Ad Fontes, Week Six: The Ending of Mark

Chapter 5: The Ending of Mark

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Six

This is the first of the famous hard cases. Mark 16:9 to 20 holds the great commission, the ascension, the signs that follow believers, and a verse Luther quotes in the Small Catechism. Many of us learned these words by heart. Today we run the method from Week Five on them, honestly, and then do the harder work: asking what it means for us if Mark did not write them. The answer to that second question is the more important one. Nothing we confess is lost.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 10	Report back: what your Bible does after verse 8
10 to 20	Four endings
20 to 32	External evidence: weighed, not counted
32 to 42	Internal evidence: does it sound like Mark?
42 to 48	The master question
48 to 53	Did Mark mean to stop there?
53 to 66	What this does not take away
66 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: what your Bible does after verse 8

Last week you wrote down exactly what your translation does after Mark 16:8. Let’s hear them.

What we might find	Where
Verses 9 to 20 printed straight through, no note	King James
Verses 9 to 20 in the running text under their own heading, with a note at verse 8 that some early manuscripts end there and others have a short ending	BSB

What we might find	Where
Verses 9 to 20 in double brackets, with a note	ESV, NASB
A heading or note saying the earliest manuscripts end at verse 8	NET, NIV, CSB
A “shorter ending” printed as well	Some editions, often set off or in a note (the BSB gives it in its note at verse 8)

Something to notice already: not one modern translation deleted these verses. Every one kept them and told you the evidence. That is the opposite of hiding something.

2. Four endings

Most people assume the question is a simple yes or no. It is not. Mark ends at least four different ways in the manuscripts.

Ending	What it says	Where it is found
The abrupt ending	Stops at 16:8: “And in their fear they did not say a word to anyone” (BSB)	Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, both 300s
The longer ending	Verses 9 to 20: appearances, the commission, the signs, the ascension	Most later Greek manuscripts; the Latin Vulgate; the King James
The shorter ending	A few lines: the women report to Peter’s companions, and Jesus sends out through them “the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation”	The Old Latin codex k, some Coptic copies, a few Greek copies from the 600s to 800s. Only codex k has it alone; every Greek copy that has it follows it with the longer ending
The longer ending, expanded	Adds an exchange after verse 14 about Satan’s reign coming to an end, called the “Freer logion”	Codex Washingtonianus (W), 300s or 400s, now in Washington, D.C. Jerome saw it in Greek copies too

Why four endings matter

When a book has a strong, satisfying close, copyists copy it. They do not invent alternatives. Four endings tell us that very early on, many Christians felt Mark’s ending was missing something, and different churches filled the gap in different ways. The existence of the alternatives is itself evidence.

3. External evidence: weighed, not counted

If we counted manuscripts, the longer ending would win easily. Some 1,650 Greek manuscripts of Mark have it; only three end at verse 8 (Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and a twelfth-century commentary manuscript, 304). But those thousands are mostly one stream, copied over and over. Week Five's rule applies: weigh the witnesses.

Ends at verse 8 (or shorter ending only)	Has the longer ending
Codex Sinaiticus (300s, Egypt). The end of Mark is on a replacement sheet written by the manuscript's own corrector, who spread out his letters so no blank column would follow verse 8	**Codex Alexandrinus** and **Codex Ephraemi** (400s)
Codex Vaticanus (300s). The scribe leaves the rest of the column and the whole next column blank, just room enough for verses 9 to 20. What the gap means is debated, but it suggests he knew Mark could go on and his copy did not	**Codex Bezae** (400s; its last Greek leaf is lost, but the passage begins on the leaf before)
Old Latin codex k (about 400, North Africa): shorter ending only	**Codex Washingtonianus** (300s or 400s), with the Freer logion
The Sinaitic Syriac (an early Syriac translation)	Nearly all Greek copies from the 500s on
Some Sahidic Coptic copies (Egypt)	The Latin Vulgate, and from it Wycliffe, Tyndale, Geneva, and the King James
Several Armenian and Georgian copies lack it or mark it; one Armenian copy of 989 writes the name of an elder, Ariston, above it	

What the church fathers reported

- **Eusebius** (early 300s), asked how Mark 16:9 fits Matthew 28:1, gave two answers: set the passage aside, since it is missing from the accurate copies and almost all of them, or keep it and harmonize it. He used verse 9 himself. His clearest testimony is his **canon tables**, his cross-reference system for the Gospels, which end Mark at verse 8.
- **Jerome** (early 400s) is often listed beside him, but his remark in Letter 120 is a Latin translation of Eusebius's answer, not a second witness. Jerome put verses 9 to 20 in the Vulgate.
- **Hesychius of Jerusalem** and **Severus of Antioch**, later still, also knew copies that ended at verse 8.

So we have one fourth-century witness here, not two: an important one, at Caesarea, who knew copies that ended at verse 8 and judged them the accurate ones.

The strongest point on the other side

The longer ending is old. **Irenaeus** quotes Mark 16:19 by name around AD 180, and Tatian and perhaps Justin Martyr seem to know it in the 100s; some also hear it in the *Epistula Apostolorum*, though that is debated. (On the other side, the *Gospel of Peter* seems to know a story of Mark that stopped at the tomb.) So it was attached to Mark very early. The real question is not whether it is ancient. It is whether it goes all the way back to Mark himself.

Weighed, the evidence leans to the ending at verse 8: the two oldest Greek Bibles (closely related to each other), early translations in Syriac, Coptic, and Latin, and Eusebius's report and canon tables. These are not five independent lines, but they span four languages, and that spread is hard to explain if the longer ending had been in Mark from the start.

4. Internal evidence: does it sound like Mark?

Four observations. Any one alone would be suggestive. All four together, in the same twelve verses, are very hard to credit to Mark.

1. **It reads like a summary of the other Gospels.** In twelve verses it gathers the appearance to Mary Magdalene (John 20), the two on the road (Luke 24), the appearance to the eleven (Luke and John), the commission (Matthew 28), the signs (Acts), and the ascension (Luke 24 and Acts 1). That is Week Three's harmonization, done on a large scale: a whole ending assembled from the other Gospels.
2. **The vocabulary is not Mark's.** The twelve verses hold seventeen words or uses that are foreign to Mark, some found nowhere else in the New Testament.
3. **The seam shows.** In Greek, verse 8 ends on the little word *gar*, "for": an odd way to end a sentence, let alone a book. Verse 9 then begins with a construction Mark never uses for the resurrection.
4. **Mary Magdalene is introduced all over again.** Verse 9 presents her as the one "from whom He had driven out seven demons" (BSB), as if the reader were meeting her for the first time. But she was named at 16:1, eight verses earlier.

Try it. Read Mark 16:1 and 16:9 aloud, one after the other. Does verse 9 sound like the same writer continuing, or like someone starting a new story?

5. The master question

Suppose Mark's text ended at verse 8	Suppose Mark wrote verses 9 to 20 to follow verse 8
Can we explain the longer ending? Yes, easily. The sudden close felt unfinished. Different churches supplied different endings, drawing on the other Gospels close at hand. That explains the shorter ending and the Freer logion too.	Can we explain its absence from Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, codex k, the Syriac, and the Coptic, and Eusebius building his canon tables on copies that ended at verse 8? Not easily. No repeated words invite an eye-skip. Deliberate removal cannot be ruled out, but no witness says anyone did it, and it would have to take hold in only one region. And an existing ending does not invite a second, shorter one.

The text ending at verse 8 is the reading that explains the others. External evidence, internal evidence, and the master question all point the same way. The UBS editors give it an A, in the sixth edition (2025) as in the older ones. With very high probability, the earliest text of Mark we can recover ends at verse 8, and verses 9 to 20 were not written by Mark to follow it. They are an early addition from the 100s that the church came to read with Mark. Whether Mark meant to stop at verse 8 is a separate question (section 6).

Hear the other side

This is a minority view, not a crank one. William Farmer (*The Last Twelve Verses of Mark*, 1974), James Snapp Jr. (*Authentic*, 2024 edition), Nicholas Lunn (*The Original Ending of Mark*, 2014), and Maurice Robinson, a defender of the Byzantine text, have made serious cases for the longer ending. Snapp agrees that verses 9 to 20 were not written to follow verse 8. He proposes that Mark was interrupted, probably by Nero's persecution; that his co-workers in Rome finished the book with a short account of the appearances Mark had written earlier; and that an Egyptian copyist later removed it. On that view the passage belongs to the Gospel as it was first released for the church's use. Each step of that story is a reconstruction with no surviving witness, and our dogmaticians tie inspiration to what the apostles wrote, not to what a later circle released. Still, the case gives more weight to the majority of manuscripts and less to Eusebius. It hangs together, and it deserves to be read. Most textual scholars find it unconvincing, and so do I. We will give the Majority Text position a full hearing in Chapter 13.

6. Did Mark mean to stop there?

If the text we can recover ends at verse 8, was that on purpose? Serious scholars hold both views, and the manuscripts cannot settle it.

The “lost ending” view	The “intended ending” view
Mark wrote more, perhaps an appearance in Galilee as promised in 16:7, and the last leaf was lost very early, or he was prevented from finishing. The later endings were attempts to restore it.	Mark stopped on purpose. His book opens with “the beginning of the gospel” (1:1), and the women’s silence leaves the reader to finish the proclamation.

Either way, the ending we have is theologically whole. The tomb is empty (16:6). The angel announces the resurrection (16:6). The women are sent to tell (16:7). They tremble in holy fear (16:8). Jesus foretold his death and rising three times in this Gospel (8:31, 9:31, 10:33 to 34), and the angel confirms it.

And the women did not stay silent forever. We know, because we are reading their story.

7. What this does not take away

This is the heaviest part of the hour. Some of us heard these verses at confirmation, on Ascension Day, or at the graveside of someone we loved. That attachment is real, and it deserves care. But it is not evidence about what Mark wrote.

The load-bearing distinction, again

Inspiration attaches to what the apostles wrote. Preservation attaches to the whole stream of copies. If Mark did not write verses 9 to 20, they are not part of the inspired Gospel of Mark, and we cannot preach them with the same confidence as Mark 1:2. But God built the apostolic witness wide on purpose. Nothing in these twelve verses stands alone.

Taught in Mark 16:9 to 20	Taught securely in undisputed text
Christ is risen and appeared to his disciples	Matthew 28; Luke 24; John 20 and 21; 1 Corinthians 15:3 to 8
Go into all the world and preach	Matthew 28:18 to 20; Luke 24:46 to 49; Acts 1:8
Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved	Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3 to 4; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21
He ascended to the right hand of God	Luke 24:50 to 51; Acts 1:9 to 11; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 1:3
Christ’s authority over demons and disease goes with his messengers	Throughout the Gospels and Acts

A word about the Small Catechism

Mark 16:16 matters to Lutherans in a special way. In the Small Catechism, when Luther asks where God’s promise in Baptism is written, he answers with “the last chapter of Mark.” Does our teaching on Baptism fall if that verse is not Mark’s?

No. The promise stands on ground nobody disputes: “the baptism that now saves you” (1 Peter 3:21 BSB); “He saved us… through the washing of new birth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5 BSB); “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38 BSB). Luther quoted the Bible he had, and what he taught from it is true. The doctrine never rested on one verse.

Luther and the longer ending

Luther preached on these verses, and preached them well. He worked from Erasmus’s Greek (the 1519 second edition) and the Latin Vulgate, both of which had them. He had no Sinaiticus, no Vaticanus, no codex k, and no canon-table evidence in hand; the one ancient doubt in circulation came through Jerome’s letter, and it did not move him. He preached faithfully from the text he had. We have more evidence, and using it is not a criticism of Luther. It is his own *ad fontes* carried on in our century.

What we lose, and what we keep

We keep the resurrection, the appearances, the commission, Baptism’s promise, the ascension, and Christ’s authority. Every one is taught in text nobody questions. What we lose is the comfort of treating these twelve verses as Mark’s own words when our best evidence says they are not. For some, that is not a small loss. But the gain is honesty, and honesty about Scripture is what we owe the One who gave it.

You can still read verses 9 to 20 for what they are: an early witness the church has treasured, faithful to the other Gospels, but not the apostle’s own pen.

For discussion

1. Four different endings survive. What does it tell you that early Christians could not bear to leave Mark on the women’s silence?
2. Have you ever held onto a verse because of who taught it to you or when you first heard it? How do we honor that memory without asking it to settle a question of evidence?
3. How would you answer a fellow member who says, “If Mark 16:16 is not original, our Baptism teaching is in trouble”?
4. Is Mark’s Gospel, ending at verse 8 with fear and an empty tomb, enough? Why or why not?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Longer ending. Mark 16:9 to 20.

Shorter ending. A brief alternative close to Mark, a few lines long, found in a small group of manuscripts.

Freer logion. An extra saying inserted after Mark 16:14 in Codex Washingtonianus, named for Charles Freer, whose collection holds it.

Codex Washingtonianus (W). A Greek Gospels manuscript from the 300s or 400s, now at the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.

Codex Bobbiensis (k). An Old Latin Gospels manuscript from about AD 400, from North Africa, the only witness with the shorter ending alone.

Sinaitic Syriac. One of the earliest Syriac translations of the Gospels, found at St. Catherine's Monastery.

Canon tables. Eusebius's cross-reference system for the four Gospels. His tables end Mark at verse 8.

Patristic evidence. What the church fathers quote or report about the text. On Mark 16, Eusebius is the key witness; Jerome's remark repeats him.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 6, "The Pericope Adulterae," the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 7:53 to 8:11.

Do this one thing. Read Mark 16:1 to 8, just the eight verses, and stop. Sit with the ending Mark gave us. Then read 16:9 to 20 and notice how different it feels.

Also. Open your Bible to John 7:53 to 8:11 and write down what your translation does with it, just as you did for Mark 16.

Bring. Your Bible, your John 8 notes, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. The women fled the tomb afraid and said nothing, and yet here we are, reading their story. What does that tell you about how God gets his Word out?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for the Gospel of Mark, however he chose to end it. Thanks be to God that the resurrection of our Lord is told by many witnesses in many books, so that nothing the church confesses about her risen Lord rests on a single contested passage. Thanks be to God for the early copyists who could not bear to leave Mark on the women's silence. Their additions were not Mark's, but their longing was for a true thing. And thanks be to God for the women at the empty tomb, who did not stay silent forever. The news got out. We are reading it now.

"He has risen! He is not here!" Mark 16:6 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.