

Is the Resurrection Reliable & Believable?

Jonathan K. Dodson | Mark 16:1-8

Today we conclude our series in Mark on the Son of God, and begin our series on the resurrection. Chapter 16 serves both purposes, providing a conclusion to the biography of Jesus and introducing us to the resurrected Jesus. We will spend the next five Sundays reflecting on the resurrection. Instead of one Easter, you get five! We will approach this claim with doubt, reverence, curiosity, and wonder. On April 20, *we will doubt the resurrection to see if its worth believing, so that would be a good one to invite your friends to*, and we will screen *Raised?* documentary the night before at Alamo Ritz. We're praying that God would do great things through this series, as we honestly engage doubt and invite faith in Jesus. Now, as we turn to the final chapter of Mark, we need to ask several questions: "Is Mark reliable?" "Is the resurrection story reliable?" and "Is the resurrection believable?" Is Mark's account of the resurrection good history and, if so, is it worth believing?

Is Mark's Ending Reliable?

You'll see a note in your Bibles indicating discrepancy over reliability of this ending. Let me address this briefly. This is the biggest issue in the biblical record. The Bible stands out against other works of antiquity as the most documented, copied, transmitted and preserved book of history. There's tons of evidence for this. If you took all the copies and ancient translations of the NT and added them up, they would number 20,000. The average number of manuscripts for ancient Greek/Latin writings is around 20. This means that we can be 1000xs more confident of the reliability of the NT than the works of say Plato or Caesar! However, the ending of Mark is the most significant dispute. Many ancient manuscripts include it. However, the *two oldest and most important manuscripts* (Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, complete copies of NT) do not include it. In addition, many translations omit the ending. *So where did the alternate ending come from?* It was likely a later scribal addition, and in fact some manuscripts show evidence of this in the margins. The ending is abrupt, a non-sequitur with Mary Magdalene being referred to as one whom seven demons were cast out. This is plain weird because Mark just referred to her three times in the last two chapters without this moniker. Depending on where you cut the ending, there are 34 to 52 new vocabulary words, which seems strange given Marks use of inclusion and repetition. These indicate that this ending was fabricated. So, the ending is not on the page in front of you. That is why we will restrict the message to the first eight verses. Now, lets continue to consider the reliability of the resurrection account by working through the characters in our story.

Is the Resurrection Account Reliable?

It's late Friday night. The women who followed Jesus look on in sadness. Jesus has just died, been placed in a tomb carved out of rock, and a large stone rolled in front of the entrance. The story of Jesus had started with such promise, such hope, but declined steadily into conflict, suffering, and now death. The women plan to visit his body as soon as possible, but that's three days away. According Jewish law, contact with a corpse on the Sabbath is not permitted, so these women will have to wait until Sunday to visit the grave. This all seems pretty normal, even accurate, until we consider *the women*. In Jewish patriarchal culture,

women were not considered reliable witnesses. Yet, Mark includes them in his account of the resurrection! If he's trying to write reliable history, he's already shot himself in the foot or if he wanted to embellish an account and perpetuate a myth about Jesus rising from the dead, then he would have had his best witnesses there. **Using female witnesses was not the way to do it. But the presence of these women is not disputed.** Let's take a closer look at these women. There's *Salome*, the mother of James and John, two disciples of Jesus. Earlier, she had the audacity to approach Jesus asking that her two boys sit on his right and left hand in his kingdom. You might call her a helicopter mom, always hovering to protect and promote her kids. She's a little power hungry, likes to be in the know, to be in the in crowd. Not a great person to back up your story. Then, *Mary Magdalene* was crazy before she met Jesus; he delivered her from seven demons! Unstable? And then there's *Mary, the mother of Jesus* (and James). These three women, crazy, power hungry, and pious are the first witnesses on the scene of Jesus' alleged resurrection. It's kinda like using *The Inquirer* and *People* magazine as your sources! If this resurrection account is a made up tale, Mark is doing a really bad job pulling the wool over our eyes. He's using female testimony and women of questionable character to establish an eye-witness account. So why consider it reliable? Mark has provided specific names and places that can easily be fact-checked. The problem, however, is that their witness isn't contested in the 1st century. There's a deafening silence. No outcry and there's absolutely no reason to make up such an account. **The only reason Mark would risk reporting the story from the mouths of 1) women and 2) women of questionable character is if, in fact, this is precisely what happened.** It's all too detailed and too unlikely to be untrue. It's just reliable history.

Is the Resurrection Believable?

So, we've established that the resurrection story is reliable, but is it believable? That's going to depend largely on you. See, if you're not a Christian you probably don't believe in the resurrection and if you are a Christian, like me, you have lapses in faith, moments of atheism where you act as if the resurrection isn't true at all. Let's see if it's worth believing. Next, we meet the "young man dressed in white" sitting to the right of where Jesus was. Who is this? A man, angel? How do we know if he's an angel? By their response—they were *alarmed*. The word mixes fear with awe, a mind-bending experience. If he was an ordinary person, there would have been no reason to respond this way. They believed in the **supernatural**. Now, encountering supernatural beings was an acceptable thing in the first century, and in most of the world today, but in the West we have become much more narrow-minded. We've decided to believe in a closed universe, where all the answers to life, all meaning and hope have to be found within a system that is entirely natural. In this system there can be no supernatural beings, divine messages of grace, or revealed truth. We are alone. If this is the right way to see the world, then all your longings for **redemption and perfect love** are a pipedream manufactured by your psyche to cope or survive in this world. I prefer an open system. I prefer to believe that redemption and love are real, not a false psychological constructs to help me survive. You have to decide if you are willing to believe in these supernatural values, which are present in this account, embedded in the person of Jesus. The angel says: "**Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.**" A lame, mundane response. If Mark wanted to wow us, or stun us into belief in the supernatural, he would have used more fireworks, announcing the

Son of God. The angel does not cast a spell on them, hand them golden tablets, or give them magical powers of persuasion to spread gospel truth. Instead, the angel comforts them and tells them they are seeking Jesus of Nazareth. He loves them and points to redemption in Jesus. How does he do this? By referring to Jesus of Nazareth instead of Son of God. **Jesus of Nazareth** is how these women came to know him, as a real person from the village of Nazareth. He's the very real person who redeemed Mary's demonic insanity and patiently loved Salome in her grab for power. To them, **the supernatural had become mundane**. God was love and redemption in Jesus. And so he is for you, if you've got an ugly past, Jesus redeems. If you care too much about influence and power, Jesus offers you love in divine power. He was, as the angel said, *crucified*. Why did a God of inordinate power choose to suffer crucifixion? Because he knew that proud, power hungry, insane and immoral people have to be put to death before renewed versions can come to life. We need God to wrap himself in our sin and take it down to the grave before we can come up with new life. **Our self-centered lives have to be crucified before we resurrected into a God-centered life**. The reason this should be believable is because it's what we all want, it's the supernatural become mundane, God become Jesus of Nazareth. But that is not all Jesus is, "He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him" (1:6). The **mundane becomes supernatural**. Ordinary flesh that is dead and weighed down with the sin of the world becomes an extraordinary body, lifted up in vindicating righteousness. Jesus is raised from the dead change our broken system from the inside-out. This is Paul's point in Romans 8: *But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.* If you put your faith in Jesus, he'll make the mundane supernatural in you. He'll make you new from the inside out by his Spirit, and later he will make you new from the outside in, in your resurrection. His Spirit puts the supernatural into the mundane. Jesus had told his friends repeatedly that he *would rise* (14:28), but now the angel announces that he *did rise...from the dead* (16:7)! His past promise is now a present reality. His love and redemption isn't mere sentiment, like the closed system of naturalism suggests. **The resurrection of Jesus assures that the Spirit of God is strong enough to secure our redemption through his love**. That Spirit is stirring in you now, calling you to live out your resurrected life. Stop living for yourself, for power, for influence, for your kids, and live for God. Show your kids and everyone else the hope of the resurrection. Forgive, sacrifice, serve, encourage, love, tell the truth, live in the light. Imitate Jesus. Show the world what its like when the supernatural enters the mundane, when self-centered people become God-centered people. *If you still don't believe this, you should wish it were true.* It changes everything. It gives us joy and hope. *We don't have to be locked into old patterns or closed systems. The resurrection points us to a new way of being human in a renewed system.* **Resurrection affirms love and redemption as reality not fiction**. But this is something you have to choose to believe, every day. You have to shake off the old person and step in the new, resurrected system, life in the Spirit. I hope I've shown you that the resurrection story is both reliable and believable, but lets be honest, good history and encounters with the supernatural don't lead people to true belief. *And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8).* Even after seeing the stone rolled away,

encountering an angel, and seeing Jesus gone the women are still filled with fear and seized with astonishment. Why? Because we meet them in the middle of it all. As they take in the news that Jesus is risen, and his promises come flooding back, and the sheer hope of it all we catch them somewhere between fear and faith, trembling and astonishment. Some speculate that the reason the ending of Mark was added was to chastise their unbelief. But Jesus does just the opposite. He is patient with unbelief, doubt, and failure. He isn't asking for blind belief in an unreliable history. He's offering you deep reasons to believe, reasons like redemption and love. We all know we need something from the outside to love and redeem us. As this hits them, they move from fear to *astonishment*. The word is *ekstasis*, from which we get the word *ecstasy*. Their moving towards wild faith, abandonment to joy, in Christ. We need more than history and believability; we need Jesus, *mundane enough to be crucified and supernatural enough to be resurrected*, to offer the hope of a whole new life. When we slow down long enough to contemplate that kind of God, we can move from fear to ecstasy, from trembling to astonishment.