to the ground and prayed that if it were possible the hour might pass by him; he said, “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you. Take this cup away from me, but not what I will but what you will.” When he returned he found them asleep. He said to Peter, “Simon are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour? Watch and pray that you may not undergo the test. The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” Withdrawing again, he prayed, saying the same thing. Then he returned once more and found them asleep, for they could not keep their eyes open and did not know what to answer him. He returned a third time and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough. The hour has come. Behold, the Son of Man is to be handed over to sinners. Get up, let us go. See, my betrayer is at hand.”

Gethsemane means “olive press,” and is a secluded grove on the slope of the Mount of Olives. Here we witness the anguished prayer of Jesus before he is handed over, and the repeated failure of his closest disciples to watch with him.

Jesus takes with him Peter, James, and John as his intimate companions. It is these three who are present at the transfiguration (9:2-13) that this scene dramatically contrasts. In both scenes Jesus takes the three disciples aside from the others to reveal the depth of his mission. Just as they witnessed Jesus in glory, they now see him in anguish and weakness as he faces death. If they are to understand Jesus, they must understand his suffering as well as his glory.
These three, along with Andrew, were also the ones who heard his apocalyptic discourse on this same Mount of Olives (13:3-37). There Jesus told the disciples to watch and pray because no one, not even the Son, knows the day or the hour when the events described will take place. Here Jesus relates his own suffering to the tribulation of his disciples throughout time. The attitude of the true disciple must always be watchfulness and expectation.

The words of Jesus’ prayer echo the anguished psalms of lament. The desolation of abandonment, the terrors of approaching death, the betrayal of friends, yet trust in God’s faithfulness—these are the laments of ancient Israel that form on the lips of Jesus as his death approaches.

Jesus addresses his prayer to his Father. The Aramaic word “Abba” is preserved here, because this is the habitual prayer form of Jesus. It expresses the affectionate and reverential address by a Jewish child or adult to a parent. At his baptism and at the transfiguration, Jesus is proclaimed as God’s beloved Son. Now the deep union between Father and the Son is acclaimed by Jesus as he prays in the garden.

As the transfiguration has shown Jesus in his divine glory, the garden scene shows his profound humanity. Overwhelmed by fear and sadness, he prays that the cup be taken away. The prayer is shockingly honest. Throughout the gospel, Mark has shown Jesus as destined to lay down his life, to “drink the cup.” Yet, now as the time approaches, Jesus pours out his heart in a profound and emotional lament.

Still, the bedrock of Jesus’ prayer is the Father’s will. It is dedication to God’s will that guides Mark’s presentation of the life of Jesus. The Son of Man would drink the cup because Jesus understood God’s will through his dedicated prayer.

The ardent prayer of Jesus is strongly contrasted with the disciples’ behavior. Three times Jesus returns from prayer to find them asleep. Their continual incomprehension and failure to accept the prediction of Jesus’ suffering throughout the gospel prepares us for their failures during the passion. Jesus had predicted their desertion, and now their inability to stay awake with Jesus forecasts the collapse of their discipleship.

Before entering into prayer, Jesus had warned the disciples to “keep watch.” These words recall the final words of his apocalyptic discourse: “What I say to you, I say to all: ‘Watch!’” Clearly he relates the drowsiness of his three closest disciples to the neglectful tendencies within all his followers. Watchful alertness was to be the posture of discipleship if they were to continue the mission of Jesus in the midst of opposition and persecution.
After each prayer of Jesus the results are the same: the disciples fall asleep instead of keeping watch. Jesus urges them to “watch and pray” that they may not “undergo the test.” This is the same verb used to describe the testing of Jesus in the desert at the beginning of the gospel (1:12-13). This testing, which served as a preface to Jesus’ ministry, would continue in the lives of his followers as they struggled with the power of evil in the world. Jesus recognizes the polar dimensions within humanity: the spirit and the flesh. The spirit is responsive to God’s will, while the flesh is egotistical and opposed to God’s will.

The triple failure of the disciples is contrasted with the threefold prayer of Jesus. After finding them sleeping for a third time, Jesus announces that the hour has come and he is about to be handed over. Through his prayer Jesus is now prepared for the betrayal and passion. However, the disciples who failed to watch in vigilant prayer will flee.

The Betrayal and Arrest of Jesus

Mark 14:43-52

43 Then, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived, accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs who had come from the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders. 44 His betrayer had arranged a signal with them, saying, “The man I shall kiss is the one; arrest him and lead him away securely.” 45 He came and immediately went over to him and said, “Rabbi.” And he killed him. 46 At this they laid hands on him and arrested him. 47 One of the bystanders drew his sword, struck the high priest’s servant, and cut off his ear. 48 Jesus said to them in reply, “Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs, to seize me? 49 Day after day I was with you teaching in the temple area, yet you did not arrest me; but that the scriptures may be fulfilled.” 50 And they all left him and fled. 51 Now a young man followed him wearing nothing but a linen cloth about his body. They seized him, 52 but he left the cloth behind and ran off naked.

While Jesus was still speaking in the garden, Judas arrived with the arresting party. The crowd—that had come from the chief priests, scribes, and elders—represents the Jewish Sanhedrin. It is these religious leaders of Jerusalem who had been seeking Jesus since their confrontation with him in the temple (11:27).

Judas addressed Jesus as “Rabbi,” the honored title by which disciples addressed their master. The kiss further emphasizes that this is a betrayal
of friendship. Jesus is the righteous sufferer who is handed over by his trusted companion.

The passion predictions that mark the second half of the gospel (8:31; 9:31; 10:33) point to this handing over, the arrest of Jesus by the chief priests, elders, and scribes. The scene is marked by confusion. A bystander draws his sword and strikes the high priest’s servant. No motive is given for the action in Mark’s gospel, though it seems to be a historical detail that is a result of the mob scene. They came with swords and clubs to arrest Jesus as if he were a common criminal, though he had taught openly in the temple. Jesus does not resist arrest and his final words in this scene set the coming events within the context of God’s plan “that the scriptures may be fulfilled.” The reference here is not to any specific scriptural text, but to the whole of God’s salvific plan, shown through many Old Testament passages that influence the passion scenes.

Jesus’ prediction that the shepherd would be struck and the sheep would be dispersed is here fulfilled (14:27). The complete desertion of Jesus by his followers is starkly described: “they all left and fled.”

A final conclusion to the scene is included only in Mark’s gospel. A young man who was following Jesus left even his clothing to flee from the scene. This anonymous follower of Jesus stresses the total desertion of Jesus by his followers, and challenges the readers of the gospel to consider their own commitment to remain with Jesus in crisis.

**Jesus before the Sanhedrin**

*Mark 14:53-65*

> 53 They led Jesus away to the high priest, and all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. 54 Peter followed him at a distance into the high priest’s courtyard and was seated with the guards, warming himself at the fire. 55 The chief priests and the entire Sanhedrin kept trying to obtain testimony against Jesus in order to put him to death, but they found none. 56 Many gave false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. 57 Some took the stand and testified falsely against him, alleging, 58 “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple made with hands and within three days I will build another not made with hands.’” 59 Even so their testimony did not agree. 60 The high priest rose before the assembly and questioned Jesus, saying, “Have you no answer? What are these men testifying against you?” 61 But he was silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked him and said to him,
“Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?” 62Then Jesus answered, “I am;
and ‘you will see the Son of Man
seated at the right hand of the Power
and coming with the clouds of heaven.’”

63At that the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further need have we of witnesses? 64You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?” they all condemned him as deserving to die. 65Some began to spit on him. They blindfolded him and struck him and said to him, “Prophecy!” and the guards greeted him with blows.

The scene now shifts to the court of the high priest. Mark sets the scene as a formal trial before the Sanhedrin. This council—made up of seventy representatives from the chief priests, elders, and scribes—governed the Jews in those religious and political affairs allowed to them by the occupying Romans. The Sanhedrin was led by the high priest, Caiaphas, though he is not named by Mark.

Peter is present outside the trial. Though all the followers of Jesus had fled in Gethsemane, Peter’s presence recalls his words at the Last Supper: “Even though all should have their faith shaken, mine will not be.” Yet, despite Peter’s insistence, Jesus predicts his denial. The result of his conviction is hinted at here as he follows Jesus, but “at a distance.”

The witnesses at the trial focus on Jesus’ relationship to the temple. Jesus had already critiqued the temple worship (11:17) and predicted its destruction (13:2). In the apocalyptic discourse of chapter 13, Mark has symbolically related the destruction of the temple and the death of the Messiah. In the trial, the witnesses cast Jesus as the one who will destroy the present temple and build another no made with hands.

Mark clearly associates each of Jesus’ references to the temple with the plot on Jesus’ life (11:18; 12:12; 14:1). If the accusation against Jesus was indeed his intention to destroy the temple, his arrest and trial would be a natural consequence. The witnesses fail to agree, however, and Jesus neither admits nor denies their accusation.

Mark allows the accusation to remain ambiguous. On one level the statement is clearly a false witness to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus is not a militant who intended to destroy the temple building but rather the Messiah who will himself be destroyed. Yet on another level, the messianic ministry and of Jesus destroyed the need and efficacy of the temple and established the new, spiritual temple of the Christian community.
While the destruction of the temple may have been interpreted as a revolutionary claim, the promise to rebuild the temple is a messianic declaration. In Jewish literature at the time of Jesus there was an expectation that the Messiah would establish a new and transformed temple for authentic worship. The destruction and renewal of the temple is related to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The new order of true worship will be established by Jesus’ destruction and triumph.

The climax of the trial comes when the high priest asks Jesus: “are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?” The response of Jesus is immediate: “I am.” The question brings together the two central titles of Jesus’ identity for Mark’s gospel: Christ and Son of God.

Mark first states these two titles in the opening of the gospel as he identifies Jesus and sets the purpose of his writing. The first half of Mark’s gospel leads to the climactic profession of Peter’s faith: “You are the Messiah” (8:29). The title, Son of God, previously proclaimed at Jesus baptism (1:11) and transfiguration (9:7), will be dramatically revealed by the centurion at the cross (15:39). His identity, which remains hidden and misunderstood by his followers throughout the gospel, now comes to be fully revealed in his passion. It is only in the context of the cross that Jesus can be fully understood and only now does he accept his messianic titles unreservedly.

It is the title, Son of Man, which adds the dimension of the cross to Jesus’ messiahship. Jesus used it throughout the second half of the gospel to complete the more exalted titles; he used the Son of Man designation every time he referred to his death (8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33, 45; 14:21, 41). Here at the trial, Jesus uses the Son of Man title as a prediction of triumph. It refers to Jesus’ exaltation at the right hand of God and to his victorious power. Two texts are referred to here showing Jesus’ triumph: Daniel 7:13, which speaks of a triumphant figure in human form coming with the clouds of heaven, and Psalm 110:1 in which the king is addressed by God, “Sit at my right hand.” The triumphant power of Jesus can only be understood and revealed in the context of his giving his life through the cross.

The high priest dramatically tears his garments and labels the prophecy as blasphemy. The tearing of the garments as a response to blasphemy is attested by King Hezekiah in 2 Kings 19:1. The Sanhedrin unanimously and unhesitatingly condemned Jesus as deserving to die. The scene ends as they mock Jesus as a false prophet, while ironically one of the prophecies, the denial of Peter, is being fulfilled in the courtyard below.
**Peter’s Denial of Jesus**

*Mark 14:66-72*

> While Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the high priest’s maids came along. Seeing Peter warming himself, she looked intently at him and said, “You too were with the Nazarene, Jesus.” But he denied it saying, “I neither know nor understand what you are talking about.” So he went out into the outer court. Then the cock crowed. The maid saw him and began again to say to the bystanders, “This man is one of them.” Once again he denied it. A little later the bystanders said to Peter once more, “Surely you are one of them; for you too are a Galilean.” He began to curse and to swear, “I do not know this man about whom you are talking.” And immediately a cock crowed a second time. Then Peter remembered the word that Jesus had said to him, “Before the cock crows twice you will deny me three times.” He broke down and wept.

Mark creates a strange contrast by framing the scene of Peter in the courtyard around the scene of Jesus before the Sanhedrin. As Jesus boldly confesses his messiahship, Peter cowardly denies him.

The accusations against Peter spread from a private question by the maid to a confrontation with all the bystanders. Likewise, Peter’s denials begin as an evasive misunderstanding but develop into a frightened cursing and a sworn rejection of his relationship with Jesus.

Peter’s denial fulfills Jesus’ prophecy (14:30). The second cockcrow was the dreadful reminder that caused Peter to weep with remorse. Now Jesus, abandoned by the last disciple, faces his passion alone.

Mark does not try to hide the embarrassing story of Peter. Writing in a community that was undergoing persecution, the failure of Peter became both a warning against unfaithful discipleship and a message of hope for those who had failed and needed reconciliation.

**Jesus before Pilate**

*Mark 15:1-5*

> As soon as morning came, the chief priests with the elders and the scribes, that is, the whole Sanhedrin, held a council. They bound Jesus, led him away, and handed him over to Pilate. Pilate questioned him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” He said to him in reply, “You say so.” The chief priests accused him of many things. Again Pilate questioned him, “Have you no answer? See how many things
The Passion and Resurrection Narratives of Jesus

they accuse you of.” Jesus gave him no further answer, so that Pilate was amazed.

A major segment of the passion account begins as Jesus is handed over to the Romans. The third passion prediction (10:33-34) becomes the prologue for the passion events: “They will condemn him to death and hand him over to the Gentiles. . . .” The trial before the Roman governor turns from a religious to a political hearing. Though the Jewish officials hand Jesus over, it will be the Roman authorities who will put him to death.

The role of Pilate must have been well known to Mark’s readers since he is mentioned without introduction. He was the Roman procurator of Judea from 26–35 AD. His questioning of Jesus parallels that of the high priest, except Pilate stresses the political side of the issues.

He immediately asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews. This parallels the religious question “Are you the Messiah, the son of the Blessed One?” (14:61). Instead of the affirmative response given to the Sanhedrin, Jesus answers ambiguously. He does not fully claim the title because of its exalted, political connotations. Yet, Jesus does not deny it because his kingship is a fundamental truth of his identity.

Jesus gives no further response to their accusations. As the righteous suffering servant (Isa 53:7), he will remain silent until the final lament at this death. Jesus becomes the model for those who suffer unjustly. He had warned his followers at his final discourse that they would be handed over to the court and arraigned before governors and kings (13:9). Later disciples of Jesus must be prepared to endure the same for the gospel.

The Sentence of Death

Mark 15:6-15

Now on the occasion of the feast he used to release to them one prisoner whom they requested. A man called Barabbas was then in prison along with the rebels who had committed murder in a rebellion. The crowd came forward and began to ask him to do for them as he was accustomed. Pilate answered, “Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?” For he knew that it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed him over. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have him release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate again said to them in reply, “Then what [do you want] me to do with [the man you call] the king of the Jews?”
They shouted again, “Crucify him.” Pilate said to them, “Why? What evil has he done?” They only shouted the louder, “Crucify him.” So Pilate, wishing to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas to them and, after he had Jesus scourged, handed him over to be crucified.

The custom of releasing a prisoner at Passover seems to have been a concession to the Jews on the part of the Roman government. The name Barabbas literally means “son of the father,” providing an ironic choice between him and the true Son of the Father. The choice rests with the crowd, though they are prompted by the chief priests to call for Barabbas.

Pilate is reluctant to condemn Jesus and seems not to believe the charge, but he is pressured by the crowd. Crucifixion is a Roman penalty used against criminals, runaway slaves, and political insurgents. If the Jews had put Jesus to death it would have been by stoning since that was the punishment for blasphemy (Lev 24:16).

Once again Mark uses the term “handed over” to describe the final transfer of Jesus. Judas had handed Jesus over to the chief priest, the priests had handed him over to Pilate, and now Pilate hands Jesus over to be crucified. The disciple, the Jewish leaders, and the Roman leader all share in the responsibility for Jesus’ death.

Mockery by the Soldiers
Mark 15:16-20

The soldiers led him away inside the palace, that is, the praetorium, and assembled the whole cohort. They clothed him in purple and, weaving a crown of thorns, placed it on him. They began to salute him with, “Hail, King of the Jews!” and kept striking his head with a reed and spitting upon him. They knelt before him in homage. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, dressed him in his own clothes, and led him out to crucify him.

The mockery of Jesus continues the fulfillment of Jesus’ passion prediction: “who will mock him, spit upon him, scourge him, and put him to death” (10:34). The mockery of the Roman soldiers parallels the first scene of mocking by the Jewish leaders. The Jewish trial ended with him mocking as a prophet, the Roman trial with his mocking as a king. Again Jesus suffers as the innocent servant of Isaiah as he is beaten and spit upon (Isa 50:6).
The purple cloak is the color of royal garments and the crown of thorns mocks the claim to kingship. The taunts of the soldiers take up the accusation at the trial, “King of the Jews.” Irony pervades the scene because what the soldiers say and do is true, but on a level they cannot comprehend. Jesus is worthy of their homage, but the true nature of his kingship is hidden in lowly suffering.

**The Way of the Cross**

*Mark 15:21*

> They pressed into service a passer-by, Simon, a Cyrenian, who was coming in from the country, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross.

**The Crucifixion**

*Mark 15:22-32*

> They brought him to the place of Golgotha (which is translated Place of the Skull). They gave him wine drugged with myrrh, but he did not take it. Then they crucified him and divided his garments by casting lots for them to see what each should take. It was nine o’clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, “The King of the Jews.” With him they crucified two revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left. Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, “Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross.” Likewise the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him among themselves and said, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe.” Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him.

Simon was probably a diaspora Jew who had come to Jerusalem from Cyrene in northern Africa for Passover. He and his sons, Alexander and Rufus, may have later become Christians since their names are known to the Christian community. The words used here, “carry (take up) his cross,” are the same words Jesus used when first teaching his disciples about the way of suffering: “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (8:34). Simon’s action is a reminder to Mark’s community of the way to discipleship.
Crucifixion took place outside the walls of the city, so Jesus would have been led out the city gate. Mark preserves the Aramaic name, Golgotha, for the place of execution, though he translated it for his audience as “Place of the Skull.” The name most likely refers to the shape of the hill and to the executions that were a common occurrence there.

Giving wine drugged with myrrh to Jesus was probably an act of mercy that is attested to in other Jewish writings (Prov 31:6). Although the wine was meant to relieve the pain, Mark notes that Jesus refused it, emphasizing the full extent of his suffering.

The crucifixion of Jesus is stated as a matter of fact with no details given of the method or the physical agony. The emphasis is on the details surrounding the crucifixion: the dividing of his garments and the mockery.

The Christian community looked to the Scriptures as prophecies of Jesus’ suffering and as avenues to understand the meaning of his death. Psalm 22 seems to have been particularly important as a foreshadowing of the events surrounding the crucifixion. Several of its verses are quoted or alluded to in this section: the act of crucifixion (v. 17), the casting of lots for his garments (v. 19), and the mockery by the crowds (vv. 8-9).

The charge against Jesus and the mockery again recall the true identity of Jesus and his messianic mission. The inscription of the charge “The King of the Jews,” meant as a humiliation, ironically states the truth of Jesus’ identity. Here, over the cross, the title can be understood in its fullest sense.

Those crucified with Jesus are traditionally called “thieves.” Yet, the Greek term also means “revolutionaries,” and it is more probable that they were crucified for political insurrection against the Roman occupation. Symbolically the two, “one on his right and one on his left,” become his royal court. When James and John had asked for the places of honor in the kingdom, “one at your right and one at your left,” Jesus promised them instead a share in his passion. Mark again reminds his readers that the places of honor in the kingdom belong to those who share in the cross.

The mockery of Jesus is done by three distinct groups. First, those passing by take up the charge of the Sanhedrin trial that Jesus will destroy the temple. They challenge him to save himself by coming down from the cross. This is clearly a reference to Psalm 22:8-9. Second, the Jewish leaders continue the charge from his trial and mock his pretension to be “the Messiah, the King of Israel.” “He saved others; he cannot save
himself” is ironically true concerning his mission: “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it” (8:35). The challenge to come down from the cross in order that they might believe summarizes the temptation of the entire gospel: only a messiah without the cross is believable. Third, even those crucified with him mock him from the cross. Jesus is reviled by all levels of society, from the ordinary observers, to the Jewish leaders, to the criminals. He is rejected, abandoned, and left totally alone to face his death.

The Death of Jesus

Mark 15:33-41

33 At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. 34 And at three o’clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” 35 Some of the bystanders who heard it said, “Look, he is calling Elijah.” 36 One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, “Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him down.” 37 Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. 38 The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. 39 When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” 40 There were also women looking on from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of the younger James and of Joses, and Salome. 41 These women had followed him when he was in Galilee and ministered to him. There were also many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.

Mark’s passion account is organized in patterns of threes: Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane is threefold, Peter denies Jesus three times, three groups mock him on the cross, and the crucifixion consists of three periods of three hours each. At the third hour (9 a.m.) Jesus was crucified, at the sixth hour (noon) darkness came over the land, and at the night hour (3 p.m.) Jesus died.

The darkness that came over the land recalls the words of the prophets: Amos 8:9; Joel 2:10; Isaiah 13:10. This association of Jesus’ death with the apocalyptic Day of the Lord emphasizes its cosmic consequences. It also suggests the darkness that was the result of the ninth plague of Egypt. As the darkness preceded God’s saving event in the exodus, so, too, it precedes the saving death of Jesus.
The great cry of Jesus expresses his anguish. He has been forsaken by all his followers, and now in his final hour he feels the depth of abandonment in even the absence of God. The cry is the opening verse of Psalm 22, and we may assume that Jesus continued the psalm as his final prayer. It expresses the desolation of the suffering one, yet holds to confident trust. Psalm 22, so often referred to in the passion account, ends not in despair, but in triumph and deliverance. It proclaims the eventual worship of God by all nations.

Even this final prayer of Jesus is mocked by the bystanders and misunderstood as a desperate call to Elijah rather than “my God” (Eloi, in Aramaic). Their confusion is filled with irony since Elijah had already returned through the ministry of John the Baptist. It was his being handed over, his imprisonment and violent death, that prepared the way for the passion of Jesus. The ridicule continues as a bystander offers Jesus wine soaked into a sponge. This was intended for reviving him to mockingly give Elijah time for the rescue.

The death of Jesus is the climax of Mark’s gospel and brings to a head the theological themes he has been developing. The moment of death is portrayed with absolute stark brutality. The other gospel writers describe Jesus’ death by emphasizing his control and resignation. In Mark, the scene is pierced by Jesus’ loud scream as he breathes his last.

As Jesus dies, again the scene flashes back to the temple. The curtain separating the holy place from the holy of holies (Exod 26:31-37) is torn in two from top to bottom. Entry through the veil into the holy of holies was forbidden to all except the high priest, and for him only once a year. On the great Day of Atonement, a day of sacrifice, penance, and fasting, the high priest entered behind the veil to offer incense and to sprinkle the blood of a sacrificial bull and goat.

Mark associates the death of Jesus with the destruction of the temple. The tearing of the veil is a portent of the impending destruction that occurred in 70 AD, about the time of Mark’s writing. Through the death of Jesus the redemptive significance of the temple sacrifice has been nullified. The offerings in the temple had been for atonement, and that is the meaning of Jesus’ death. He fulfills the function of the temple in a new and decisive way. Through his ultimate sacrifice, the obstacles are removed on the way to God.

The death of Jesus opens the way to God for all humanity, Gentiles as well as Jews. The Gentile centurion speaks the climactic declaration of the gospel as he declares, “Truly this man was the Son of God!” The
theology of Mark’s gospel is summarized as Jesus’ identity is fully expressed for the first time. It is only on the cross that the messianic identity of Jesus can be fully understood and that his sonship can be proclaimed.

The two motifs of the trial here come to their full expression. The destruction of the temple made with hands is now beginning, and the messianic sonship of Jesus is now able to be recognized by all people. The temple not made with hands, of which Jesus is the cornerstone, will be truly open to all, “a house of prayer for all peoples” (11:17). The new, sacred place of worship is the Christian community, the gathering of all who are able to recognize Jesus as the Son of God.

The faith of the Gentile centurion, together with the faithfulness of the women who continue to follow Jesus to his death, again emphasizes the absence of his chosen disciples. Those who are faithful—the centurion, the women, Joseph of Arimathea—represent what the Christian community will be. Women and men, Gentiles and Jews, together form that community called to share the humble, loving, self-giving life of Jesus.

**The Burial of Jesus**

*Mark 15:42-47*

42When it was already evening, since it was the day of preparation, the day before the sabbath, 43Joseph of Arimathea, a distinguished member of the council, who was himself awaiting the kingdom of God, came and courageously went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44Pilate was amazed that he was already dead. He summoned the centurion and asked him if Jesus had already died. 45And when he learned of it from the centurion, he gave the body to Joseph. 46Having bought a linen cloth, he took him down, wrapped him in the linen cloth and laid him in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. 47Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses watched where he was laid.

Again, Mark makes the transition by taking note of the time. It is now Friday evening, the end of preparation day for the Sabbath. Very little information is given about Joseph of Arimathea, who is spoken of here for the first time. He is an influential man, and his “awaiting the kingdom of God” seems to indicate his responsiveness to Jesus’ teaching (1:15). His membership on the council may or may not refer to the Sanhedrin.

The fearlessness of Joseph in requesting the body of Jesus is noted in contrast to the cowardly dispersal of the disciples. Joseph does what the
disciples of Jesus should have done. He courageously associates himself with the crucified Jesus and gives him a proper burial.

The burial of Jesus prepares for the account of the empty tomb. The reality of Jesus’ death is stressed by the reaction of Pilate and it is confirmed by the centurion. Jesus’ body is then wrapped in a linen cloth and placed in a tomb that had been hewn out of rock. Mark notes carefully the great stone that sealed the entrance of the tomb and the women who watched where Jesus was laid.

**The Resurrection of Jesus**

*Mark 16:1-8*

1When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. 2Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb. 3They were saying to one another, “Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” 4When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large. 5On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. 6He said to them, “Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him. 7But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.’” 8Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The three women who looked on from a distance at Jesus’ death (15:40) are the women who brought spices with the intention of anointing the body of Jesus. Once again it is the women who attended to Jesus’ needs, the same women who had ministered to him while in Galilee. The only name that is consistent in the four gospel accounts of the empty tomb is Mary Magdalene. The consistency in recounting that she was the first to discover the empty tomb rests on historical remembrance. A woman in the Judaism of that day could not serve as a witness in any legal proceedings. Thus, the writer would not have cited women as the first to witness that the tomb was empty unless it was based on historical remembrance.

Mark points out that the discovery was made “very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week.” All was beginning anew, as if the week of creation had begun again on the first day. The dawn
brought a fresh beginning to the lives of those who had fled in denial and desertion.

The huge stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb becomes part of the portentous sign of the empty tomb. The young man clothed in white is the interpreting angel, a common feature of apocalyptic writings. The encounter is formulated in the common pattern of angelic messages: the angel appears, the receivers are fearful, the angel tells them not to fear and gives the explanation, a commission given to the hearers (Luke 1:11f; 1:26f).

In a clear and concise way, Mark relates to the readers the fact of the empty tomb and the reason for its emptiness. He offers no details about the resurrection, but briefly states, “He has been raised.” The commission to “go and tell his disciples and Peter” does not seem to have been fulfilled. They fled from the tomb and said nothing to anyone because of their fear and bewilderment.

Mark ends his gospel with verse 8. He refrains from describing any resurrection appearances, though he certainly knew of them and could have recounted them in his gospel. The vocabulary and style of the longer and shorter endings indicate that they were written at a later period by someone other than Mark. So our study of Mark’s writing should end here. The other endings were probably added because of the discomfort felt by later Christians in comparing the abrupt ending of Mark’s account with the elaborate resurrection appearances in the other gospels.

Why did Mark end his gospel here? Remember that Mark was writing to teach people in a later generation how to be disciples of Jesus. Thus, Mark leaves his gospel open-ended. The women flee from the tomb puzzled over the meaning of the resurrection and its implications for their lives. They say nothing to anyone because it is up to each individual to come to know and experience the risen presence of Jesus. Mark leaves the gospel incomplete because the good news of Jesus is incomplete. It must be taken up and proclaimed by people in every generation.

The message given to the women repeats the promise Jesus made to Peter and the disciples before his agony in the garden. After predicting the desertion of Peter and the disciples, Jesus assured them, “After I have been raised up, I shall go before you to Galilee” (14:28). The messenger proclaims that they will see him there. The final message of the gospel is that Jesus has again gone ahead of them. Jesus leads and all who hear the good news are challenged to follow him. Jesus’ first call to his disciples in Galilee, “Come after me,” becomes the final challenge addressed to all future disciples.
Mark wants to tell his readers that the resurrection is not the end of the story, but only a new beginning. What has begun in Jesus is still going on. Jesus, now risen, continues to lead disciples. They are to continue giving life and hope to those in need, continue giving meaning to suffering and bring life from death. They are to continue hearing the call of Jesus to follow where he leads.

The Longer Ending

*Mark 16:9-20*

> 9When he had risen, early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10She went and told his companions who were mourning and weeping. 11When they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.
> 12After this he appeared in another form to two of them walking along on their way to the country. 13They returned and told the others; but they did not believe them either.
> 14[But] later, as the eleven were at table, he appeared to them and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised. 15He said to them, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. 16Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. 17These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. 18They will pick up serpents [with their hands], and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” 19So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. 20But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.]

Today it is generally agreed that Mark intentionally ended his gospel with verse 8, but in earlier centuries this was not the belief. The common opinion was that the complete ending of Mark’s gospel had been lost. This was evidently the opinion at the end of the first century when the other endings were written. Christians of later decades added endings that they thought Mark would have added himself.

The longer ending contains vocabulary, theses, and a style unlike anything in Mark’s gospel. It is simply a compilation and reformulation of familiar resurrection scenes from the other three gospels.
The shorter ending appears after verse 8 in several later manuscripts of the gospel. It was another attempt by early Christians to end Mark’s gospel more smoothly.

The endings have traditionally been accepted as a canonical part of the gospel. Yet, for our reflection we should leave Mark’s work to stand on its own. Only by ending the gospel with verse 8 can Mark’s complete intention and plan be understood. His gospel ending is far more inspiring and challenging as he leaves it to his readers to relive and continue the gospel in their lives.