

MARK 16:1–8. (EHV)

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they could go and anoint Jesus. Very early on the first day of the week, at sunrise, they went to the tomb. They were saying to each other, “Who will roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb for us?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. He said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’” They went out and hurried away from the tomb, trembling and perplexed. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

If you have an English Bible that was first published in the latter half of the 1900s or later, it most likely has a note after Mark 16:8. That note reads something like this: “Some of the earliest manuscripts do not have Mark 16:9–20,” or, “Some of the earliest manuscripts conclude with 16:8.” The EHV that I am using has a similar note, but they put it at the very end of Mark’s Gospel. In other words, some of the earliest Greek manuscripts of Mark’s Gospel basically read: “They went out and hurried away from the tomb, trembling and perplexed. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. The End.”

Doesn’t quite seem like how it should end, does it? So what’s the deal?

First, you should realize that notes like that, while correct, don’t tell the whole story. For example, those notes don’t take into account the fact that there are Latin translations of Mark just as early as those Greek manuscripts that do have verses 9–20. And those Latin translators had to have access to some Greek manuscript in order to produce those translations.

But the fact remains that, for many early Christians, the end of Mark was indeed what you just heard: “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” And even if you have the longer ending, you only need to read it for yourself to see that verses 9–20 are not a continuation of verses 1–8. “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. After Jesus had risen early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene...” It doesn’t go together.

That doesn’t mean verses 9–20 are not true. That doesn’t mean verses 9–20 are not inspired by the Holy Spirit. That doesn’t mean that verses 9–20 don’t belong in the Bible. But it does mean this: When Mark sat down to write the resurrection account for the first time, he wrote, “They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid,” and either what he wrote after that was not what the Holy Spirit wanted us to have and it got lost or, what I think more likely, for whatever reason, Mark put down his pen. If he wrote verses 9–20, he wrote them separately and he wrote them later.

Why stop there the first time? Had Mrs. Mark the Evangelist perhaps just finished grilling up some chislic? (I know that could stop me stone dead in the middle of writing a sermon.) Or had Markie Junior perhaps just marched in covered from head to toe in some sort of disgusting, unidentifiable goo, tracking it all behind him throughout the house?

Keep this question about the shorter ending in mind. We’re going to circle back to it.

But first, let's digress a little bit about Easter in general. Christians love Easter. I love Easter. I love Christmas just like all of you do, but for me, Easter surpasses it by leaps and bounds. It's not just the brighter colors and the lilies and the Alleluias and the He-is-risen-indeed's after a period of darker colors and more somber and serious reflection. It's also this: The Jews were always pestering Jesus for a sign, and Jesus told them that no sign of the kind they were seeking would be given them except the sign of Jonah, which was Jesus's way of referring to his forthcoming resurrection from the dead (Matt. 12:39–40; cf. 27:63).

That means that Jesus intended the event that we are celebrating this day, his resurrection, to be the proof-positive answer to the question: How can I know that my religion is the correct one? How do we know that Christianity is true?

And so the resurrection serves as the most natural launching pad for talking about the strengths of Christianity in general. After all, if a religion makes the claim that their leader said he was going to die a certain way and rise from the dead and then did, the natural reaction is to say, "Okay, but is that claim trustworthy?"

And oh, is it ever! First, we have all the Old Testament prophecies about Jesus, like Genesis 3:15, 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 22, Psalm 118, Isaiah 53, and so, so many more, made hundreds and thousands of years before he was even born, and not only in circulation in Hebrew but also translated into Greek well before Jesus was born.

Then we have the testimony about Jesus in the New Testament. For comparison, no one doubts that Caesar's *Gallic War* was written by Julius Caesar between 58 and 50 BC. But we only possess nine or ten good manuscripts of his work, and the earliest dates to about 900 years after it was first written. No one doubts that Herodotus and Thucydides wrote their respective histories, yet we only possess seven or eight reliable manuscripts of both, and the earliest of them date to more than 1,300 years after their composition. The earliest manuscript evidence for the existence of Buddha dates to somewhere between 600 and 800 years after he died (and didn't rise from the dead, I might add). I could go on. Many ancient works of high value, even some written after the time of Jesus, like the *Histories* of Tacitus, we don't even possess in complete form anymore. Parts of them are just gone.

There are over 5,000 reliable Greek manuscripts of the New Testament in whole or in part. Two of the best of the entire New Testament date to about 350, only about 320 years after the time of Jesus. We have a papyrus that contains all of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Acts and another one that contains all of Paul's letters and the letter to the Hebrews that both date to the early 200s, only about 200 years after the time of Jesus.

And that's just a sampling of the manuscript evidence. It doesn't include the evidence of the so-called Apostolic Fathers, who wrote between 90 and 160 AD, so only 60–130 years after the time of Jesus, and they extensively quote from and allude to the books of the New Testament.

Then you have the actual content of the New Testament, which contains books written by companions and disciples of Jesus, like Matthew and John, and by others who knew the apostles and other companions of Jesus personally, like Mark and Luke. Then there is Paul, who stands in a class by himself. Some have said that his conversion to Christianity at a time when he was zealous in persecuting Christians and enjoyed prominence and popularity among the Jewish leaders is enough to prove the claims of Christianity all by itself. Not to mention the fact that he

was also then willing to die for the Christian faith, and eventually did. If you think that people are in the religion they are in because that's just the way they were raised, try telling that to Paul.

These New Testament writers go out of their way to establish their claims as historical fact, and you can scrutinize their claims as closely as you like in the light of other secular historians of the time and archeological evidence. Luke in particular is a historian like few others. He mentions by name three Roman emperors (Luke 2:1; 3:1; Acts 11:28; 18:2), six Roman governors (Luke 2:2; 3:1; Acts 13:7; 18:12; 23:24; 24:27), a number of people from the Herod family from several generations (Luke 1:5; 3:1; Acts 25:13) and others connected with them (Luke 3:19; Acts 25:13; see also Luke 8:3; Acts 13:1), priests (Luke 3:2; Acts 23:2), and a rabbi (Acts 5:34)—all of whose existence can be verified by other, non-biblical sources. Luke also goes out of his way to get the titles of various rulers and administrators exactly right (e.g. Luke 3:1; Acts 13:7; 16:20, 35; 18:12), titles that have been verified by other writings and archeological inscriptions. And he did so at a time when he couldn't do a Google search or consult an encyclopedia for those titles.

And these men all make unanimous claims about Jesus: that he was the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament, that he was both true God and true man, that he was born of a virgin, and that he made full and complete payment for the sins of the world—and that he conclusively proved all of this by prophesying his death, including the manner of his death, and his resurrection (Matt. 16:21; 17:12; 20:17–19; 26:1–2, 31–32 and parallel passages; John 2:19, 21; 3:14; 8:28; 12:32–33; 13:33), and then fulfilling those prophecies. And after rising from the dead, he didn't just appear to one or two people secretly. He appeared to the women whose names are recorded in the four Gospels (Matt. 28:1–10; Mark 16:9; Luke 24:1–10; John 20:1–18). He appeared to all of his apostles multiple times (Acts 1:2–3; 1 Cor. 15:4–5). He appeared to his half-brother, James, which contributed to James's conversion (1 Cor. 15:7); previously he didn't believe in Jesus (John 7:5). Paul says he also appeared to more than 500 people at the same time—and he might have just been counting the men—and that most of those eyewitnesses were still living just over twenty years later, when he told the Corinthians about it (1 Cor. 15:6).

You can come up with alternative ideas—that the women went to the wrong tomb in their grief and confusion, that the Jewish authorities themselves had the body removed, that Jesus's disciples all experienced a mass hallucination—but none of them will hold up to serious inquiry. Charles Colson was one of President Nixon's men involved in the Watergate scandal. He later became a Christian. One of the reasons, he later said, was that if he and his team weren't able to successfully cover up something as relatively insignificant as breaking into the Democratic National Committee headquarters, even though they were connected to the most powerful man on earth at the time, then explaining away the resurrection of Jesus as a Christian coverup was utterly ridiculous.

This unshakeable historical evidence is why, in 1838, Oxford professor Thomas Arnold, one of the most renowned historians of his time and intimately acquainted with all sorts of ancient literature, said that he knew of “no one fact in the history of mankind [which was] proved by better and fuller evidence of every sort” than Christ's death and resurrection from the dead. No other religion has the historical evidence ours has. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

I love the certainty and assurance that Easter gives. But there's still a problem. The problem is that all of what we just covered is mostly intellectual. And for all the intellectual arguments that atheists like to proudly publicize, a recent study revealed that, actually, only ten percent of those who object to Christianity claim to do so for intellectual reasons. Another ten percent object to Christianity because they want to have their own say over their own lives; they want to do what seems and feels good to them without thinking about true and false, right and wrong, good and evil.

But the other eighty percent? They object to Christianity for personal or emotional reasons. If there is a good and gracious God, why are there natural disasters? Why is there injustice, poverty, and hunger? Why are there senseless shootings at schools? Why are minors abused and children trafficked? Why is there bone cancer in children? Why did So-and-so die, or die when he or she did? Why didn't God answer this prayer or that one?

This is why, whatever the human reasons for it, I love the shorter ending of Mark. Don't get me wrong; I love the longer ending too, and I wouldn't like the shorter ending at all if we didn't also have Matthew, Luke, and John's accounts. But since we do have their accounts, I love the shorter ending. It forces us to ask the question: What if Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead? Or what if we didn't know for certain that he did?

If Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead, the shorter ending of Mark is the answer to that "What if?": "They went out and hurried away from the tomb, trembling and perplexed. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. The End." If you deny God, if you deny the resurrection, because of pain, you've only made pain worse.

If you deny God altogether, you make pain pointless. In that worldview, your entire existence, the existence of everyone else, is just an accident, a naturalistic, cosmic burp. When you die, it's just the burp dying out. You can scream, "Why?" at the sky till you're blue in the face, but there's no answer. The dumbest thing atheists do is debate why atheism is true, because if they were to conclusively prove their arguments, they would only be proving that they were wasting their time debating, because the debate would be utterly meaningless. Your life without any god is a life of trembling, and is perplexing and fearful. The End.

If you acknowledge there is a god, but deny the resurrection of Jesus his Son, you turn pain into punishment. You might be angry at that god, whoever he might be, but apparently he's more angry with you, if you are experiencing such pain and misery while others are happy. And guess whose anger matters more? Guess who is stronger, if he's able to bring natural disasters and inflict bone cancer and pull people's life-strings as if they were but puppets? Your life with that god is a life of trembling, and is perplexing and fearful. The End.

But if you confess God of the Bible and confess the resurrection of his Son from the dead, for which he has given you all the evidence you could reasonably ask for and more, then what? Then there is an end to trembling, perplexity, and fear. Look at the other Gospels to see how the risen Jesus put an end to it for these women (Matt. 28:8–10; John 20:10–18). If Jesus is risen from the dead, then pain is no longer pointless and meaningless, just as Jesus's own pain and death wasn't, even though his was the worst ever. Then whatever the reason for the pain and suffering, it is not punishment for your sins, because Jesus's resurrection has proved that he has already fully paid for all of your sins and that God has accepted his payment and that Jesus has reconciled you to God through his death on Good Friday. Then all of God's words and promises

are true, and all things, good and bad, do work together for the eternal good of those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28). Then suffering produces patient endurance, and patient endurance produces tested character, and tested character produces hope that will not disappoint us (Rom. 5:3–5). Then, regardless of the pain we go through in this life, regardless of whether God takes us prematurely or after a good, long life, it is not “The End.” Instead, we have an infinitely better, a perfect, painless world to look forward to in eternity after we die. Because Jesus lives, we too shall live (John 14:19). Then we have peace, even in turmoil. Then we have joy, even in sadness. Then we have hope, even in the deepest darkness.

“They went out and hurried away from the tomb, trembling and perplexed. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” That’s the shorter ending. But it’s not the complete one. Not for the women. Not for the rest of Jesus’s disciples. Not for you. Not for me. Easter is just the best, and you’ll never convince me otherwise, because Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.