

‘The Fearful Silence of Three Women (Mark 16:8)’

Gerald O’Collins SJ

Abstract

This article aims at reinstating an older interpretation (offered e.g. by R. H. Lightfoot) of the astonishment, fear, and silent flight with which three women responded to the message they heard from the angel in Jesus’s open and empty tomb. It was an appropriate reaction to the astonishing revelation of the resurrection. The article argues that this reaction is not to be reckoned as an unexpected failure on the part of the women. Throughout Mark’s Gospel they proved exemplary in their following of Jesus, right through to being present at his crucifixion. Mary Magdalene and her two companions remained temporarily silent until they could deliver the angel’s message to the appropriate audience, the male disciples.

Keywords

fear, flight, Mark, resurrection, revelation, silence, women

The Gospel of Mark, as we have it, ends in a disturbing way.¹ Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome have discovered the tomb of Jesus to be open and empty. Inside the tomb they meet an angelic figure who announces the resurrection and gives them the instruction: ‘tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, as he said’ (16:7). But ‘they went out of the tomb and fled; for trembling (*tromos*) and bewilderment (*ekstasis*) took hold of them. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (*ephobounto*)’ (16:8). How are we to understand this flight and fearful silence of the three women?

Earlier commentators such as Robert Henry Lightfoot, Dennis Nineham, and Rudolf Pesch offered a positive interpretation of this terrified (temporary) silence of the women. It was an appropriate reaction

¹ On variant endings (and theories of lost endings) of Mark, see Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16* (Newhaven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 1088–96.

to the revelation of Jesus's resurrection from the dead. Then scholars such as Norman Perrin, Morna Hooker, Francis J. Moloney, and Joel Marcus proposed understanding the women's reaction negatively. At the end the women, like the male disciples, failed. But is this view of total failure on the part of all disciples, men *and women*, truly convincing? Should a positive view of the women be reinstated?

Lightfoot, Nineham, and Pesch

Lightfoot argued that 'the whole tenor' of Mark 16:5–8 suggests 'a fear or dread of God', a fear caused by 'revelation' which produces the women's amazement, fear, and silent flight. In accounting for the women's emotions and reactions, Lightfoot pointed to the stilling of the storm (Mark 4:35–41): the 'physical alarm' of the disciples was 'replaced by a much deeper fear'. He noted the parallel between the silence of the three women in Mark 16:8 and the 'bewildered utterance' of the male disciples in Mark 4:41. 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'.²

Lightfoot went on to recall how various episodes of revelation in Mark's Gospel regularly produce in the disciples or others 'fear or astonishment or both together'.³ In a climactic way the reaction of the women at the tomb—their amazement, trembling, fear and silence—gathers up the emotions caused earlier by the revealing presence of God conveyed through Jesus's actions and teaching.

Dennis Nineham

With considerable attention to Lightfoot's comments, Nineham interprets the fearful silence and flight of the women as expressing 'the overwhelming and sheerly supernatural character of that to which' they were responding. Nineham attends not only to protagonists in the narrative but also to the response that could be expected from readers. If they even begin to 'understand the full significance of what had occurred', they 'too will be bound to respond with amazement and godly fear'.⁴

² R. H. Lightfoot, *The Gospel Message of St Mark* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. 88.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

⁴ D. E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (London: Penguin, 1963, reprinted 1992), pp. 447–48.

Rudolf Pesch

In his own way and without reference to Lightfoot or Nineham, Rudolf Pesch detected in the women's fearful silence 'a motif of reaction to the reception of revelation' found in 'the [Old Testament] accounts of epiphanies'. He referred to such texts as Daniel 7:28.⁵ (Lightfoot had exemplified the connection between some revealing message from God and human silence by citing passages such as Luke 1:20; and 2 Cor 12:4.⁶) Pesch noted that the fear, trembling, and silence of the three women are apocalyptic themes—he cited Daniel 7:15, 28; 8:17, 27; and 10:7—which 'underline the meaning of the angel's *revelatory* message'.⁷

The 'overwhelming secret' communicated by the angel's announcement of Jesus's resurrection produced trembling, ecstatic amazement, and silence. Such a response emphasized 'the *mysterium tremendum* of the divine revelation'. The women have planned 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.⁸ Pesch might have used the full account of the Holy coined by Rudolf Otto: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.⁹ The women go to the tomb drawn unconsciously by the fascinating mystery of God about to be disclosed to them. They flee from the tomb shocked by the awe-inspiring message of Jesus's resurrection. The contrasting activity of the women exemplifies Otto's classic thesis about the two-fold human reaction to God and the revelation of the divine mystery.

Pesch commented that the readers of the Gospel, confronted with the women's response to the 'epiphany of God' that has taken place in Jesus's resurrection, are invited to let themselves 'be *fascinated* into faith'.¹⁰ Here Pesch recalled—for the sake of the Gospel *readers*—the *fascinans* from Otto's phrase, but ignored the *tremendum*. Surely readers are invited to imitate the women by being both fascinated *and* awe-inspired, and so come to faith (or be strengthened in an Easter faith that already exists). While profitably introducing Otto to illuminate Mark 16:8, Pesch could have deployed more fully the language of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*.

⁵ R. Pesch, *Das Markusevangelium*, vol. 2 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1977), p. 536; see also p. 522; trans. mine.

⁶ Lightfoot, *Gospel Message*, p. 87.

⁷ Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, vol. 2, p. 528; emphasis mine.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 535.

⁹ R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Penguin, 1959).

¹⁰ Pesch, *Markusevangelium*, vol. 2, p. 541; emphasis mine.

Norman Perrin, Morna Hooker and Francis Moloney

Norman Perrin was among the first to explain Mark 16:8 as disobedience and failure on the part of the three women. Perrin rightly connected the story of the women at Jesus's tomb (Mark 16:1–8) with two other narratives (Mark 15:40–41; 15:42–47). These three narratives (which deal, respectively, with women 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 named again in 16:1. Perrin also noted the progressive failure of Jesus's male disciples that begins at Mark 6:52 and reaches its highpoint in the passion story with Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial of Jesus, and their total absence at the crucifixion. 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. They remain faithfully present at Jesus's death and burial and are 'prepared to play their role in anointing him'. It is 'their great honour to discover the empty tomb and the fact of the resurrection'.¹¹

Then, like the male disciples before them, 'the women also 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'. Perrin admits that this is a 'grim picture' and a 'dark' and 'stark' vision of what Mark intends by the frightened silence of the three women.¹² But is this picture of total failure on the part of all the disciples, both male and female, the right vision to be drawn from Mark 16:8?

In her commentary on Mark's Gospel, Morna Hooker agrees with Perrin. She explains the reaction of the women as a final act of disobedience and failure: Mark ends with 'the statement that the women disobeyed the divine command because they were afraid'; 'their silence is culpable'.¹³ The male disciples have failed to understand the message and identity of Jesus, who denounces their 'hardened' hearts (8:14–21). At the end one of the Twelve betrays Jesus to his enemies, Peter denies him three times, and none of the others have the courage to support him at his death on the cross. The young man who flees naked into the night (14:51–52) symbolizes the way all the male disciples fail Jesus. Having persistently misunderstood and failed Jesus, it is no surprise that they

¹¹ N. Perrin, *The Resurrection Narratives: A New Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 31–32.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.

¹³ M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (London: Continuum, 2001; orig. 1981), p. 392. It is worth remarking that the evangelist does *not* state that the women 'disobeyed' and were 'culpable', but only that, after receiving the message from the angel about the resurrection and a rendezvous in Galilee, 'they said nothing to anyone' (Mark 16:8). He states what happened without passing a moral judgement on it.

all abandon him at the end. Hooker acknowledges that the record of women in Mark's Gospel has been different: 'individual women have been commended for their faith and their actions (5:34; 7:29; 12:41–44; 14:5–9); and the women who follow Jesus from Galilee stand alone by him at the end; they alone witness his death (15:40–41) and burial (15:47). But, surprisingly, at this point even they fail'. Their fear and failure to deliver the message 'demonstrate their inability to believe the good news' of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus.¹⁴ Hooker considers it 'ironic that on Easter morning those who had faithfully followed Jesus to his crucifixion should flee from his tomb—just as the [male] disciples fled from arrest (14:50, 52): this stupendous act is too great even for their [the three women's] loyalty'.¹⁵

Hooker's list of references to the faithful activity of women needs to be enlarged by adding details from 1:29–31, the account of Peter's mother-in-law being cured and then 'serving' Jesus—the only example from the many people cured in Mark's Gospel who does just that. The full account of the activity of female followers of Jesus in Mark 1–15 remains totally positive. Not a single misstep prepares us for an alleged failure at the end. Such failure would be totally out of character with all that the women associated with Jesus have done since the start of Mark's Gospel.

Nevertheless, Hooker's interpretation has been followed by her former doctoral student, Francis J. Moloney: 'The women, who had overcome the scandal of the cross by looking on from afar as Jesus died (15:40–41) and watched where he was buried (15:47), have not been able to overcome the scandal of the empty tomb and the Easter proclamation. They have joined the [male] disciples in flight and fear'.¹⁶ Hence Moloney discusses Mark 16:1–8 under the title 'the Failure of the Women'.¹⁷ Mark, he insists, proposes that, just as the male disciples failed, 'so also the women failed (16:8). In the end, *all human beings fail...but God succeeds. God has raised Jesus from the dead (16:6)*'.¹⁸

¹⁴ Hooker, *St Mark*, p. 387.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 393. But do the male disciples's flight from arrest and the women's flight from the tomb stand in parallel? The men flee from danger at the hands of human beings; the women flee when 'confronted with the power of God'. Faced with 'the mightiest act of all', they flee. This is 'precisely how many other characters in the [Mark's] story have reacted when confronted' with the divine power (*ibid.*, p. 387). Here Hooker herself recognizes that the flight of the men and that of the women are differently motivated; they should not be explained in the same way.

¹⁶ F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2002), p. 348.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 348–52.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

Joel Marcus

Marcus recognizes how the women's fear is 'a typical biblical reaction to a theophany or angelophany'. He points out how Abraham 'responds to a covenant-inaugurating theophany with *ekstasis* ('astonishment') and *phobos* ('fear') (Gen. 15:12). Moreover, 'when God or an angel appears in the Bible, the recipient of the appearance sometimes becomes mute', for instance, 'because of shock' (Dan 10:15). Nevertheless, Marcus claims that it seems that the women in Mark 16:8 remain deliberately silent: 'they choose not to' speak.¹⁹ He finds their fear and flight 'easy to understand: the women have just encountered an angel, and they have seen a rolled away rock and an empty tomb where they expected a sealed and full one. The sheer unexpectedness of these events and the impression of supernatural power at work help explain their trembling and astonishment'.²⁰

Marcus suggests, however, that 'the muteness of the women in our story seems to arise not from inability to speak but from unwillingness to do so'. The 'resurrection *kerygma*' must 'now be proclaimed to the whole world', but the women react to the angel's instruction with 'fearful silence and flight'.²¹ 'The fleeing [and silent] women provide an image of what not to do, as they run away in fear and squelch the marvellous tidings of the resurrection'.²²

Marcus, nevertheless, goes on to qualify his conclusion about the women's allegedly deliberate and disobedient failure to deliver the message. He raises 'the question whether the women eventually overcame their fear and told the disciples about the meeting in Galilee, to which they then went and were restored to fellowship with Jesus. The mere existence of the narrative suggests a positive answer'.²³ The narrative, I would argue, not only suggests but also requires such a positive answer. If the women never delivered to anyone whatsoever the message about a rendezvous in Galilee and, indeed, about their own experience at the tomb of Jesus, how has Mark come to know about these matters? Apropos of the key instruction of the angel, M. Eugene Boring points out how, 'at the narrative level of presenting past events, the reader is aware that the disciples did somehow get the message'.²⁴

A provisional silence on the part of the women is accounted for by the various astonishing elements in what they experienced at the empty tomb—elements acknowledged by Marcus and just listed above. Their

¹⁹ J. Marcus, *Mark 8–18* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 1081–82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1087.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 1093.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1095.

²⁴ M. E. Boring, *Mark: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox), p. 449, n. 16.

silence was not a deliberate act of disobedience but a stunned, temporary silence produced by the unexpected discovery and bewildering encounter at the tomb of Jesus. Timothy Dwyer illustrates how in biblical stories silence, at least for a time, can 'result from a divine encounter'.²⁵ The silence of the women, he proposes, is best understood as provisional: in due course they spoke to the male disciples.²⁶ The women remained silent with inappropriate persons, until their message could be passed on 'to the appropriate audience, the disciples'.²⁷

Early in Mark's Gospel, Jesus cured a leper and instructed him to 'say nothing to anyone' as he went off to show himself to a representative of the priestly establishment (Mark 1:44). He was to remain silent until he reached the appropriate person, a priest in Jerusalem. Now the three women, although not explicitly so instructed, 'said nothing to anyone' as they ran to bring the angel's message to the appropriate persons, the male disciples.

The temporary silence of the women belongs to three dramatic contrasts which heighten the numinous nature of the revelation expressed by Mark 16:1–8. A first contrast pits not only the *darkness* of the night (between the Saturday and the Sunday of the resurrection) but also the darkness that enveloped the earth at the crucifixion (Mark 15:33) against the *light* of the sun that has just risen when the women go to visit the tomb (Mark 16:2). The second contrast emerges once the women enter the tomb itself. The *absence* of Jesus's body is set over against the *presence* of Jesus mediated through an interpreting angel in the form of a well-dressed 'young man'. A third contrast pits the confident *words* of the heavenly figure ('he has been raised; he is not here; see the place where they laid him'; and the instruction about the rendezvous in Galilee) against the *silence* of the women when they flee from the tomb.²⁸ Their provisional silence belongs to an appropriately dramatic way of using contrasts to narrate the climactic revelation of Jesus's resurrection from the dead, and should not be taken to be a disobedient refusal to pass on the angelic message.

Some readers may wonder why I have not discussed the hypothesis which explains the women's silence as 'a later-first-century attempt to explain why no one had previously heard the story about the empty tomb, which according to this theory had recently been concocted, either by Mark or by a predecessor'.²⁹ Marcus did not find those who

²⁵ T. Dwyer, *The Motif of Wonder in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), p. 189.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 191–92.

²⁷ J. Lee Magness, *Sense and Absence: Structure and Suspension in the Ending of Mark's Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), p. 100.

²⁸ G. O'Collins, *Easter Faith: Believing in the Risen Jesus* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003), pp. 72–73.

²⁹ Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, p. 1082.

argue for the later invention of an empty tomb story to be convincing. Neither have I. Both before and after his 2009 commentary appeared, I have argued against those who hold such a later invention view.³⁰

Camille Foçant

Besides respecting the narrative of Mark 16:1–8, we should also note what it can ask of its readers and hearers—something that J. Lee Magness called 'the completion of the story by the readers and their dramatic participation in its conclusion'.³¹ We also saw above how Nineham and Pesch introduced the role of readers into their interpretation of Mark 16:1–8.

Like other commentators, Camille Foçant recognizes how the 'the mention of Galilee' in Mark 16:7 recalls 'the start of the gospel narrative that begins with the preaching in Galilee'. This carries momentous implications for readers of the gospel. In a striking reversal and extension, 'the epilogue of the gospel [Mark 16:1–8] thus constitutes a prologue to the work of the reader' (reversal). Moreover, 'where the work of the narrator ends, that of the reader begins' (extension). Readers are invited to complete the story. They are led to register themselves 'personally in the evangelical drama and assume it'.³²

Thus the (provisional) silence of the three women becomes an invitation to speak. Readers can become 'voices crying out in the wilderness' (Mark 1:3) and play their role 'in the history of the gospel *kerygma*'.³³

A positive interpretation of the women's fearful silence in Mark 16:8 should be reinstated. It embodies an appropriate reaction to the unique divine revelation conveyed in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. The comments of Nineham, Pesch, Magness, and Foçant add to this, by calling on us to acknowledge in the enigmatic final verse of Mark an invitation to complete what we read by living and proclaiming the resurrection.

Gerald O'Collins SJ
ocollins@unigre.it

³⁰ G. O'Collins, *Interpreting the Resurrection* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 53–58; O'Collins, *Easter Faith*, pp. 66–71; O'Collins, *Believing in the Resurrection* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012), pp. 80–91.

³¹ Magness, *Sense and Absence*, p. 102.

³² C. Foçant, *The Gospel According to Mark: A Commentary*, trans. Leslie Robert Keylock (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2012), p. 661.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 662.