Lesson Thirteen
Women at the Cross and the Tomb:
Serving Jesus to the End

Focal Text
Mark 15:40—16:8

Background
Mark 15:25—16:8

Main Idea
Women were faithfully present at Jesus’ crucifixion, his burial, and the empty tomb.

Question to Explore
Would you have been there?

Quick Read
Jesus requires and rewards sacrifice for his Kingdom.

Commentary
I am a graduate of Houston Baptist University, where a student ID was required to register chapel attendance. My junior year, I was assigned the ID number 666. Some of my friends were concerned; others were not surprised. On my way into chapel I would tell the attendant, “Mark of the Beast,” she would write down 666, and everyone would stare.

While the meaning of the “mark of the beast” (Revelation 13:18) is much debated, the mark of a disciple is not. Jesus made very clear the one standard by which his followers...
would be identified. In John 13, after he washed the feet of his disciples, he commanded them to do the same for each other (John 13:15-17). Then he stated: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

Serving others proves that we love Jesus. Such service began with the Lord Jesus himself. This week we will conclude our study of Mark’s Gospel by focusing on those who first served the crucified Christ. We will find in their example the guidance we need to serve Jesus effectively. Their courage and commitment are God’s invitation to us today.

**What will you risk for Jesus? (15:40-47)**

In lesson twelve we left Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Judas betrayed him and his disciples abandoned him (Mark 14:40-50). Our Lord was taken to the Sanhedrin, where he was tried illegally and condemned for blasphemy (14:51-65). Peter waited outside, where he denied Jesus three times (14:66-72). He was condemned by Pilate (15:1-15), mocked by the Roman soldiers (15:16-20), and crucified (15:21-32). After Jesus’ death, the Roman centurion proclaimed him “the Son of God” (15:33-39).

Caring for Jesus’ needs

Our text continues the narrative: “Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome” (15:40). “Watching” translates theorousai, meaning observing or being spectators. Note the contrast between the courage of these woman and the cowardice of Jesus’ male disciples. Except for the “the disciple whom he loved” (John 19:26), the men all abandoned Jesus and avoided the cross. By contrast, these women were present for his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection.

Of the women named in this text, we know the most about Mary Magdalene. She is referenced in all four Gospels. Luke 8:2 tells us that Jesus drove seven demons out of her. The name “Magdalene” indicates that she was from the town of Magdala on the Sea of Galilee’s western coast.

Some people think that Mary, “the mother of James the Younger and of Joses [or Joseph],” was Jesus’ mother; Mark 6:3 says that Jesus had brothers named James and Joseph. (Joses and Joseph are from the same Greek word.) However, it seems unlikely that Mark would refer to her as the mother of James and Joseph rather than the mother of Jesus. Salome is not named in Matthew’s version, but the fact that she is replaced there by “the mother of Zebedee’s sons” perhaps indicates that she was the mother of James and John. Some also speculate that she could have been the sister of Mary, Jesus’ mother (see John 19:25).

Our text continues: “In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there” (Mark
15:41). They “followed” (ekolouthoun, meaning accompanied, served as his disciples) Jesus and “cared for his needs” (diekonoun, or served him, waited on him). Here we learn that these women were not devoted to Jesus only at the end of his earthly life, but throughout his ministry. They provided the practical support that enabled him and his other disciples to teach, preach, and heal.

We should be careful not to view their support as indicating that women can serve only in support roles, then or today. Philip had four daughters who “prophesied” (Acts 21:9); Junias was “outstanding among the apostles” (Romans 16:7). While this is not the place for a discussion of women in ministry, it is important not to read Mark’s description of the women’s role as a prescription for all women.

Neither should we minimize the importance of their ministry. They sacrificed financially and personally to serve Jesus, traveling with him and his other disciples and risking the same reproach that society brought against their Lord. Their ministry was vital to his.

**Caring for Jesus’ body**

Jesus died on a Friday, and “it was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath)” (Mark 15:42a). “Preparation Day” (Paraskeue) was the last opportunity for business that could not wait until after the Sabbath was concluded. If Jesus’ body was not removed from the cross before sundown, it would remain there until Sunday or be disposed of by the Romans, probably by being discarded as trash or thrown into a common grave. In addition, Deuteronomy 21:22-23 forbade leaving a body hanging on a tree overnight.

As a result, “as evening approached, Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council, who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body” (Mark 15:42b-43). This development is central to the resurrection miracle. If the Romans had disposed of the body, the empty tomb would not have been such a powerful apologetic for the Easter miracle. Skeptics could have claimed that someone stole the body, without the counter-argument that the Roman guards posted at the tomb would not have allowed such a theft (see Matt. 27:62-66).

Joseph was a “prominent member” (euschemon, or noble, honored, member of high standing) of the “Council” (Bouleutes). Scholars debate the precise identity of this Council. Some note that synedrion was the proper name for the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of Israel, and suggest that Joseph was part of a local council in Arimathea or some other legislative body. However, others note that bouleutes was a common reference to the Sanhedrin by non-Jews, and remind us that Mark wrote his Gospel for a Roman audience.

If Joseph was in fact a member of the Sanhedrin, we are left to wonder whether he had been present when Jesus was condemned by that body, or whether he had not been invited to their illegal assembly. Church tradition has identified Joseph of Arimathea as a Sanhedrin member, a position that would make his present activity even more dangerous.
Joseph was “waiting” (proschomenos, or welcoming, looking for) the “kingdom of God,” that realm where God reigns. Matthew 27:57 calls him a “disciple”; John 19:38 adds that he was “a disciple, but secretly because he feared the Jews.” As a result of his commitment to Christ, he went to Pilate and “asked” (etesato, or requested, demanded) for Jesus’ corpse. Remember that Rome crucified Jesus as an insurrectionist, the worst crime against the Empire. For Joseph to identify himself with this convicted felon was most dangerous. Perhaps Pilate would consider him part of the threat, and would treat him as he had treated Jesus. At the very least, he risked the approbation and ridicule of his society and the Council.

As another note that reinforces the historicity of this account, Mark tells us that “Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died” (Mark 15:44). Jesus’ early death on the cross is further evidence of its divine nature and purpose. Rather than dying of natural causes, he “gave up his spirit” (Matt. 27:50). The Romans did not take his life from him, for he could have summoned “twelve legions of angels” to his rescue (Matt. 26:53).

The centurion, a soldier intimately familiar with crucifixion, would know for certain whether Jesus had really died: “When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph” (Mark 15:45). When Pilate was assured of Jesus’ death, he “gave” (edoresato, or presented, granted) his “body” (literally corpse) to Joseph. This transaction further certified the reality of Jesus’ death and the miraculous nature of his subsequent resurrection.

With this result: “So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb” (15:46). He “took down” (kathelon, or lowered, brought down) the body from the cross, wrapped it in a linen shroud, and “placed it” (etheken, or deposited) in a tomb “cut out” (lelatomemenon, or hewn out of, shaped out of) rock. Jewish tombs in this day were typically caves or carved-out rooms. They were then sealed with a rock that was placed over the entrance, rolled in a channel that was lowest at the point directly in front of the opening. This method made the tomb easy to seal but hard to open, keeping out wild animals or grave robbers.

John 19:39-40 indicates that Nicodemus helped Joseph with this task. Note that both men risked contaminating themselves ceremonially, thus being unable to observe the Sabbath. Since the Passover was coming, their decision was even more significant. Meanwhile, “Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid” (15:47). They “saw” (etheoroun, or observed) the location of Jesus’ tomb, a fact that would be important shortly.
Risking all for Christ

Our text to this point serves as a powerful apologetic for the resurrection of Jesus. We have learned that Jesus’ death was a fact of history, attested by Romans who had no interest in furthering his movement or Kingdom. No more authoritative sources could have been utilized in this regard; the centurion was the chief coroner of their day. Pilate’s decision to consign the corpse to Joseph was proof that Jesus really died.

This fact refutes the claim that Jesus’ death was a mirage or supposition. It refutes the claim advanced by some Muslim theologians that someone else died in Jesus’ place. It refutes the swoon theory, which views Jesus’ death as a hoax. And it refutes the wrong tomb theory, which suggests that Jesus’ grief-stricken disciples went to the wrong tomb and thus found it empty. These women watched the entire event and knew precisely where Jesus’ tomb was located, as did Joseph. It is a fact of history that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman Empire and that he died on their cross.

An equally significant theme of our narrative concerns the bravery of those it profiles. The women had nothing to gain and everything to lose by accompanying Jesus to his cross. They could have done nothing by their attendance to prevent Jesus’ death. To the contrary, they could have been accused of complicity in Jesus’ crimes and prosecuted by the authorities.

Joseph’s actions placed him in even greater peril. He risked his standing within the Jewish community as well as his life in the Empire. He acted only out of love for his Lord, and was willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice for his faith.

From then to now, Christians have been challenged by their culture to decide how much they will risk for their Lord. I am writing this commentary while en route to Cuba, where I will spend several days with Christians who risk everything for Jesus. When they are baptized, they get the worst jobs, military assignments, and houses. Their pastors are under constant scrutiny. They pay a high price to follow Jesus, but their joyous faith is proof that God rewards all we risk for his glory.

When last did it cost you something significant to serve your Lord?

What will you do to serve him? (16:1-8)

What comes next is the single most significant event in human history. While Jesus’ virgin birth and sacrificial atonement are obviously vital to the Christian faith and hope, his resurrection authenticated all he said and did. If he had not been raised from his tomb, we could not be raised from ours. His resurrection is proof of his uniqueness, his divinity, and his hope.
Burying Jesus
Our text continues: “When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus’ body” (Mark 16:1). There was a brief time on the Sabbath day, after sundown, when the shops would open for a few hours so that people could purchase essential supplies. This appears to have been when the women bought their spices to anoint Jesus’ body.

Then, “very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb” (16:2). The hour was “very” (lian, or exceedingly) early. The women went at the earliest possible moment to anoint Jesus’ corpse. Consider the task that awaited them: Jesus had been dead for two days, his body laid in a rock tomb in the heat of an Israel spring. They would unwrap his corpse, pulling off the blood-soaked linen that had wrapped it, then applying their spices. This task would be gruesome, but their devotion to Jesus outweighed its cost.

Along the way, “they asked each other, ‘Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’” (16:3). Their question supplies further proof that they knew the location and nature of Jesus’ tomb with the rock that sealed its opening. It also demonstrates the fact that the women could not have stolen his body, for they could not have removed the rock that held it in the tomb.

The miracle of the resurrection begins in Mark’s Gospel with what came next: “But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away” (16:4). The rock was megas sphodra, or extremely large. It could not have been rolled out of its channel naturally. Matthew 28:2 tells us that an angel “rolled back the stone.” While Mark’s narrative omits this description, it makes clear the miraculous nature of the event. “Had been rolled away” utilizes the divine passive, a syntactical construction that points to divine causation. We will meet this construction again in verse 6 where the angel describes how Jesus “has risen” (literally, has been raised).

Finding the empty tomb
The second miracle followed the first: “As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed” (Mark 16:5). The Roman guards, stationed at the tomb to prevent just such an intrusion, were nowhere to be found. In their place, a “young man” (neaniskon, or youth, young servant) was there, dressed in a “white” (leuken, or bright, gleaming, brilliant, radiant) robe on the “right side” of the tomb. This was the place where Jesus’ body would have been placed, as the left chamber of the tomb was used for mourners.

When the women saw him, they were “alarmed” (exethambethesan, or astounded, astonished). Imagine yourself in their position. A loved one has died and was buried hastily; now you have come to the mausoleum where his body was laid. The funeral
home attendants are gone, the door of the crypt open, and a young man in a brilliant white robe is sitting where the body had been. How would you react?

As is so often the case in Scripture, an angel responds to human fear with divine assurance: “‘Don’t be alarmed,’ he said. ‘You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him’” (Mark 16:6). This verse could be considered the gospel in a nutshell. We meet “Jesus,” whose name means Savior. He is “the Nazarene,” having lived in a town so small and nondescript that it is not mentioned a single time in the Old Testament; by living in Nazareth, he will live anywhere—even in your home and heart.

He “was crucified,” his death a demonstrable fact of history. He was “laid” in a tomb after his death. But now “he has risen!”—three words that would change everything. We can “see the place” where his body had been buried, proving further the reality of his resurrection. If we had only this verse, we could explain to the world the facts and significance of Jesus’ ministry.

Such a response was God’s intention: “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’” (16:7). They were to “go” (hypagete, meaning depart, leave), not to stay at the empty tomb. We must give others what God has given us. They were to “tell” the world what had been told to them. Specifically, they were to begin with “his disciples and Peter,” indicating the latter’s significance to the Christian movement even after his three denials of his Lord.

They were to testify to Jesus’ resurrection and the fact that he would meet his disciples in Galilee, a prediction that was fulfilled shortly afterwards: “Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go” (Matt. 28:16; see Mark 14:28). Here they would meet Jesus, worship him, and receive their Great Commission (Matt. 28:17-20). Their interaction would take place in Galilee, far from the authorities’ interference, as Jesus would spend another forty days with them before his ascension (Acts 1:1-3).

Their response was understandable: “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (Mark 16:8). They were “trembling” (tromos, meaning quivering, quaking) and “bewildered” (ekstasis, meaning amazed, astonished) at what they had seen and heard. They “fled” (ephygon, or escaped, disappeared) from the tomb. At this moment they told no one what they had experienced, for they were afraid.

How did the story end?

Modern translations of Mark’s Gospel note that verses 9-20 do not appear in the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of the Greek New Testament. This so-called “longer
ending” is not found in the best Latin, Syriac, Armenian, or Coptic versions. In addition, its vocabulary and style is unlike the rest of Mark’s Gospel; of its seventy-five significant words, fifteen do not appear elsewhere in Mark and eleven are used in a different way from the rest of Mark’s Gospel.

The connection between verses 8 and 9 seems awkward as well. And the verses contain doctrines that seem to contradict the rest of Scripture, notably the necessity of baptism, the statement that Christians will speak in tongues, and the promise that they will be unharmed by deadly snakes and poisons (Mark 16:16-18). All of this to say, most scholars do not believe that verses 9-20 are the original ending of Mark’s Gospel. They were found in the Greek manuscripts utilized by the King James Version translators and thus found their way into most English Bibles.

There is also a “shorter” end to Mark, perhaps written in Egypt in the fourth century: “But they reported briefly to those with Peter all that had been commanded them. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them from the East even to the West the sacred and incorruptible message of eternal salvation.” However, the manuscripts that contain this ending then continue with verses 9-20.

So, how did Mark end his Gospel? One option is that the “longer” and/or “shorter” endings are original, although most scholars disagree with this conclusion. A second option is that Mark wrote an ending that has been lost to history.

A third option is that the Gospel ends as the Holy Spirit intended. This is my view. I believe that God has preserved his inspired word in its entirety. Because Mark was inspired to end his Gospel as he did, we can each write the ending with our own response to the resurrection.

Who will hear about the risen Christ from you this week?

**Conclusion**

How can we best serve the One who died for us? By paying any price to tell others the price he paid for them. Jesus’ last word before the ascension is still Jesus’ expectation for every believer: “You will be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).

In Cuba, every member is a minister. The last time I visited First Baptist Church in Camaguey, they had 330 professions of faith on the Sunday morning I preached in their church. The credit was not mine: the day before, 294 church members knocked on 1,050 doors and shared the gospel with 5,000 people. The next day, 330 of them stood publicly for Jesus in a church located four feet from the Communist headquarters of their city.

The more we surrender to God, the more God can use and bless. How fully can God use you?
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