

(Spoiler Alert) He is Risen!

Something has puzzled me about Mark's gospel for many years. Hasn't it been drilled into Christians over the centuries that our mission is to spread the good news of the Gospel as far and wide as possible?

Why then, in Mark's account, was Jesus so reluctant to let the word out? Time after time, he seemed upset that people were trying to share the good news.

It started right in chapter one, when he healed a leper of that terrible wasting disease. Sternly warning him, he sent him away at once, saying to him, "*See that you say nothing to anyone.*"

In chapter three, as Jesus healed the multitudes, the unclean spirits fell before him and shouted, "You are the Son of God!" *But he sternly ordered them not to make him known.*

In chapter five, Jesus encountered the daughter of Jairus, whom the household assumed was dead. He took her by the hand and said, "Little girl, get up!" She did exactly that, and the people were overcome with amazement. *Jesus strictly ordered them that no one should know about this.*

Chapter seven: Jesus encountered a deaf man. Not wanting to make a scene, he took him aside in private, away from the crowd. Immediately, the man's ears were opened, and his tongue released. *And Jesus ordered them to tell no one.*

Chapter eight: Jesus restored the sight of a blind man at Bethsaida. Then he sent him away to his home, with specific instructions showing how important it was for him to keep quiet. "*Do not even go into the village!*" Jesus said.

Right after that, same chapter, Jesus had a conversation with his disciples about whom they say Jesus is. Peter answered, "You are the messiah!" Jesus' only response to this revelation was *another stern warning to all the disciples not to tell that to anyone.*

In chapter nine, Jesus and Peter, James, and John were coming down the mountain after the blinding experience of the Transfiguration. What did Jesus order them to do? "*Tell no one about what you have seen, until after the Son of Man has risen from the dead.*"

The obvious question is, why was Jesus repeatedly telling people to keep quiet about who he is and what he is doing?

Over the years, I have heard a number of attempts at an explanation. One of the most popular is the reverse psychology angle. When someone asks you not to do something, what is your immediate reaction? "I want to do it."

When someone says, "Don't look behind you, but . . ." what you want to do more than anything is look behind you. I remember reverse psychology working on my young kids. "Don't you dare eat that meatloaf! Not one bite!" And chortling with delight, they eat something they had no intention of eating.

But Jesus isn't playing around with childish oppositional behavior. *He sternly warned them. Strictly told them. Ordered them.* There is no reason to think he's faking being deadly serious to manipulate them to do what he really wants. That isn't Jesus' style. Besides, are desperate people who have been miraculously made whole suddenly going to openly defy Jesus because it gives them a fun little power trip?

A second reason makes somewhat more sense: Jesus was swamped with more sick people than he could handle. He sometimes had to work through the night to heal them all. Crowds dogged his every step and created some unsafe situations. And that's without any advertising on his part. The last thing he needed was personal testimonials about what Jesus could do for them to make everything crazier than it already was.

But while I see some truth in that, this explanation doesn't work for me, either. Jesus was not stupid. Obviously, you don't heal that many people in a small area in a short amount of time without it getting noticed. If this was his strategy, it was doomed to fail. Why would Mark spend such a large portion of his Gospel repeating the theme of Jesus' naïve and failed attempt to keep things on the sly?

So I never got anywhere with this. Until we came to this Easter reading. I don't recall ever reading the Gospel of Mark at an Easter service before. It is seldom used because it is the least "Easterly" of the Gospels.

Listen again to how the original version of Mark ended: Jesus died on the cross and was buried. When the Sabbath was over, some women came to the tomb bearing spices to anoint the body. At the tomb, they encountered a mysterious young man in a white robe who told them Jesus was gone, and said that the disciples will see Jesus

again. The reader never sees the risen Jesus in this story. All we have is hearsay evidence from an unnamed source who nobody knows, that Jesus is alive.

Mark's Gospel ends with this sentence, *"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."*

The story ends just the way Jesus seemed to want it all along, with nobody telling anyone about anything.

In light of the other gospels, this reluctance to tell the whole story about Jesus made no sense to me . . .

. . . until I finally put two and two together. Why would someone not want to tell the whole story? Where have I seen someone who knows a wonderful story, who is reluctant to reveal much about it?

The answer finally hit me, SPOILER ALERTS! There are few things as frustrating as someone blurting out the ending to a movie we have not seen or a book we have not yet read. It is often irritating enough that it prevents a person from going to see the movie or reading the book at all. If they do, a crucial part of the experience has been ruined, or at the very least, diminished.

We go to great lengths to make sure that doesn't happen. I have encountered people attending a wedding during a Packers or Vikings game who are recording the game at home. They did not want to know anything about that game until they got home to watch it. And woe to anyone who just heard an update and happened to blurt it out. They experienced something akin to the wrath of God.

I understand *The Game of Thrones* producers are going to great lengths to conceal what is going on with the final season. They have multiple scripts, decoy shoots, binding nondisclosure clauses in contracts. They are even sending actors to multiple locations to throw off the press. A huge amount of time and effort and money is being spent to prevent spoilers.

I don't know that this was what Jesus had in mind in Mark's gospel; but it makes more sense than anything else I've heard. What if Jesus did not want people blabbing about who he was because he wanted as many people as possible to experience the full range of awe and wonder of the new life he was bringing into the world?

At the rate Jesus was healing people, it seemed that he was likely to get to just about everyone in Galilee who needed healing. Why spoil it for them by telling them exactly what was going to happen? Let them experience the full force of the relief and joy and awe and majesty of the moment.

And what about this ambiguous ending? Why don't we get the full story here on what happened at the tomb on Easter morning?

Perhaps it was because Mark's was the first gospel written. This story is new to many, if not most, of his readers. This is not a tale they've heard before and relive again every Easter. In reading this, they are experiencing it now, full force, for the first and only time.

I may have mentioned at some time my oldest son's confirmation experience. He described how, during their second year of instruction which, for most of them had grown fairly routine by that time, one of the students suddenly bolted upright in his seat at something the pastor had just said.

His eyes wild with amazement and confusion, he blurted out, "Wait a minute! You mean Jesus was God's son?!!"

At first, the class thought he was putting them on. How could you go through church and all that time in confirmation without hearing this? But he turned out to be sincere. Somehow, he had missed all the spoilers, and he was absolutely blown away.

He didn't say he believed it; he didn't say he didn't believe. He hadn't gotten that far yet. All he could say was, "Whoa!"

That may be what the Gospel of Mark was meant to convey: here is the incredible story of God's love, and a triumph over evil unlike any story you have ever heard. Hearing it made the women and the disciples stop and say, "Wait a minute! You mean Jesus rose from the dead! Whoa!"

This is what happens when you experience this story for the first time, without any kind of a spoiler. Of course, Mark's readers want to know what happened next. Mark says, don't be in such a hurry. Bask in the amazement. Live in the wonder. *Feel* what it is like to experience something so out of this world awesome that it leaves you trembling in confusion and fear, *unable to speak*. Let something that is totally beyond understanding sink in.

Only after you've done that, do you try to put the pieces together and figure out what this means for you and your life.

I admit I'm a bit envious of those who experienced, and who perhaps today experience, the Easter story for the first time, without any spoiler alerts. I imagine I heard it that way once, but I was an awfully small child at the time, and for a small kid, just watching someone twist balloons into animal shapes is a mind-blowing experience.

Those of us who have heard the Easter story cannot experience it without spoilers any more. Many of us have heard the story so often we can easily recite it. The story is out there; look at all the spoiler alerts in our worship service today. Almost everyone knows it. And that's a good thing.

But the problem with that is that reactions to the Easter story now range from skepticism (*Yeah, right, sure that happened!*) to acceptance (*Of course he rose from the dead, that's what Christians have been saying for centuries. Alleluia, he is risen!*) Neither one of these is where the Gospel of Mark wants us to be.

There is no way to go back and unhear what we have heard. We cannot pretend during an Easter service that we don't know what happened on Easter Sunday. That we are all waiting in breathless suspense to hear what happened at the tomb. We cannot erase the ending to this story from our memories so that today we hear it for the first time.

But here's what I think we can do.

We can use our imaginations to put ourselves in the shoes of the women at the tomb, or the disciples hearing their stunning report, or a person hearing this story for the first time. Or in the shoes of the confirmation student who awoke to that shocking discovery of who Jesus is. For them there was nothing routine or traditional about this story.

Imagine being hit with this story cold, out of the blue. Wouldn't it be cool if we could all jerk upright in our seats and say,

*"Wait a minute! You mean Jesus rose from the dead?!!"*

*"Wait a minute! You mean that in him God defeated the powers of death and sin forever?!!"*

*“Wait a minute! You mean that this life is not the end of me, and that I get to live forever with God?!!”*

And for just a few moments, don't say that you believe it. Don't say you don't believe it. Just sit there in stunned amazement.

Later, you can try to put the pieces together and figure out what this means for you and your life. But for just a moment, before we let loose with the Alleluias, let's just close our eyes and sit here in stunned amazement of this incredible, stupefying story of a being powerful beyond our understanding whose love for us beyond comprehension.

Let the magic and the mystery of what you have heard wash over you. Don't try to say anything. Don't even think anything except, “Whoa!”