

FOLLOWING JESUS TO THE CROSS: MARK'S STORY OF DISCIPLESHIP AND THE IDENTITY OF THE NEW HOLINESS COMMUNITY

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This essay will use narrative criticism to explore what Mark says about the nature of discipleship, in particular highlighting his portrayal of the Twelve – their incomprehension, blindness, and failure during the passion narrative – as compared to female disciples, who remain faithful to the cross and beyond. It will then consider in what ways Mark's story, including his representation of discipleship as well as the story's unexpected ending, shapes the identity of the new holiness community and demands a response from us today.

Introduction

Stories create. They do not simply reproduce facts or present a neutral picture of reality. By narrating occurrences and conversations in a certain manner, stories draw intentional images and form perspectives. In this way, stories shape identity and transform the recipient because they demand a response: Stories are 'essential to life [and] hold a community together'.¹

In his gospel, Mark tells a story about 'Jesus Christ, the Son of God' (1:1).² But he also tells a story about following this Jesus, and *how* he tells the story helps the audience to understand what 'following' entails, and thus be 'transformed' by the story.³

This essay will use narrative criticism to explore what Mark says about the nature of discipleship, in particular highlighting his portrayal of the Twelve – their incomprehension, blindness, and failure during the passion narrative – as compared to female disciples, who remain faithful to the cross and beyond. It will then consider in what ways Mark's story, including his representation of discipleship as well as the story's unexpected ending, shapes the identity of the new holiness community and demands a response from us today.⁴

Mark and Discipleship

The gospel of Mark has been called a 'passion narrative with an extended introduction' or alternatively 'the arrival of the rule of God with an extended denouement'.⁵ Most scholars would agree that the gospel is primarily a depiction of Mark's Christology – or, more precisely, it is about the 'nature of Jesus' messiahship' rather than 'the claim *that* Jesus is the Christ'.⁶ Closely connected to this theme of Jesus' identity is *discipleship*. The disciples in Mark are 'more than mere bystanders' and play a significant narrative function in the 'story' that Mark is trying to tell.⁷

Three aspects of Markan discipleship are central to this essay. First, discipleship in Mark is about 'following Jesus *on the way*'.⁸ The disciples are on a journey with Jesus: a journey of learning – Mark 8:22–10:52 has been highlighted as the main section for 'teaching on discipleship'⁹ – but also a physical journey: through Galilee, into Gentile territory, and finally to Jerusalem. Second, by *following Jesus*, it is significant for the disciples to understand Jesus' identity, particularly his identity as the suffering Messiah – something the Twelve find hard, if not impossible to grasp. Immediately after Peter's

¹ D. Rhoads, J. Dewey and D. Michie, *Mark as Story* (3rd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), xiv.

² All scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the ESV.

³ As this is not the place to discuss the gospel's authorship, I shall call the author 'Mark' throughout my essay. Mark's original audience were 'hearers', not readers: 'Mark's story was presented from memory, told all at one time' in an 'oral performance' (Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, xi-xii). It is important to keep this in mind when thinking of 'story' in this essay. Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 1, 136.

⁴ I am specifically looking at *Mark's* story and will consequently not refer to what other NT writers say about discipleship or holiness.

⁵ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, xiii.

⁶ S. Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship in the Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), 11-12.

⁷ Primarily, 'disciples' refers to the Twelve, but may include any who 'follow' Jesus (Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 3). Numerous scholars have discussed this; see Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 3 for an overview.

⁸ K. Brower, "We are able": Cross-bearing Discipleship and the Way of the Lord in Mark, *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 29 (2007): 186; *my emphasis*. Best calls Mark 'the gospel of The Way'. E. Best, *Disciples and Discipleship* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986), 5. For a short discussion of the recurring 'way' motif, see W. Swartley, *Mark: The way for all nations* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1979), 158.

⁹ K. Brower, *Holiness in the Gospels* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 2005), 90, 92.

confession of Jesus as Christ (8:29), Jesus ‘begins to present another view of messiahship,’ not of political power but of being a servant, denying oneself, bearing one’s cross.¹⁰ Thus, third, discipleship in Mark is about following Jesus *on the way to the cross*, it is ‘cruciform’: ‘the call of all would-be followers of Jesus to a cross-bearing discipleship is a central feature of Mark’s narration’.¹¹

In the next two sections I will show how, through the way Mark tells his story – first setting the standards of discipleship and then following up the failure of the Twelve with the faithfulness of the women – he adds emphasis to his theme of cruciform discipleship and following Jesus on the way to the cross.

The Blindness of the Twelve

While disciples in Mark are not just portrayed negatively, it cannot be denied that particularly the Twelve’s repeated and increasing incomprehension and failure is a major motif in the gospel.¹² They fail to fully understand Jesus’ identity and what his messiahship entails, and in the end, they all desert and even betray and deny Jesus. I argue, however, that what is important to Mark and his portrayal of discipleship is not so much the fact *that* they fail but *in what* they fail: The disciples especially fail to understand that the path of discipleship is cross-shaped;¹³ they are ‘blind to the necessity of the cross’.¹⁴ Mark emphasises this by a variety of literary devices, of which I will highlight three: the passion predictions, the blindness motif, and the passion narrative itself.

The Passion Predictions

In the ‘discipleship section’ (8:22–10:52), Jesus predicts his death and resurrection three times. Each prediction is followed by an illustration of the disciples’ incomprehension, which again is followed by a teaching on the real nature of discipleship: denying yourself, taking up your cross, being a servant, suffering with Christ (8:31–38, 9:30–37, 10:32–45).¹⁵ By combining several narrative techniques in these teachings – foreshadowing, sandwich episodes, and sets of three – Mark ‘amplifies’ the theme of cross-bearing discipleship and makes it the core of Jesus’ teaching on this topic.¹⁶

This is additionally underscored by Mark’s positioning of the transfiguration scene (9:2–8), which is preceded by Jesus’ call to the crowd to take up their cross (8:34) and, through divine endorsement, serves to confirm that ‘[t]he path of cross-bearing servanthood is the path God has laid out for both his beloved Son *and his followers*’.¹⁷

The Blindness Motif

The section on discipleship teaching is framed by an inclusio of two blind healings.¹⁸ The first, the so-called ‘two-stage healing’ (8:22–26), may illustrate that the disciples are slowly beginning to understand, but do not yet grasp fully: as exemplified by the immediately following confession by Peter that Jesus is the Christ, again followed by the disciples’, and especially Peter’s, incomprehension of what that might mean.¹⁹

The second blind healing, that of Bartimaeus (10:46–52), comes at the end of the discipleship section, right after Jesus’ third passion prediction and his subsequent teaching on suffering servanthood (culminating in 10:45) in response to James’ and John’s request for greatness (10:37), and is the last

¹⁰ Swartley, *Mark*, 138, 141.

¹¹ Brower, ‘We are able,’ 178. Also in A. Ermakov, ‘Holy Community in the Gospel of Mark’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 2009), 17.

¹² Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 14–15, for example, mentions a number of ‘laudable tendencies’ of the disciples especially in the gospel’s first half and speaks about Mark’s ‘complex portrait of discipleship as both faithful and fumbling’. D. Hawkin, ‘The Incomprehension of the Disciples in the Marcan Redaction,’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91:4 (1972): 496. For a review of scholarship concerning the disciples’ failure see G. Markusse-Overduin, ‘Salvation in Mark: The Death of Jesus and the Path of Discipleship’ (Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 2013), 49–56.

¹³ F. Matera, ‘The Incomprehension of the Disciples and Peter’s Confession,’ *Biblica* 70:2 (1989): 153.

¹⁴ Markusse-Overduin, *Salvation in Mark*, 50. Henderson, *Christology and Discipleship*, 4 also points out that the disciples’ incomprehension must be understood within the context of what she calls ‘presence and practice’ – thus, they fail not just in understanding that Jesus’ messiahship leads him to the cross, but also fail to follow.

¹⁵ Swartley, *Mark*, 141; J. Aernie, ‘Cruciform Discipleship: The Narrative Function of the Women in Mark 15–16,’ *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135:4 (2016): 793.

¹⁶ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 47–54.

¹⁷ Brower, ‘We are able,’ 187.

¹⁸ Brower, *Gospels*, 92.

¹⁹ Matera, ‘The Incomprehension,’ 167.

healing in Mark.²⁰ Bartimaeus' plea is linguistically juxtaposed to the Zebedee brother's request because Jesus replies to both using the same words: 'What do you want me to do for you?' (10:36, 51), and Bartimaeus gives the answer that the disciples should have given: 'Rabbi, I want to see' (NIV).²¹ What happens then is significant not just because Bartimaeus 'immediately ... recovered his sight' but also because he 'followed [Jesus] on the way' (10:52) – and this is the way to Jerusalem, to the cross.²² Thus, Bartimaeus becomes 'a prototype of the true disciple': He *sees*, and, in seeing clearly, he follows Jesus on the way to the cross.²³

The 'spiritual blindness' of the disciples, in contrast, 'consists of a failure to accept the implications of the mystery of the cross'.²⁴ But the final healing miracle is not the last word Mark has to say about blindness and sight. In 15:39, what many have called the gospel's 'climax',²⁵ it is after *seeing* how Jesus died on the cross that the centurion confesses him to be the 'Son of God'.²⁶ And finally, in the resurrection narrative (16:1-8), a section full of the 'seeing' motif (16:4, 5, 6, 7), the young man at the tomb says the disciples will *see* the crucified and risen Christ in Galilee, suggesting that 'Jesus will heal them of their blindness so that they will understand fully who he is, what his life and death mean' and 'be able to follow him to the cross'.²⁷

The Passion Narrative

Yet before the resurrection comes the passion, and this is where the Twelve fail the most.²⁸ In the days leading up to the Last Supper (11:1–14:16) the disciples feature less prominently; although they are continually present, make an occasional remark (e.g. 11:21, 13:1) or follow Jesus' orders (11:1-7; 14:12-16), they are not at the centre of the story. Then ensue their worst failures: First, Judas decides to betray Jesus (14:10-11); at the Last Supper their only emotional response recorded is that of shocked sorrow (14:19); after the Supper they make promises that they will break (14:29-31); then Peter, James and John fall asleep three times instead of watching with Jesus in Gethsemane (14:37, 40, 41); and finally, Judas betrays Jesus (14:44-45), the others flee (14:50) and Peter denies that he ever knew Jesus (14:66-72). Thus, in Mark's telling of the story, the last time Jesus speaks to the Twelve is to tell them his betrayer has arrived (14:42), and the last time any of the Twelve appear on stage is as Peter breaks down and weeps after his denial (14:72): The conflict around the disciples is not resolved within the 'plotted events of the narrative'.²⁹

Faithful Female Followers

After the twelve (male) disciples have left the stage in disgrace, the female disciples enter.³⁰ When a large group of them appears in 15:40-41, with three women mentioned by name, it becomes clear that

²⁰ E. Johnson Jr, 'Mark 10:46-52: Blind Bartimaeus,' *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40:2 (1978): 191. Johnson also notes (198): '[I]t is hardly accidental that the final healing miracle in the gospel involves the giving of sight to a blind man and occurs at the last possible moment before the passion'.

²¹ In contrast to the earlier blind healing, this healing can hardly be viewed as illustrating the disciples' current development: The following chapters are filled with their failures and they now seem blinder than before. Ossandón compares the two by saying: 'If Mark 8:22-26 meant that the disciples' blindness could be healed, then Bartimaeus' behavior shows how they should act, if they were not blind'. J. C. Ossandón, 'Bartimaeus' Faith: Plot and Point of View in Mark 10,46-52,' *Biblica* 93:3 (2012): 401-402.

²² Johnson, 'Blind Bartimaeus', 203. B Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A socio-rhetorical commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 292.

²³ Johnson, 'Blind Bartimaeus', 201. Commentaries also highlight Bartimaeus' use of a messianic title for Jesus (10:48): 'Bartimaeus rather than the twelve, has become the image of the true disciple. It was no accident that Mark portrays a blind man as the first person to perceive that Jesus was the son of David'. Witherington, *Gospel of Mark*, 292.

²⁴ Johnson, 'Blind Bartimaeus', 203.

²⁵ e.g. B. Gamel, 'Salvation in a Sentence: Mark 15:39 as Markan Soteriology,' *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6:1 (2012): 67. This verse is also significant because, with 1:1, it forms an inclusio around the entire gospel.

²⁶ Gamel, 'Salvation', 65. J. P. Heil, 'The Progressive Narrative Pattern of Mark 14,53-16,8,' *Biblica* 73:3 (1992): 356. Gamel ('Salvation', 77) calls this the 'eschatological sight of the centurion': 'The blindness that has characterized humanity throughout the story is now lifted at the cross, and the centurion sees what hitherto no human has seen, namely, the true identity of Jesus'.

²⁷ D. Garland, *Mark. The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 615. Also: Heil, 'Progressive Narrative Pattern', 356. Markusse-Overduin, 56.

²⁸ Ermakov, 'Community,' 176 maintains that '[t]he theme of the disciples' failure and misunderstanding finds its culmination in the Passion narrative'.

²⁹ Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 93, 95.

³⁰ For a discussion on why the women can be counted as 'real disciples' as well as a general overview of women in the gospel, see: Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 783; W. Munro, 'Women Disciples in Mark?' *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44:2 (1982): 225, 226, 231. Aernie (791) also mentions the 'positive portrayal of discipleship that is consistently developed in the previous narrative of female characters'. Much more could be said about faithful women in Mark, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

they have been following Jesus all along,³¹ but, contrary to the Twelve, they follow *all the way*: They remain with Jesus at the cross, at his burial (15:47), and return to the tomb (16:1) to become the first witnesses of the resurrection (16:5-7). In short, where the Twelve have failed, the women remain faithful.³² For this reason, a number of scholars have maintained that the women 'represent ideal disciples,' that they 'have replaced men as the representatives of the followers of Jesus' during the passion and serve as 'immediate foils to the foolish disciples'.³³ Thus, in their narrative function the women present a 'contrast with the male disciples' by remaining with Jesus, becoming 'faithful exemplars of Markan discipleship'.³⁴

What makes the women in Mark 15–16 good examples of discipleship? I will highlight two features: their servant attitude and following *to the cross*.

Serving

When the women are introduced to the narrative, Mark describes them as 'following' – a mark of discipleship – and 'serving' – the 'essence of discipleship'.³⁵ In fact, the women serve as Jesus himself 'came not to be served but to serve' (10:45) and has called his followers to 'be [the] servant of all' (9:35) – the Greek root used in 9:35 and 10:45 is the same.³⁶ The women have already put into practice a significant aspect of discipleship that the Twelve have so far failed to grasp, an attitude of serving: 'It is surely no accident that the women are described here for the first time in the language of discipleship ... Now that delusions of power and glory had led the men to desert Jesus ... the women who had followed him remained'.³⁷ After Jesus' death, they continue to serve by bringing spices for anointing, despite obstacles.³⁸ To serve *all the way*, one has to follow *all the way*: as the women have done.

Following

In Mark's crucifixion narrative, apart from the mockers, it is only the women who watch and endure with Jesus at the cross.³⁹ Like Peter, who earlier had 'followed [Jesus] at a distance' (14:54), and then

³¹ Sabin discusses the significance of *three* women being mentioned by name as watching here, in comparison to the three (named) men asked (and failing) to watch in Gethsemane. M. Sabin, 'Women Transformed: The Ending of Mark is the Beginning of Wisdom,' *CrossCurrents* 48:2 (1998): 158. Aernie ('Cruciform Discipleship', 791) calls it 'their ongoing presence with Jesus in the non-narrated story'.

³² It is important to point out that, while some scholars like to argue that 'the women' succeed where 'the men' fail, this is not actually the case: Joseph of Arimathea, for instance, is described as a faithful follower 'looking for the kingdom of God' (15:43) who takes an active (positive) role in the passion narrative (Heil, 'Progressive Narrative Pattern', 351). Many have argued that the women in Mark 15–16 do fail twice: once at the cross, watching only 'from a distance' (15:40; see footnote below), and in their reaction to the resurrection announcement: They flee and remain silent in fear (16:8). This negative interpretation is supported e.g. by Munro, 'Women Disciples in Mark?', 235; Heil, 'Progressive Narrative Pattern', 357; E. Malbon, 'Fallible Followers: Women and Men in the Gospel of Mark,' *Semeia* 28 (1983): 43; A. Lincoln, 'The Promise and the Failure: Mark 16:7, 8,' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108:2 (1989): 286. For a fairly thorough summary on scholarship about the fear and silence of the women, see: J. Topel, 'What Were the Women Afraid Of? (Mark 16:8)' *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6:1 (2012): 81-84. In contrast, others have argued that the women's silence was clearly only temporary (e.g. Garland, *Mark*, 619) and not universal (Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 788), that they flee in 'ecstasy' (G. O'Collins, 'The Fearful Silence of Three Women (Mark 16:8c),' *Gregorianum* 69:3 (1988): 501; Sabin, 'Women Transformed', 161) not away from Jesus, like the disciples, but 'in response to a direct command to go in order to fulfill the call of discipleship' (Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 789), and that their 'fear' is not cowardice but 'overwhelming awe'. Topel, 'What Were the Women Afraid Of?', 89; also A. Collins and H. Attridge, *Mark: A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 797-801: 'That the women are afraid, therefore, represents not their failure or misunderstanding but rather their recognition of the divine drama unfolding before them' (Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 790). For longer discussions of the positive valuation of the women's response, see Aernie, O'Collins, Sabin, Topel.

³³ Heil, 'Progressive Narrative Pattern', 351. Lincoln, 'The Promise and the Failure', 288. Sabin, 'Women Transformed', 150. Sabin states her case somewhat too forcefully at times. Malbon ('Fallible Followers', 33) suggests a more balanced approach by arguing that the women 'supplement and complement the Markan portrayal of the disciples, together forming, as it were, a composite portrait of the fallible followers of Jesus'.

³⁴ Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 791.

³⁵ This applies (as stated in Mark's narrative) to the three named women, not the larger group. Munro, 'Women Disciples in Mark?', 234.

³⁶ Sabin, 'Women Transformed', 151. She also points out that the first woman to be healed by Jesus, Peter's mother-in-law, is described as 'serving', using the same Greek root (1:29–31); R Kernaghan, *Mark* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 335-336. The same verb is also used in reference to the angels ministering to Jesus 'in the wilderness' (1:13).

³⁷ Kernaghan, *Mark*, 336.

³⁸ The stone, which they couldn't have moved by themselves. Sabin ('Women Transformed', 159) notes an inclusio here (with 14:3-9): The 'anointing of Jesus by women' frames Jesus' passion.

³⁹ And except, of course, for the centurion, whom Heil calls 'another substitute disciple'. Heil, 'Progressive Narrative Pattern', 350.

denied him, the women watch 'from a distance' (15:40), yet remain faithful.⁴⁰ In contrast to the 'blind' Twelve, the women *see* Jesus die, they *see* where he is laid (15:47), and they *see* the empty place in the tomb (16:6). By having followed Jesus all the way, they are 'uniquely qualified to witness the predicted resurrection of Jesus from the dead' and are 'sent forth – i.e. *as apostles*' to announce the crucified and risen Christ.⁴¹ Their centrality is supported by the narrative structure of 14:53–16:8, which Heil divides into three sets of three literary 'sandwiches,' with the third set entirely focused on the 'women watch[ing]'.⁴²

Earlier in the story, Jesus has explained to the crowd that 'following' him involves 'taking up one's cross' (8:34). Now, in sight of the cross, only the female disciples remain as faithful followers – and this, according to Jeffrey Aernie, makes them 'narrative examples of Mark's wider portrait of cruciform discipleship'.⁴³ In this way, I argue, they not only embody the type of 'discipleship' Christ has established, but also become characteristic representatives of the new 'holiness community' as portrayed in Mark's narrative.

The New Holiness Community

Mark's gospel is not necessarily known for its teaching on holiness; nonetheless, as e.g. Brower and Ermakov have argued convincingly, it does have a lot to say about the life of holiness and the holiness community.⁴⁴ Mark's emphasis on discipleship connected with his portrayal of Jesus' identity as being 'the Holy One of God' early on in the gospel (1:24 – during Jesus' first healing) demonstrate this.⁴⁵ The disciples follow Jesus, the Holy One, and by being close to him, learning from him, participating in his mission, and imitating him, their own identity is shaped – 'discipleship and the call to be holy are inextricably linked'.⁴⁶ And this identity is not just individual but communal.⁴⁷ The followers of Jesus constitute a 'new holy community,' 'God's holy people,' the 'newly re-created holy nation with the Holy One of God dwelling in their midst'.⁴⁸ This community becomes holy by being in the Holy One's 'empowering presence' and by following him and his teaching.⁴⁹ 'The notion of being holy embraces both the identity and mission of the community: what the new people of God are and what they do. ... The way of discipleship is the way of the holy people to complete restoration in the kingdom of God'.⁵⁰

In the way Mark tells his story of the Way, as summarised above, he highlights two characteristics of this new *holiness community*: It is cruciform, and it is inclusive.

Cruciform

Through an analysis of Mark's story of the Twelve as compared to the female characters during the passion, we have seen that Mark's portrayal of discipleship is quite radical: 'Following Jesus' is not enough, as revealed through the Twelve; we need to follow Jesus *all the way* – to the cross (and beyond).⁵¹ This is what the women in Mark 15–16 have done: They 'embody a narrative presentation of

⁴⁰ There is some debate on whether their watching 'from a distance' (15:40) is a negative characteristic (e.g. Munro, 'Women Disciples in Mark?', 235; Malbon, 'Fallible Followers', 43) or else neutral or even positive. Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 784; R. Cole, *Mark: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 330–331, being thus 'distinguished from the mockers'. D. Smith, *Mark: a commentary for Bible students* (Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing House, 2007, 295).

⁴¹ Heil, 'Progressive Narrative Pattern', 353. Sabin, 'Women Transformed', 160. It is significant that 'Jesus remains the crucified one (16:6) even after the resurrection' (C. Joynt, 'The Sound of Silence: Interpreting Mark 16:1–8 through the Centuries,' *Interpretation* 65:1 (2011): 27.).

⁴² Heil, 'Progressive Narrative Pattern', 332.

⁴³ Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 794.

⁴⁴ Brower, *Gospels*, 83. Ermakov, 'Community', 192.

⁴⁵ In fact, it happens during an exorcism, and 'through them', according to Ermakov, 'Jesus' true identity is revealed by spiritual beings'. A. Ermakov, 'The Holy One of God in Markan Narrative,' *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 36 (2014), 176.

⁴⁶ Ermakov, 'Community', 181. Brower, *Gospels*, 89. Also: Brower, 'We are able,' 180; Ermakov, 'Community', 161.

⁴⁷ Best adds that 'the disciple is never alone' – not only Jesus is present, but also other disciples: Discipleship is communal. E. Best, *Mark: The Gospel as Story* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1983), 91.

⁴⁸ Ermakov, 'Holy One,' 170. K. Brower, 'The Holy One and His Disciples: Holiness and Ecclesiology in Mark,' in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament* (eds. K. Brower and A. Johnson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 66. Brower, 'We are able,' 185. Brower, 'Holy One,' 69; 'We are able,' 189–190, and Ermakov, 'Community,' 178) show how this new 'covenant community' is constituted during the Last Supper.

⁴⁹ It is important to note that holiness is always 'derived' from God/Jesus, and that it is 'contagious': Only by being with Jesus one becomes holy. Brower, *Gospels*, 99; 'Holy One,' 72–73.

⁵⁰ Ermakov, 'Community,' 184, 196.

⁵¹ Mark 16:7 is seen by many as a promise of 'restoration' for the Twelve, including Peter (Brower, *Gospels*, 99; Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 96; Lincoln, 'The Promise and the Failure', 291), and an opportunity to 'renew their discipleship by denying themselves, taking up their cross, and following Jesus'. Heil, 'Progressive Narrative Pattern', 356; also Collins and Attridge, 797. I have not discussed the failures of the Twelve in terms of discipleship in general as this is not the scope of my

the cruciform discipleship that demonstrates the way in which the cross forces Mark ... to reimagine the nature of the new covenant community'.⁵² Discipleship, then, and consequently holiness, is 'cruciform in character,' it 'requires complete self-denial': 'cruciform holiness as self-giving, other-serving love of neighbor' that is lived 'in community'.⁵³ As the holiness community must be cruciform, cruciform holiness must also be communal – 'cross-bearing' is a 'corporate' activity.⁵⁴ 'We take up our crosses when we suffer on behalf of others. The purpose of cross-bearing is to love others'.⁵⁵

Inclusive

It is significant that it is *women* whom Mark employs to tell his story of faithful, cruciform discipleship. Throughout his gospel Mark has shown that discipleship, the kingdom of God, the new holy community is *inclusive*. People who have previously been 'outsiders,' like the unclean, demon-possessed, sinners, and Gentiles, are healed and fed, they follow, witness and become part of 'an inclusive new people'.⁵⁶ Some instances of this are fairly radical: The Syro-Phoenician woman (7:24-30), triply 'unclean' by being a woman, a Gentile, and mother of a demon-possessed, actually wins an argument against Jesus, contrary to the learned 'insiders'.⁵⁷ The gospel's climax – the final revelation of Jesus' true identity – comes from the lips of a Roman centurion (15:39),⁵⁸ not just a Gentile but 'an enemy to God's people,' a sign that 'all restrictions against Gentile inclusion hav[e] been done away'.⁵⁹ And in the end, in a 'complete overturning of the existing social hierarchy',⁶⁰ it is women who are witnesses of the crucifixion and become heralds of the good news about Jesus' resurrection. Jesus' holiness is not just contagious but 'transformative'; it transforms even communities and society.⁶¹

Open-Ended

Mark's gospel ends rather abruptly, and many scholars have considered why this is the case.⁶² Some believe that the lack of 'resurrection appearances' puts the focus on the cross.⁶³ At the cross is 'the last scene in which Jesus speaks'.⁶⁴ Others see the emphasis on 16:7, where the disciples are again called to follow Jesus.⁶⁵ A number of scholars see the open ending as the necessity for a 'reader response', challenging the hearer or reader: 'Who will tell the story?' and: 'What are *you* afraid of?'⁶⁶

essay, but Ermakov summarises aptly: 'The way of discipleship in Mark includes both success and the possibility of failure. It seems that Mark does not understand the holiness of the new people as a static status but rather as a dynamic relationship where there is possibility for failure as well as restoration'. Ermakov, 'Community,' 182-18.

⁵² Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 797.

⁵³ M. Gorman, 'You Shall Be Cruciform for I am Cruciform': Paul's Trinitarian Reconstruction of Holiness' in *Holiness and Ecclesiology in the New Testament*. eds. K Brower and A. Johnson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 157, 158, 164. Ermakov, 'Community,' 193. This is a profound question about identity, as Best explains self-denial: 'Jesus does not call disciples to deny things to themselves but to deny themselves: whatever they take themselves to be at their deepest level, that must be denied'. Best, *Mark*, 86.

⁵⁴ Brower maintains that the 'identity of the re-created people of God ... is cross-shaped'. Brower, 'We are able,' 178.

⁵⁵ D. Brower Latz, 'Take Up Your Cross And Follow Me,' *Didache: Faithful Teaching* 17:2 (2018): 2. D. Leclerc, 'Following Jesus the Crucified' in *Following Jesus: Prophet, Priest, King*. eds. Timothy Gaines and Kara Lyons-Pardue. (Kansas City: Foundry Publishing, 2018), 91.

⁵⁶ Malbon ('Fallible Followers', 42) argues that Mark reverses the 'old order': 'From the first-century Jewish and Jewish-Christian point of view, one could hardly be more of an outsider to the central dramas of religious faith and practice than a Roman centurion—or a woman! But the reversal of outsiders and insiders is basic to the good news of Jesus according to the good news of Mark'. The notion of previously 'unclean' people in a 'holy' community is particularly radical. Brower, *Gospels*, 89-90; 'Holy One,' 66.

⁵⁷ Sabin, 'Women Transformed', 154. Munro, 'Women Disciples in Mark?', 227.

⁵⁸ Gamel expresses how remarkable this is: 'Most significantly, however, is the identity of those whom the centurion replaces. The 'mystery of the kingdom of God' (4:11) was supposed to be revealed to Jesus' chosen insiders. It should be Peter or James or John who utter these words. But instead it is the outsider *par excellence*, the one Mark's readers would vote 'most likely to oppress and mock us,' who receives insight at the cross and, for the first time in the Gospel, sees clearly'. Gamel, 'Salvation', 76.

⁵⁹ Gamel, 'Salvation', 65. Munro, 'Women Disciples in Mark?', 236.

⁶⁰ Kernaghan, *Mark*, 336.

⁶¹ Sabin, 'Women Transformed', 155; Brower, 'Holy One,' 73.

⁶² It appears to be the general consensus that Mark originally ended at 16:8, and this has been my assumption for this essay.

⁶³ Aernie, 'Cruciform Discipleship', 791. One could argue that this contributes to Mark's gospel being for people of all nations and all times – people that have to live with only the news of the resurrection, not actually meeting Jesus in person.

⁶⁴ Garland, *Mark*, 626.

⁶⁵ Best, *Disciples*, 14-15; Kernaghan, *Mark*, 342.

⁶⁶ Discussing who the original audience of Mark was is beyond the scope of this essay – but it is to be expected that many of the hearers were in fact part of the 'new holy community'; Garland, *Mark*, 629. The women's silence may also be seen as 'dramatic irony' that encourages the audience to go and not be silent. Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 60; Topel, 'What Were the Women Afraid Of?', 91.

The ending also builds a bridge to Mark 1:1: 'The *beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God'. Mark's story is only the beginning; it 'shows us the direction of discipleship, but does not close the challenge;' the holy community will now continue the story.⁶⁷ In that sense, the gospel's open-endedness also serves as an image of holiness in terms of discipleship: It is open-ended, an ongoing process of following Jesus 'on the way' and being perfected into Christ-likeness and a holy community.⁶⁸

Conclusion

Through a brief analysis of the way Mark tells his story of discipleship, particularly highlighting the passion predictions, the blindness motif, and the Twelve as opposed to the female characters in the passion narrative, I have tried to show that one of Mark's emphases in his gospel is the cruciform and inclusive nature of the new holiness community. This, of course, leaves us with a number of questions for the 'holiness community' of today. What, in detail, does it mean to live 'cross-shaped discipleship' today?⁶⁹ In what ways is the holy community expected to be 'radically inclusive' in the here and now?

Stories shape identities, and stories transform: both communities and individuals. In the end, we as the readers need to come to terms with the story for ourselves, a story that 'has faced its readers with the way of the cross and the necessity for suffering discipleship,' a story that has shown that to reach resurrection we have to go past the cross, it 'is the way to life and there is no other'.⁷⁰ When the last verse fades into silence, the story demands a response from *us*: What are we afraid of? Are we afraid 'to take up [our] cross, to play [our] part in the boundary-breaking activity of Jesus for the salvation of the world,' to 'surrender to a divine holiness that empowers life in the new age'?⁷¹ For us as members of the new holiness community, Mark has not left the option of turning away: 'The ending forces us to enter the story. We are the next chapter'.⁷²

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⁶⁷ Swartley, 198. The 'performance event' where the gospel is heard 'create[s] new communal relationships'. Rhoads, Dewey, and Michie, *Mark as Story*, 151.

⁶⁸ Brower, *Gospels*, 100.

⁶⁹ For further discussion on cross-shaped discipleship, see articles in *Didache* 17:2 (2018).

⁷⁰ Lincoln, 'The Promise and the Failure', 297. Topel, 'What Were the Women Afraid Of?', 92-93.

⁷¹ Topel, 'What Were the Women Afraid Of?', 91, 80.

⁷² Garland, *Mark*, 629.