



**bi-annual Bulletin**

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# THE FEARFUL SILENCE OF THREE WOMEN

(Mark 16:8c)

by

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At least as we have it, Mark's Gospel ends in an extraordinarily enigmatic fashion. It states that after discovering Jesus' tomb to be open and empty and hearing the angelic message about the resurrection and a coming rendez-vous with the risen Jesus in Galilee, the three women fled in astonishment; "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (Mark 16:8c).

This reaction on the part of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome (Mark 16:1; see 15:40,47) has been somewhat prepared for when the text speaks of their being "amazed" (Mark 16:5,6) and of their "astonished" and "trembling" flight from the tomb (Mark 16:8a and b). Even so the final word about their fearful silence is surprising. Matthew seems to have been dissatisfied with what he found in Mark and modifies the women's reaction: "they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell his disciples" (Matt 28:8; see also Luke 24:9-10).

What are we to make of Mark's statement about the women's fearful silence? Is it to be understood in a more **historical** vein? Mark (or his source) knows that accounts of the empty tomb did not feature in the early preaching of the resurrection (see 1 Cor 15:3b-5), and/or that the women's story remained unknown for some time. He acknowledges the fact that the story of the empty tomb only developed and/or only entered the Easter message at a later stage by noting that the women remained silent (= for some time did not publicly speak about their empty tomb experience). Or does the three women's fearful silence reveal a

**theological** stance of the evangelist? In that case his point could be negative (for example a disapproving judgment against all Jesus' first disciples, both female and male) or positive (for example, a picture of the appropriate, initial reaction to the revelation of Jesus' resurrection). Here, of course, historical concerns and theological interests overlap and are in no way understood to be mutually exclusive. Rather it is a matter of the predominant motive behind Mark 16:8c which could be of a more theological or historical nature.

1. **An Historical Explanation.** Perhaps the most thoroughgoing historical explanation of Mark 16:8c - and indeed of the whole pericope, Mark 16:1-8 - is that offered by Paul and Linda Radham in *Immortality or Extinction?* (Totowa, N.J. 1982). According to them, the evangelist himself created the whole of Mark 16:1-8: that is to say, prior to the writing of this Gospel, there was simply no empty tomb story at all. They interpret the Gospel's closing comment (Mark 16:8c) as implying

*that the empty tomb story formed no part of the generally received oral traditions about Jesus which circulated before the Gospels were written. It would be manifestly absurd for Mark to write that the women said nothing about it to anyone, if the story of their finding the empty tomb were generally known. The comment in fact only (sic) makes sense if Mark was conscious that he was adding a new element to the generally received traditions about*

*Jesus; an element which was not known prior to the publication of his Gospel, and which he therefore had to account for by claiming that his sources had hitherto kept this knowledge secret out of fear.*

In short "the story of the empty tomb was unknown before the appearance of Mark's Gospel" (pp. 23-24). The evangelist simply invented the whole story himself; his final words ("they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid") show him trying to cover his tracks and hide from the reader the fact "the generally received traditions about Jesus" contained no story about the discovery of the empty tomb.

Yet would it have been "*manifestly absurd*" for Mark to write that the women said nothing about it to anyone, if the story of their finding the empty tomb were generally known" (*italics mine*)? The ordinary conventions of **narrative** suggest that the women's silence should be understood as temporary: for the time being they did not deliver the message and tell others about what they had seen and heard. If Mark proposes their silence to have been permanent and absolute (= the women **never** said anything about their discovery to anyone whatsoever), what he writes would be "*manifestly absurd*". How could he, the narrator, know what the women had seen and heard if they quite literally never passed on their story to anyone? The Badhams have confused "said nothing to anyone" with "never said anything to anyone whatsoever." Mark could quite reasonably write that the women "said nothing to anyone," even though the story of their finding the empty tomb were now generally known (at least in Jerusalem and the Holy Land).

The Badhams seem to be crediting Mark with the claim that his sources (= the three women or one or two survivors from the trio) had kept their knowledge of the empty tomb "secret out of fear" for thirty or forty years - right down to the time when Mark himself got the information from them and wrote his Gospel in the middle or late sixties. The Christian message of Jesus' resurrection had long since spread around the Mediterranean world and there were growing Christian communities in most parts of the Roman empire. But Mark (implicitly) contends that three women remained afraid for decades and - even in the face of the successful spread of Christianity and its central message of Jesus' resurrection

- never broke their silence until they told him. Such a scenario about Mark and his alleged claim seems quite far-fetched. But this is what the Badhams are suggesting: that Mark claims that "his sources" had kept to themselves their knowledge of the empty tomb until they finally broke their silence and told him. It is much more believable and in line with ordinary narrative conventions to interpret as **temporary** silence the comment "they said nothing to anyone".

Second, as we shall see, Mark's closing comment is open to various explanations which do not postulate that Mark had to insert that comment, because he has fashioned the whole empty tomb story and was consciously adding a "new element to the generally received traditions" about Jesus' destiny.

Third, the many redaction-critical studies of Mark's Gospel published in recent decades have convincingly established that the evangelist was no mere wooden mouthpiece of the traditions he received. He showed a certain measure of liberty and inventiveness in arranging and embellishing those traditions. But I do not think the weight of evidence from those redactional studies supports the view that Mark could simply invent *ex nihilo* an important item like the discovery of Jesus' empty tomb. In using and embellishing his sources, the evangelist was free but not that free.

Fourth, in advancing their hypothesis the Badhams pay no attention to redactional (and compositional) criticism. I do not know any scholar who has examined Mark 16:1-8 to distinguish the source(s) from the Markan redaction, and who then argues that for these eight verses Mark had **no source** but freely composed the narrative on this own. With some minor variations, the general consensus is that the traditional source used (and added to) by the evangelist ran as follows:

*On the first day of the week Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb when the sun had risen. They saw that the stone had been rolled back and entering they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him." And they went out and fled, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them.*

Redactional criticism supports the existence of a pre-Markan source and not the Badhams' thesis that Mark composed *ex nihilo* the entire empty tomb story. It is a little too obvious that by denying any traditional (and historical) source for Mark 16:1-8, the Badhams can more easily commend their view that immortality of the soul rather than bodily resurrection is the real Christian hope.

Before turning to more theological interpretations of Mark 16:8c, we should note other somewhat "historical" versions of the evangelist's purpose here. By emphasizing the women's frightened silence, Mark intends to indicate that the appearances of the risen Jesus and not the discovery of the empty tomb had first triggered faith in the resurrection. The silence of the women "explains" why such an important sign of Jesus' resurrection as his empty grave did not play a role as the original basis for Easter faith and in the first preaching (see, for example, 1 Cor 15:3b-5 where two appearances, but not the discovery of the empty tomb figure in the resurrection kerygma cited by Paul). In other words, Mark introduces the theme of the women's silence, so as to respect and account for what he took to be historical facts: Peter, the twelve and other male disciples had played the foundational role in preaching the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, the women's role was relatively unimportant and the story of their discovering the empty tomb entered the Easter message only later.

There might be some truth in these historicizing comments on Mark 16:8c. Yet, as Eduard Schweizer comments, to see Mark 16:8 as "an attempt to explain how it happened that so much time passed before there was any report of the discovery of the empty tomb is too modern a suggestion. A critically trained historian would think this way but not the early Christian Church." Furthermore, merely historical hypotheses about the women's reaction lack connection with theological themes that surface earlier in Mark's text. They aim at explaining the cryptic reference to the women's silence in terms of what we know "extrinsically" from Paul, Acts and other NT books - instead of first looking for some clue in what Mark himself has already written. What "theological truth" is Mark "attempting to express when he reports the silence of the women"?

**2. Theological Explanations.** One well-argued thesis about the women's fearful silence comes in Willi Marxsen's redactional study, *Mark*

*the Evangelist* (Nashville, 1969). His thesis takes as its background the much discussed Markan phenomenon of the "messianic secret."

a) Right from the first chapter of Mark's Gospel we come across the tension or even "contradiction" between an injunction to silence and its transgression (Mark 1:40-45). Marxsen attributes these "contradictions" to the redactional work of the evangelist who aims at expressing the tension between concealment and disclosure or between silence and speech. The "contradiction" between the command to spread the news of the resurrection in Mark 16:7 and the women's fearful silence in Mark 16:8 results from the evangelist's redactional work, specifically in that he inserts 16:7 into his source. In the case of Mark 16:7-8 the order to spread the news comes first, the silence second, whereas during Mark's account of Jesus' ministry the order is normally the reverse: Jesus asks for silence but others give way to a compulsion to speak (p. 91).

Marxsen's work in redaction criticism gave new life to the thesis of the Messianic secret initiated by William Wrede's 1901 work, *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien*. Wrede had argued that the earthly Jesus never claimed to be Messiah, and that Mark read back into the story of the ministry later messianic beliefs. Marxsen's redactional techniques distinguished more successfully between the evangelist's work and his traditional sources. At the same time, Marxsen recognized the real theological nature of Mark's Gospel. All of this meant that Marxsen could fit the question of Mark 16:8c into a framework of explanation for the whole Gospel.

Nevertheless, one wonders whether as such the "messianic secret" can bear the weight assigned to it. There is much to be said for finding Mark's theological thrust in the theme of **revelation**: the revelation of the kingdom (Mark 1:1-8:21) and then the revelation of the destiny of the Son of Man (Mark 8:22ff.). Or else one could stress more the revelation of Jesus as the Son of God, a revelation which reaches its climax in the centurion's confession (Mark 15:39).

Where Marxsen's interpretation of Mark 16:7-8 becomes really doubtful is when he develops the work of some earlier scholars and links the two verses to the *parousia* that Mark expects to occur soon in Galilee, the land of preaching and the messianic secret.

Mark writes in the 60's, he wishes to direct the Christian community to gather in Galilee



for the glorious coming of the Lord. Unlike the *ophthe* ("he appeared") of 1 Cor 15:5-8 which is a technical term for **resurrection** appearances, the *opsesthe* ("you will see") of Mark 16:7 points to the *parousia* that the evangelist (wrongly) supposes is about to occur in the 60's. Where the Messiah is proclaimed, an epiphany takes place and the *parousia* is anticipated (Mark 16:7; see also 14:28). But, in Mark's scheme, for the moment the Messiah remains hidden, the epiphany is secret and the *parousia* is anticipated in quiet concealment (Mark 16:8). All this entails interpreting the women's silent fear (Mark 16:8c) in the context of the evangelist's message about an impending *parousia* in Galilee (pp. 83-94).

A number of considerations tell against this view. Marxsen takes "Galilee" in the rest of Mark's Gospel to be a theological term symbolizing the place of preaching and or the Gentile mission of the early Church. He must suppose that in Mark 14:28 and 16:7 it reverts to the status of a geographical term. Second, from the rest of his Gospel (despite 9:1; ch. 13; 14:62) it is not so clear that Mark expects an imminent *parousia*. Third, other evidence is lacking to establish any special connection between Galilee and the *parousia*. Fourth, Mark presents the prediction of the Son of Man's passion and resurrection (8:31; 9:31; 10:32-34) separately from passages which can be interpreted as conveying - among other things - predictions of the *parousia* (ch. 13). Elsewhere in his Gospel Mark keeps the themes of resurrection and *parousia* apart. It is then hardly to be expected that he will mix them in ch. 16 by combining an announcement of an imminent *parousia* (to occur in the late 60's) with an account of women on Easter day (more than thirty years before) discovering the tomb of Jesus to be open and empty and hearing an angelic announcement of his resurrection. Fifth, we can interpret the words "he is going before you to Galilee" (Mark 16:7) in two ways: either a) "he is going **at your head** (like a shepherd leading his sheep) to Galilee", or b) "he is going **in advance of you** with a view to a rendez-vous in Galilee." Explanation a) seems more likely, inasmuch as it recalls the theme of Mark 14:27ff., the apostasy of the twelve and of Peter in particular. The shepherd's flock will be scattered, but this process will be reversed when the flock is reassembled. In either case the "going before" as such does not evoke any thoughts of the *parousia*. Sixth, R. H. Fuller adds a further

point against Marxsen's position:

*The decisive argument which proves it to be, in Mark 16:7, a resurrection rather than a parousia reference is the naming of Peter as well as the disciples, a circumstance which indicates clearly that the Evangelist is alluding to the two appearances, listed in 1 Corinthians 15:5. If Mark 16:7 were pointing forward to the parousia, it is hard to see why Peter should be singled out for special mention. But if it points to resurrection appearances, the reason for the mention of Peter is obvious.*

Seventh, the verb "see" used in Mark 16:7 can refer to human beings experiencing the *parousia* (Mark 13:26; 1 John 3:2). But it can also be used of a vision of the risen Christ (1 Cor 9:1; John 20:18): Moreover, the seeing of Jesus in Mark 13:6-27 is to be preceded by war, famine, the emergence of false messiahs, the martyrdom of some disciples and other signs of which there is not a hint in Mark 16:7 and its immediate context. Finally, Marxsen himself has become more tentative about his view that Mark 16:7 points to an imminent *parousia* rather than an imminent post-resurrection appearance or appearances.

Thus Marxsen has left us with the "messianic secret's" tension of disclosure/concealment as the way to understand the three women's fearful silence in Mark 16:8c. In *The Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth*, where he treated the final section of Mark, Marxsen failed to raise the question of the duration of the women's silence (only temporary? or really permanent?) and lightly touched another theme that Norman Perrin was to develop. Marxsen presented the women as by their silence "disobeying the command given to them by the young men (whom we are undoubtedly intended to think of as an angel)" (p. 42; italics mine). A few years earlier, in *The Gospel Message of St. Mark* (Oxford, 1950), R. H. Lightfoot had reported questions about the fear, "silence and disobedience" of the women (pp. 85, 89). He replied by commenting that such questions as "whether" the women conquered their fear, or how long they remained silent" were simply not in the mind of the evangelist" (p. 92). It may have been good, however, right from the outset to avoid the word "disobedience," a loaded term that as such already suggests a position on the silent flight of the women. This theme of disobedience emerges more fully in Perrin's *The Resurrection Narratives*

(London 1977). To that we can now turn.

b) Perrin correctly connects the story of the women at Jesus' empty tomb (Mark 16:1-8) with two other narratives (Mark 15:40-41; 15:42-47). These three narratives (which deal with women, respectively at the cross, at the burial of Jesus and at his tomb) are closely related - not least by the fact that two of the three women named in 15:40 turn up again in 15:47 and all three are again named in 16:1. Perrin notes the progressive failure of Jesus' male disciples that begins at Mark 6:52 and reaches its climax in the passion story with Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial of Jesus (pp. 30-31). Meanwhile women enter Mark's story (from 14:3-9) and "take over the role" one "might have expected to be played" by the male disciples (p. 31). They remain faithfully present at Jesus' death and burial and "are prepared to play their role in anointing him." It is "to their great honour to discover the empty tomb and the fact of the resurrection."

Then like the male disciples before them, "the women also fail their master" and "fail their trust", by not delivering "the message entrusted to them." Mark's Gospel ends with total "discipleship failure," as "every disciple fails the master" (pp. 32-33). Perrin admits that this is a "grim picture" and a "dark" and "stark" vision of what Mark intends by the frightened silence of the women (p. 33). But is this picture of total failure on the part of all disciples, both male **and female**, the right vision to be drawn from Mark 16:8c?

Perrin rested his case without discussing "why Mark paints this grim picture" (p. 33) and thinks of total "discipleship failure." The theme as a whole must await discussion on another occasion" (p. 35). Sadly Perrin died before being able to complete his case and suggest why Mark paints this grim picture. But does the evangelist in fact do so? As Perrin himself recognized, Mark writes his Gospel "to express the conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God," pursuing this theme from 1:1 "to the climactic confession of the centurion at the cross in 15:39" (pp. 34-35). After developing such a positive theme right through his work, it seems strange for Mark to conclude with a bleak, grim picture of total failure by all the disciples. Second, after noting the warning about the failure of the male disciples (14:27), their flight at the time of Jesus' arrest (14:50) and Peter's triple denial of his master (14:29-31; 66-72), the evangelist is hardly introducing a parallel to all that

in the three women's silent flight from the empty tomb. Third, the women who had "followed" Jesus in Galilee (Mark 15:41) clearly personify a discipleship that remains faithful to the end. It would be very odd to cancel that picture suddenly in the last verse of the Gospel. Fourth, the most effective response to Perrin's theory of total failure remains, of course, a successful alternate explanation of the women's silent and fearful flight. That we can find in an updated version of R. H. Lightfoot's comments.

Before we take up Lightfoot, however, we should note that Perrin's negative presentation of the women's silence in Mark 16:8c comes from a tendency of certain scholars to over-emphasize that Gospel's negative characterization of Jesus' disciples. T. J. Weeden's *Mark: Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia, 1971) constitutes the high-point in the attempt to argue for a Markan attack on the twelve disciples. Weeden, in fact, holds that Mark is "assiduously involved in a vendetta against the disciples. He is intent on totally discrediting them" (p. 50). Such "a polemic against the disciples," Rudolf Pesch points out, is pure speculation which has no basis. Quentin Quesnell dismisses Weeden's thesis as "simply wrong;" "so much of the Marcan material simply does not fit the thesis". Schuyler Brown shows that Weeden "is led to adopt highly improbable textual interpretation, with the result that his work as a whole fails to be convincing." In particular, his "interpretation of the empty-tomb narrative" is simply "bizarre." To the extent that critics have effectively rejected the major voice for the theory of a Markan attempt to discredit the (male) disciples, the particular thesis of Perrin about these three women being part of an **overall** scheme of discipleship failure will not hold up. He cannot sustain that Mark wishes to paint a "grim picture" of the women, if Mark has not such "dark" and "stark" vision of the male disciples. Granted that the promise of Mark 16:7 ("tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you") entails some kind of special rehabilitation of the **male** disciples, it would be strange for the evangelist in the very next verse suddenly to introduce a "grim picture" of the women whose record from 14:2 to 16:1ff. - unlike that of the male disciples - has been consistently positive. Their fearful silence in 16:8c must have some meaning other than final failure. Let us see what Lightfoot makes of it.

c) In *The Gospel Message of St. Mark*, Lightfoot explains the three women's fear in Mark 16:8c not as "fear of men, whether fear of the Jews or of the disciples' reaction to their message, if they gave it." To end the Gospel with "the thought of the fear of men" would be an intolerable anti-climax and utterly unworthy of St. Mark." "The whole tenor" of 16:5-8 suggests that what we are facing is rather "fear or dread of God, ... fear caused by revelation" which produces the women's amazement, flight, trembling, astonishment and silence (p. 88). In accounting for the women's emotions and reactions in Mark 16:5-8, Lightfoot points to a similar earlier episode in the Gospel, the stilling of the storm (4:35-41). There the disciples' "earlier physical alarm is now replaced by a much deeper fear." He notes the parallel between the silence of the women in 16:8c and the "bewildered utterance of the disciples" in 4:41 and adds: these reactions "arise from the same cause, namely, an increasing and involuntary realization of the nature and being of Him with whom they have to do" (*ibid.*). In the first case the men "were afraid with a great fear," but said something: "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" In the second case the women were simply "afraid", but said nothing. Yet Lightfoot is correct in seeing some parallel between the human reactions in both cases.

Even though the second passion prediction in Mark 9:32 ("they understood not the saying and were afraid to ask him") is almost a case in point, Lightfoot admits that, apart from 16:8c, we do not have a clear example where the evangelist explicitly refers "to silence as the result of fear of God, or, in other words, of revelation (*ibid.*). He suggests a reason why Mark introduces "the combination of fear and silence" only in "the last sentence of the book." The evangelist treats with reserve both the crucifixion and its counterpart in the resurrection hinting at "the unspeakable tragedy and darkness of the Passion" and "the ineffable wonder and mystery" of the resurrection. One can appreciate, therefore, why Mark could lay a unique emphasis "upon the devastating results, for the women, of the first intimations of the greatest and final manifestation of the divine activity recorded" in his book (p. 89). Episodes of revelation earlier in Mark's Gospel produce "fear or astonishment or both together" in the disciples or others (pp. 90-91). In a climactic way "the reaction of the women

at the tomb, their amazement, trembling, astonishment, fear" and silence, "gathers up the emotions caused" earlier by the revelatory presence of God conveyed by Jesus' actions and teaching.

In his own way and without reference to Lightfoot's *The Gospel Message of St. Mark*, Pesch finds in the women's silence of Mark 16:8c "a motif of reaction to the reception of revelation in accounts of epiphanies." To substantiate this claim he refers to such texts as 1 Sam 3:15 and Dan 7:28 (p. 536; see also p. 522) whereas Lightfoot exemplifies the connection between some revealing message from God and human silence by pointing to Ezek 3:26; 24:27; Luke 1:20 and 2 Cor 12:4 (p. 87). Pesch rightly notes that the fear, trembling and flight of the three women are apocalyptic themes - he refers to Dan 7:15,28; 8:17,27 and 10:7 - "which underline the meaning of the angel's *revelatory* message" (p. 528; italics mine). The "overwhelming secret" communicated by the angel in the announcement of Jesus' resurrection (Mark 16:6) produces trembling, ecstatic amazement and silence. Such a reaction emphasizes the "mysterium tremendum" of God's unexpected revelation. The women plan to anoint the corpse of the crucified Jesus. Instead they are "confronted with the message of his resurrection and are torn away from" their normal ways of thinking (Pesch, p. 535).

Pesch might have used the entire phrase from Rudolf Otto "mysterium tremendum et fascinans." The women go to the tomb (Mark 16:1-2), drawn unconsciously by the "fascinating mystery" of God about to be revealed to them. They flee from the tomb (Mark 16:8), shocked by the awe-inspiring message of Jesus' resurrection. The double-sided activity of the women exemplifies very well Otto's classic thesis about the human reaction to God and the revelation of the divine mystery. Second, Pesch curiously comments that Mark's reader, confronted with the account of the women's reaction to the "epiphany of God" that has taken place in Jesus' resurrection, is "invited to let himself be *fascinated* into faith" (p. 541; italics mine). Here Pesch recalls - for the case of the Gospel's **reader** - the "fascinans" from Otto's phrase, but ignores the "tremendum." Surely the reader is invited to imitate the women by being fascinated **and** awe-inspired, and so come to faith

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RECENT MATERIALS RECEIVED BY THE  
CENTRO PRO UNIONE  
IN THE AREA OF ECUMENICS

With minor discrepancies and some simplification, the bibliographical items are classified according to the system used by the Library of the World Council of Churches (cf. *Classified Catalogue of the Ecumenical Movement. I-II & First Supplement*. - Boston: G. K. Hall, 1972 & 1981).

**280 - CHRISTIANITY**

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(continued from p. 8)

(or be strengthened in an Easter faith that already exists)?

3. **Conclusion.** Lightfoot points in the right direction by interpreting the women's fearful flight of Mark 16:8c within the context of the whole Gospel. The reaction of the women gathers up in a climactic way the feelings evoked by earlier episodes of divine **revelation** communicated through Jesus' **words** and **deeds**.

One might add that Mark establishes this theme right from the outset of the ministry.

People are "astonished" at Jesus' teaching (Mark 1:22) and "amazed" at his power over unclean spirits (Mark 1:27). Divine revelation reaches its climax in the event of the resurrection which produces the empty tomb (Mark 16:4-5) - a deed clarified and announced by the word (Mark 16:6). Faced with the uniquely great revelation of God in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, the silent and fearful flight of the women is not only understandable but also highly appropriate.