soon face his judgment. The high priest asks Jesus whether he is the “Messiah, the Son of the Blessed.” Here, the “Blessed” is God. Apparently, for the high priest, the titles “Messiah” and “Son of God” are synonymous, but they are not for Mark. Significantly, in response to the high priest’s question concerning who he is, Jesus replies, “I am,” and, of course, that phrase belongs, properly speaking, to God alone (cf. Exod 3:14). This divine Jesus is the one whom not only the high priest but also Mark’s readers will soon “see” at the final judgment.

Questions for Reflection:
For us, is the fact that Peter denied Jesus a warning or a comfort or both? Do Christians sometimes try to confess Jesus prematurely, before they learn what the cost of following Jesus is? Did the high priest really think that Jesus committed blasphemy? Why?


And as soon as it was day, the chief priests, after consulting with the elders and scribes and the whole Sanhedrin, tied up Jesus and took him off and handed him over to Pilate. And Pilate asked him, “You are the king of the Jews?” But he in reply said to him, “That is the way you would say it.” And the chief priests kept accusing him of many things. And Pilate asked him again, “Aren’t you going to answer anything? See how much they are accusing you of.” But Jesus no longer made any answer, so that Pilate was amazed (15:1–5).

Each festival, he used to release for them one prisoner, whomever they requested. Now there was a man called Barabbas who was
bound with the rebels who had committed murder in the revolt. And the crowd came up and began to ask him to do what he normally did for them. And Pilate answered them, “Do you want me to release for you the ‘king of the Jews’?” For he knew that the chief priests had handed him over out of jealousy. But the chief priests stirred up the crowd so he would release Barabbas for them instead. Pilate replying back said to them, “So what am I to do with the ‘king of the Jews’?” They shouted back, “Crucify him.” But Pilate said to them, “Why? What evil did he do?” But they shouted vehemently, “Crucify him.” And Pilate, desiring to satisfy the crowd, released Barabbas for them, and he whipped Jesus and handed him over to be crucified (15:6-15).

And the soldiers led him away inside the courtyard, that is the Praetorium, and they called together the whole cohort. And they dressed him in purple, and they wove a crown from thorns and put it on him. And they began to greet him, “Hail, king of the Jews!” And they beat his head with a stick and spat on him and bent their knees and worshipped him. And when they had ridiculed him, they stripped him of the purple and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him (15:16-20).

And they pressed into service a passer-by, a certain Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the countryside, the father of Alexander and Rufus, to carry his cross. And they brought him to a place, Golgotha, which translated means, “Skull Place.” And they tried to give him wine flavored with myrrh. But he did not take it. And they crucified him. And they divided up his garments by casting lots over them to determine who would take away what. And it was the third hour when they crucified him. And there was a superscription of the charge against him, reading, “The king of the Jews.” And with him they crucified two bandits, one on his right and one on his left (15:21-27).

In this section, Mark carefully explains to his readers in what sense Jesus is the “Messiah.” Mark invites us to consider this question in the opening dialogue between Pilate and Jesus. In Pilate’s question, “You are the king of the Jews?” the you is emphatic. Hence, the words already push us to wonder how it
can be appropriate to think of this particular individual as a king. Jesus’ answer also contains an emphatic you and so is perhaps best translated: “That is the way you would say it.” Accordingly, Mark suggests that Pilate’s words are only partially true. As the narrative continues, it insists that the words are true in the sense that Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus, we have repeated allusions to many texts. For example, the soldiers dividing up Jesus’ clothes reflects Ps 22:18. By contrast, Mark implies that it is false to say Jesus is a king if we take the declaration to mean that Jesus is willing to use force to achieve earthly glory. On the contrary, Jesus refuses even to defend himself before Pilate. Instead, like the suffering servant in Isa 53:7, he is silent in the face of injustice. The contrast between Jesus’ suffering kingship and the kingship of this world becomes unmistakable when Pilate asks the crowds to choose between Jesus and Barabbas. Barabbas is a revolutionary who committed murder. He is someone who used violence in an attempt to become an earthly king. Significantly, in the narrative Barabbas does not have to suffer and die. Then the nature of Jesus’ kingship becomes brutally evident when the soldiers ridicule Jesus. As the soldiers salute Jesus as “king” and abuse him, Mark invites the reader to realize that Jesus’ kingship is of a different order than what the soldiers mean by “king.”

Questions for Reflection:

In what sense can we say that Jesus is a king? How did Jesus’ kingship become especially visible in his trial, mocking, and crucifixion?
And the passers-by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, “Ha! You who are going to destroy the sanctuary and build it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross.” Likewise, the chief priests, along with the scribes, also ridiculed him to one another and kept saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, Israel’s King, come down now from the cross so we can see and believe.” And those who were crucified with him taunted him (15:29-32).

In this section, Mark brings to a climax his themes that Jesus does not work miracles to avoid suffering and that miracles do not produce real faith. Jesus’ enemies taunt him to work a miracle. However, if he had complied, he would have used miracles to escape suffering and death. As we have seen throughout the gospel, Jesus never uses miracles in this way. On the contrary, Jesus deliberately works miracles which lead to suffering and death. Similarly, Jesus’ enemies claim that if only he will work a miraculous sign, they will believe in him. Earlier in the gospel, the Pharisees also test Jesus by demanding that he work a heavenly sign, and he refuses (8:11-12). Such signs would not produce the faith which Mark requires. If Jesus did come down from the cross, what the chief priests would believe is that he is “Israel’s King.” However, Jesus is not “Israel’s King” in the sense that they mean. Ironically, Jesus’ enemies assume that his failure to work a miracle is a judgment on him, whereas, in fact, it is a judgment on them.

Questions for Reflection:

Does God sometimes show his goodness and power by choosing not to work a miracle? Are people’s attacks on Jesus or the church sometimes a judgment on themselves?
And when the sixth hour came, darkness fell on the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus shouted with a great cry, “Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, my God, for what reason have you abandoned me?” And some of the bystanders heard and said, “See, he is calling Elijah.” And one ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it around a stick, and let him drink and said, “So, let us see if Elijah is coming to take him down” (15:33-36).

This section is difficult and has prompted much speculation. There has been a great deal of discussion about the significance of Jesus’ question as to why God has abandoned him. No less perplexing is the bystanders’ conclusion that Jesus is calling on Elijah.

For Mark’s intended readers, however, the passage primarily continues the theme that Jesus fulfills the scriptures by dying. The question, “My God, my God, for what reason have you abandoned me?” is the opening of Psalm 22, and Mark has alluded to this psalm earlier (Mark 15:24; Ps 22:18). Jesus being given vinegar to drink recalls another scriptural passage, Ps 69:21. Both passages stress the suffering which a righteous person undergoes at the hands of the wicked. Jesus as the supremely righteous one who suffers at the hands of the utterly wicked fulfills these passages.

I suspect Mark hoped that the discussion about the coming of Elijah would remind readers that Jesus is the son of humanity who is coming. As we have noted before, Mark does not let the title of “Messiah” stand alone. Instead, he supplements it with the titles “son of humanity” and “Son of God.” For example, in
chapter 8 when Peter proclaims Jesus is the “Messiah,” Jesus talks about the “son of humanity,” and in the next scene, a voice from heaven declares that Jesus is God’s Son (9:7). In the gospel, Mark looks forward to the coming of the “son of humanity” and links it with the coming of Elijah. Thus, in chapter 9, Jesus reassures the disciples that Elijah will indeed come first, but that Elijah (John the Baptist) and the “son of humanity” both must suffer (9:11–13). Therefore, when the bystanders discuss whether Elijah will come to deliver Jesus, the reader might well recall that Jesus is the “son of humanity” who is coming.

Questions for Reflection:

How does Jesus fulfill biblical texts, such as Psalm 22 and Psalm 69, that were not prophecies in the strict sense? Can we who are “sons” and daughters “of humanity” fulfill such texts too? In what sense is it true to say that God abandoned Jesus on the cross?

42. Mark 15:37–39

But Jesus let out a great cry and expired. And the curtain of the sanctuary was torn in two, from the top down to the bottom. And when the centurion who stood by facing him saw that he expired in this way, he said, “Truly this person was God’s Son” (15:37–39).

Here, Mark brings his Christology to its climax by suggesting that through his death Jesus has abolished the barrier that separates God from humanity. When Jesus dies, the curtain of the sanctuary is torn in two. The curtain separated the place where God symbolically dwelt from the places where his
Jewish worshippers could be. The temple in turn separated the God of Israel and his chosen people from Pagans. Once the curtain is destroyed, God is fully visible and available to all. This new situation becomes evident when the Roman centurion—presumably, a Pagan—immediately declares that Jesus is God’s Son. Significantly, all this occurs when Jesus dies.

Literarily, this scene complements the scene at Jesus’ baptism and stresses that his mission is now fulfilled. At the beginning of the gospel, John the Baptist proclaims that his successor will baptize with the Holy Spirit. Jesus appears and is baptized himself. The heavens are “torn” open, Jesus receives the Holy Spirit, and a voice from heaven declares that he is God’s Son. However, apparently no one but Jesus hears the heavenly voice, and, subsequently, Jesus does not in fact baptize with the Holy Spirit. Now, at the gospel’s climax, the veil of the temple is “torn” apart and for the first time a human being declares that Jesus is God’s Son. Hence, thanks to Jesus’ death, the world has at last received God’s message, and we are confident that the Holy Spirit will soon be available to everyone.

In this climactic scene, Mark emphasizes to his readers that we can only learn who Jesus is by focusing on the cross. Previously, no person in the gospel ever confesses that Jesus is God’s Son. This failure is all the more noteworthy because first the demons and then God himself declare to various bystanders who Jesus actually is. Now, however, a Roman soldier who never had the benefit of such supernatural testimony confesses, “Truly this person was God’s Son.” Mark explicitly tells us that the centurion said this when he saw how Jesus died.

Questions for Reflection:

Is it true that people can learn who Jesus is only by focusing on the cross? Why? Why did Jesus have to die before he could baptize his followers with the Holy Spirit?
Now there were also women who watched from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of the younger James and Joses, and Salome (these followed him when he was in Galilee and provided for him). And many other women who had come up to Jerusalem with him were present (15:40-41).

And when evening had already begun, since it was the day of preparation (that is, the day before the Sabbath), Joseph of Arimathea came. He was a prominent member of the Sanhedrin who also himself was awaiting God’s rule. He dared to come to Pilate and asked for Jesus’ body. Pilate wondered if he had already died, and he summoned the centurion and asked him if he had been dead long. And when he found out from the centurion, he granted the corpse to Joseph. And he bought a piece of linen and took him down and wrapped him in the linen and put him in a tomb which was hewn from rock, and he rolled a stone to the entrance of the tomb. And Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses noticed where he was put (15:42-47).

And when the Sabbath had passed, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they could come and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb after the sun rose. And they said to each other, “Who will roll away for us the stone from the entrance of the tomb?” And they looked up and noticed that the stone had been rolled away, for it was extremely big. And they went into the tomb and saw a young man sitting on the right, dressed in a white robe, and they were astounded. But he said to them, “Do not be astounded. You are seeking Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. See the place where they put him. But go off, say to his students and to Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he said to you.’”
And they came out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and confusion gripped them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid (16:1–8).

To readers who are familiar with other gospels, this ending is startling. Matthew, Luke, and John go on to include stories of the risen Jesus appearing to his followers. Hence, it seems strange to us that Mark does not, especially since earlier Jesus tells his students that they will see him in Galilee (cf. 14:28), and now the young man at the tomb repeats this promise.

Most of the surviving manuscripts of Mark do go on to give us accounts of resurrection appearances, but these are later additions. The earliest and best manuscripts lack them, and, if these stories came from Mark himself, it is impossible to explain why ancient scribes would have omitted them.

We must suppose that when Mark wrote the gospel the original ending was less startling. Since the other gospels did not yet exist, readers did not have any expectation concerning how such a book should end. Moreover, at this early date it was obvious that the title was “The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus the Messiah, God’s Son” (1:1), and this title suggested that Mark would only narrate the first part of the story.

By breaking off the narrative before the disciples see Jesus again, Mark was able to make the crucifixion the climax of the gospel. Had Mark gone on to describe a triumphant encounter between the risen Christ and his followers, this resurrection scene would inevitably have become the climax, and Mark’s focus on the cross would have been compromised.

To Mark’s original readers, the young man dressed in white would have suggested the ultimate triumph of the believer when we will reign with Jesus in glory. To be sure, the “young man ... dressed in a white robe” is an angel. Still, it is significant that Mark does not call him an angel. Earlier in Mark’s gospel, Jesus declares that in the resurrection the faithful are “like angels”
(12:25), and the Apocalypse tells us that in eternal life the saved wear "white robes" (Rev 6:11, 7:9, etc.). In chapter 14:51–52 we have a young man who symbolizes the failure of those who follow Jesus; now we have a "young man" who proclaims the resurrection and so symbolizes our final victory.

Nevertheless, even for its original readers, Mark's gospel must have ended on a disconcerting note. The faithful women who bury Jesus cannot deal with the terrifying news that he has risen from the dead. As a result, they disobey the heavenly messenger and tell no one what they heard.

This ending brings to a climax the theme that the students of Jesus have failed. Earlier in the gospel, all the disciples who have previously been mentioned fail. Judas betrays Jesus, Peter denies him, the rest flee. However, when he narrates the burial of Jesus, Mark introduces some more disciples, and initially these appear to be faithful. Mark tells us that Joseph of Arimathea "dared" to go to Pilate to obtain Jesus' body and bury it. Significantly, Mark tells us that Joseph "was awaiting God's rule," i.e., that he is a disciple. Mark also tells up about the women who watch Jesus' death and go to the tomb to anoint his body. Mark emphasizes that they too are disciples. They "followed" Jesus, provided for him in Galilee, and accompanied him to Jerusalem. However, at the supreme moment when they receive the command to share the news, they become afraid and remain silent.

Consequently, Mark's gospel ends with a warning to the reader to do better. Earlier, we noted that in the gospel Peter is an example of what the reader must avoid. In chapter 13, Jesus talks about the crisis which Mark's own readers must endure and warns them to "watch." Then, in the garden of Gethsamene, Jesus commands Peter to watch, and yet he falls asleep. Subsequently, Peter denies knowing Jesus. So too, the women serve as a warning. We must not be so afraid in the midst of the crisis of our own time that we refuse to proclaim the resurrection.
Despite everything, however, the gospel ends on a note of hope. Even if the disciples have failed, Jesus has triumphed. He has risen from the dead. He is going before his followers to Galilee. There they will see him. Even Peter who denied him will see him. Jesus will give them new power and a greater mission. So too, Mark’s readers know that Jesus still lives and reigns. Indeed, Mark proclaims that soon Jesus will return in glory to reward those who have remained faithful. The words of the angel are equally addressed to the readers of the gospel, “You will see him, just as he said to you.”

Questions for Reflection:

In how many ways was the prophecy that the disciples would “see” Jesus fulfilled? In how many ways does Mark’s gospel invite us to “see” Jesus today?