Mark 16.1-8: The Unfinished Sentence

by Clare Amos, Editor of The Reader.

The Easter gospel in Mark is one of the strangest parts of the New Testament. So strange, in fact, that later Christians could not believe that Mark 16.8 was the end of the gospel - and attempts were made to round off the book by adding various versions of what now appears in Mark 16.9-20. It is virtually certain that verses 9-20 were not part of the original gospel of Mark and were added in the second century AD to satisfy people's under-standing of how a gospel ought to end. We cannot be quite sure that 16.8 was the point at which the gospel of Mark was intended to end. Some people would suggest that there was originally some extra text which has now got lost, or more dramatically, that Mark was interrupted - perhaps by a knock of Nero's soldiers at his door -just at the very point when he had penned the words 'They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid...'

However in recent years the view has become popular that these words were the original and intended conclusion of Mark's gospel. And if we accept this we can begin to see the gospel of Mark in a new and clearer light. They are strange: in the Greek the sentence actually ends with the little word 'for' - and that is no normal way to complete a sentence, let alone a chapter or a whole book! It is quite literally an unfinished sentence, perhaps represented by three dots, and a voice that suddenly tails off.

Yet it may be that is the very point Mark was wanting to make. He is seeking to write a gospel without a proper end - because we are to make, and live out, the conclusion for ourselves. The vocabulary of 16.1-8 is strange and awe-ful, it speaks of fear, surprise, trembling and dumbfoundedness. Appropriate language indeed, when one encounters resurrection. Yet the language also reflects words that were used in Mark 10.32-34 - when Jesus was in Galilee but racing ahead of his disciples on the journey to Jerusalem. There too his friends were very afraid. And the comment by the young man in 16.7, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee' mirrors the statement in 10.32 that Jesus 'was going ahead of them to Jerusalem.' Galilee and Jerusalem: the twin poles of the gospel. Perhaps what Mark is trying to tell us is that the first journey that Jesus' friends made to Jerusalem ended, for them at least, in failure, for they all ran away and deserted him.

But his death was not the end for him, or them, for now they are being instructed to return to Galilee (to 10.32) so that they can travel to Jerusalem, that beautiful city of suffering and glorification, once more. And this time as they journey to Jerusalem, they will have the opportunity to remain with Jesus - in his death - so that they can share with him in his resurrection. Da Capo a la Fine, they say in musical terms. Go back and play it through again.

We are fortunate that in this country and at this moment we do not live in a time of persecution, unlike the situation in which Mark was writing. But his message is relevant for us too: it is a mistake to think of Jesus' death and resurrection only as a past event in history. It must also be lived out in the life of every believer. We all have our failures, our turnings aside, and desertion of Jesus. We are all being called at every Easter to return to Galilee, so that we can journey to Jerusalem with Jesus once more. The resurrection of Jesus will not be complete for us until we have finished the sentence in our own lives.