
They Said Nothing to Anyone: A Queer Reading of the Original Markan Ending

Jenny Alexander-Allen (they/she)

*All Saints Lutheran Church, vicar
Bowie, Maryland*

“Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So, they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

—*Mark 16:6b-8a (NRSV)*¹

“And don’t mention it to anyone else unless you find that they’ve had adventures of the same sort themselves. What’s that? How will you know? Oh, you’ll know all right. Odd things they say—even their looks—will let the secret out. Keep your eyes open.”

—**The Professor to the Pevensie children regarding Narnia, in C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe***²

“I like the wine and not the label.”

—David Rose, *Schitt’s Creek*³

By way of introduction

The oldest manuscript copies we have of The Gospel According to Mark end the book with chapter 16 verse 8, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” One includes a shorter ending that says the women told the disciples. Later authorities continue with verses 9-20, though most indicate it is doubtful these verses were part of the original manuscript. Through a literary critique lens, the original ending—fear, amazement, and silence—is an intentional choice by the author. As Camp and Spencer suggest, this may have been done to put the reader in an active role of proclamation,

The oldest manuscript copies we have of The Gospel According to Mark end the book with chapter 16 verse 8, “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

completing the task given to the women.⁴

While this interpretation, which i⁵ agree with, explains the literary purpose of the original ending, it does not address the abrupt end to the narrative itself. We, as readers, are left sitting in the silence, amazement, and fear, which is an intense place to leave people who have been listening to a story that becomes the foundation of the Christian faith. It, also, begs the question: if they “said nothing to anyone” how do we know Jesus was resurrected? For that matter, how did Mark know that Jesus had been resurrected to tell us that the women did not say anything about the resurrection to anyone?

i propose that a queer reading of the text helps answer this question. As i will explain, contemporary queer experiences give us a lens to understand how one can tell the story of the resurrection without ever speaking the words the young man in white tasked the women with sharing. In movements similar to how C.S. Lewis ends *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*—it is not necessary to speak of Narnia to know that someone has visited Narnia—so too in queer community, one can share that they are

1. H.W. Attridge(ed). *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. (HarperCollins: 1757, 2006).

2. C.S. Lewis. *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. (HarperCollins:1950; Digital Edition: 2025), 115.

3. D. Levy (Writer), C. Pozzebonn (Writer), & J. Ciccoritti (Director). “Honeymoon” (Season 1, Episode 10). *Schitt’s Creek*. CBC/Pop TV, 2015.

4. G. Camp and P. Spencer. “The Gospel of Mark Cliffhanger: Lost, Added, or Intentional?” *Scriptural Works*, (May 6, 2025). <https://scripturalworks.com/the-gospel-of-mark-cliffhanger-lost-added-or-intentional>. Accessed May 9, 2026.

5. Please note that the spelling of the pronoun “i” as lowercase is not a typo, but an intentional choice by the author to decenter the individual in light of the communal—similar to how bell hooks grammatically decentered herself to emphasize the work liberation.

queer without saying the words, “I am queer.” Much like David does when explaining his sexuality to Stevie in the CBC/Pop TV show *Schitt’s Creek*.

Two modes of communication stand out in queer experiences as ways to convey a message or intention without directly saying it. The first is the queer concept of *flagging*, a nonverbal community code that allows members of a marginalized identity to signal their participation in the group with others who know the code. The second comes from the experiences of nurses communicating safety and care to homosexual men and trans women dying of AIDS at the height of the AIDS crisis. In both situations embodying the message takes priority over speaking the words.

A note on language

The gender and sexuality minorities community is an ever growing and diverse coalition of groups. While referring to our community as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual/Aromantic, Two-Spirit, and growing (LGBTQ-IA2S+) community is the most accurate label, it is also a difficult label for non-community members to parse. Given this, I will refer to the LGBTQIA2S+ community as the *queer community* throughout this paper.

“Queer” is a word that has long existed within our community. First appearing in the sixteenth century to refer to that which was strange or peculiar, it came to refer to same-gender-attracted men in the late nineteenth century—it could be affirming or derogatory depending on how and by whom the term was used. In the early twentieth century, the term “queer” functioned as a self-identification within specific urban, gay sub-cultures within nightlife contexts.⁶ Post-World War II the term came to be viewed as derogatory by gay men wishing to distance themselves from effeminate presentation and accusations of effeminacy. During the 1960s and 1970s the term was reclaimed by the gay liberation movement, it was centered in the AIDS crisis by ACT-UP protestors, and eventually became a political, academic, and umbrella identity term in the 1990s. When I use the term “queer” in this paper, it is in the final sense as an umbrella identity for the community.

Additionally, in this paper, I use the form “G/d” in place of “God” as a means of disrupting the implicit gendered associations with the English word and to serve as a foundation for building a more inclusive, nonbinary understanding of the Divine. The slash serves to disrupt and reframe our associations with a word that carries the weight of two millennia of patriarchy and hierarchy.

Narrative function of Mark 16:6b–8a

The Markan account not only functions as an early account of the life, ministry, and death of Jesus of Nazareth, but also as a source of

The author constructs a narrative world in which knowledge of the messianic secret delineates the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Those who perceive Jesus’ identity—fishermen, women, the sick, and the demon-possessed—are presented as insiders who intuitively understand the movement of G/d for and with G/d’s people and the purpose of Jesus’ ministry.

encouragement for early Jewish followers of Jesus navigating their relationship with Second Temple Judaism and the Roman Empire. The author constructs a narrative world in which knowledge of the messianic secret delineates the boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Those who perceive Jesus’ identity—fishermen, women, the sick, and the demon-possessed—are presented as insiders who intuitively understand the movement of G/d for and with G/d’s people and the purpose of Jesus’ ministry. Through this motif, the author sketches the shape of a new community: a liminal body that is both within and beyond Judaism. The disciples are portrayed as outsiders becoming insiders, serving as narrative stand-ins for the gospel audience, who are also learning to see and relate to one another in new ways.

What makes the Markan insider/outsider dichotomy subversive is the use of those considered socially and religiously marginalized as the ones who have the clearest vision of Christ’s work. The Gerasene demoniac (5:1-20), the Syrophenician woman (7:24-30), the woman with continual menstrual flow (5:24-34), and the women at the tomb (16:1-8) are all individuals whose testimony would have been dismissed under the social systems governing first-century life in Palestine and Jerusalem. Yet these outsiders recognize Jesus’ identity and become early models of faith.

Specifically, their marginalization gives them insight into a messiah whose authority is revealed not through displays of power, but through suffering, solidarity, and other-orientated love. This message resonated with the early Jesus movement, which drew women, enslaved people, eunuchs, and others on the margins through its insistence on dignity and inclusion. Mark’s narrative places the women, who could not legally testify to the resurrection, at the center of the story. They embody a community defined by the least and the lost and their commission to proclaim the resurrection places them in direct tension with the social and political

6. J. McLean. “Reviled, reclaimed and respected: the history of the word ‘queer.’” *The Conversation*. January 18, 2023. <https://the-conversation.com/reviled-reclaimed-and-respected-the-history-of-the-word-queer-197533>. Accessed May 16, 2026.

structures that ended Christ's ministry and threatens their safety. Their silence at the end of the Gospel is neither a failure to act nor an abandoning of their faith. Rather, it is a reasonable response to the danger they face.

The Markan author leaves the story open to highlight the necessity of discerning how to bear witness to Christ's message in a way that does not lead the women into further harm. This is more than an invitation to the reader to proclaim. It is a push to find new ways of telling the story and forming community through our actions and not our words. Just as Jesus learned to meet the immediate needs that prevent humans from being a kin-dom⁷ of believers.

Who is safe?

C.S. Lewis ends the first book in the Chronicles of Narnia, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, with a warning from the Professor to the Pevensie children that mirrors the commission the young man in white gives to the women. Here i use the term mirrors in as literal a sense as can be applied. When we look in the mirror, we see ourselves reflected in reverse. So too, the Professor's advice reflects the commission in a reversed way. The women have been instructed to go and tell the disciples; the children are instructed not to tell anyone—unless it is clear that the person they would tell has had the same sort of adventures that they had. In both cases, there is a charge to share with specific people. The women and the disciples (i.e., the men who followed Jesus) have shared in a common experience. Each found within Jesus a person who spoke the language of their spirit; it was a communal experience that bonded them to one another—a shared experience of joy and tragedy, that outsiders could not plumb the depths of. The young man in white does not instruct them to tell everyone, only those who have shared this experience. The Professor's advice mirrors this. The Pevensie children must use discernment to determine if the people they would share their Narnian experiences with are the sort who have also been shaped by revelatory experiences. This is a bit of linguistic reversal to make the same point: tell only those who are able to receive the message.

Yet the Professor's reversed commission creates space for something that the young man's commission does not: clarifying questions. Where the young man's commission is direct and leaves no room to doubt who is to be told, the Professor places an onus on the children, that is, how do we determine who we can speak to and who we cannot. And the Lewis text implies that the children are not shy about asking. Though the children's dialogue is not included, the Professor makes it clear that the children are, at the very least, looking at him askance, if not openly asking how they can tell who has or has not shared in the adventures. "What's that? How will you know? Oh, you'll know all right. Odd things

The women and the disciples (i.e.,
the men who followed Jesus)
have shared in a common experience.
Each found within Jesus a person who
spoke the language of their spirit;
it was a communal experience that
bonded them to one another—a shared
experience of joy and tragedy, that
outsiders could not plumb the depths
of. The young man in white does not
instruct them to tell everyone, only
those who have shared this experience.

they say—even their looks—will let the secret out." The Pevensie children will recognize a fellow traveler to Narnia through the person's behavior. What they say and how they view the world will reveal their nature.

The same was true in the AIDS crisis for homosexual men and transgender women. When interacting with people in the medical community and in society in the broad sense, it was necessary for queer people to practice discernment, to read the signs, before deciding how much to reveal about their diagnosis or the diagnosis of someone they cared about. Here two examples will help illuminate this comparison.

The first comes from the experiences of Dena Dahlma. Dena was a nurse working in the Washington, D.C., hospital system when AIDS was ravaging the queer community. In conversations with me, she shared how the patients knew if a nurse was someone they could trust with their experiences. One of the men she cared for, whom i will refer to as Johnathan, watched the nurses' behavior when making rounds to discern how supportive they were. He noted that one nurse would not set his meds on the tray next to his bed. Instead, she would place the meds on the counter by the sink on the far side of the room, forcing him to get out of the bed and work his way over to the counter while pulling his IV stand with him. When Dena conducted rounds on his floor, she would bring the medication over to him. Also, Dena would ask him how he was, would listen to his responses, and sit with him and his partner, David, as they worked through the heavy emotions surrounding Johnathan's diagnosis. When a room became available on the floor Dena routinely worked, Johnathan threatened to grab his IV and work his way up to the sixth floor to claim it. Though patients were not allowed to claim their own room, Johnathan was ready to break that rule to be treated with a measure of dignity as he died. Through their behaviors, as opposed to their words,

7. Kin-dom is a phrase credited to the Cuban American *mujerista* theologian María Isasi-Díaz. She, in turn, credits the term to the Franciscan sister Georgene Wilson, who applied it to her teachings about our relational G/d and the way we are to relate to one another as kin.

Johnathan knew Dena was a safe person to share his experiences with in a way the other nurse was not.

The second example comes from my own experiences and highlights how a failure to speak through action can result in a breakdown of community. During my junior year of undergraduate school at Augustana University (the Autumn of 1998) Matthew Shepard was murdered by queer-hating bigots. Matthew and I were only a few months apart in age, both of us were undergrads in the Midwest, and both of us were queer. The horror of what happened to him shook the nation and terrified me. I needed someone to talk with about these events, someone I could confide my emotions and my identity with. As I moved through my social and academic sphere, I did not hear others talking about it nor was it raised in any of my classes. It seemed to me that I was alone in my grief and fear because I could recognize safe adults or community members through their actions. At the time, I was a baby queer, just beginning to express my identity through my clothing and how I wore my hair (“even their looks” as the Professor would say), the people around me did not necessarily read me as queer, but it was clear to them that I was not straight, either. These two realities (no one seemed to be talking about Matthew’s execution and I was visibly not straight) were not able to sit beside one another safely. Something had to change and that something turned out to be my style and social behavior. The community around me did not reveal itself to be a safer community through its actions and I ended up retreating into fear instead of finding freedom to mourn and heal authentically.

These stories serve as examples of the social reality the women faced as they left the empty tomb. They were marginalized people within an already marginalized culture. Their grief, their amazement, and their fear were justified. They had witnessed the execution of their teacher and friend by the world-order, they were pushed to the margins by the men who spoke the story of the murdered Christ, and they would be in danger of censure or execution should they share what they heard with the wrong people. Whom within their community could they trust enough to speak openly to?

At this point it is easy to take the text at face value. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. After all, they had good reason to be afraid. But the narrative’s abrupt ending forces the question, how then do we know? Who told us? And how did they express it, if they said nothing?

Testifying without words

Just as we can discern who is safe to speak to by observing how they comport themselves, so we too send messages to others about our truths through action and presentation. An example of this is Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. In their book, *Gender Trouble*,⁸ Butler observes that gender is communicated through the accumulation of acts, gestures, and styles, rather than

It is easy to take the text at face value. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. After all, they had good reason to be afraid. But the narrative’s abrupt ending forces the question, how then do we know? Who told us? And how did they express it, if they said nothing?

through verbal declarations. From Butler’s observations of gender performativity, queer theory has proposed that our behavior and self-expression communicate truth more reliably than the words we speak. Marcella Althaus-Reid’s indecent theology has a similar understanding. For Althaus-Reid, embodiment becomes the site of truths that surpass normative language. That is, how we show up in the world is a better indicator of our truths than the words we speak.

For example, consider the queer concept of *flagging*. The hankie code (gay and bisexual men) and the key code (lesbian and bisexual women) developed within queer communities of the 1970s are recognizable examples of flagging. The side on which one wore their hankie or clipped their key indicated to others within the community the flagger’s preferred position and role. When worn on the left side the code indicated the flagger was a top who preferred active, dominant roles; when worn on the right side the flagger indicated they were a bottom who preferred passive or submissive roles. Hankies, keys, and other physical adornments (such as nail polish or earrings) spread through the community as a queer survival tactic in a society hostile to queer identities. It was a community language that allowed them to navigate desire, belonging, and community identity without the risk of speaking these truths aloud.

A more modern example of this is the use of subtext in conversations as queer people use to feel out if the person they are talking to is queer or straight. On the surface, they may be raising a common observation or asking an innocuous question, but the subtext of the comment or question is steeped in a queer ethos that will register differently for members of the community. It is a way of communicating that gives the speaker plausible deniability should the signal not land. For instance, saying that one is “a friend of Dorothy” is a way of saying you are queer that relies on the knowledge that Judy Garland (the actress who played Dorothy Gale) was an ally to gay men, that can be passed off as a comment about enjoying *The Wizard of Oz*, should the other person not catch the reference. Dan Levy, writer and actor on the CBC show *Schitt’s Creek*, demonstrates the idea of verbal flagging in the tenth episode of season one, “Honeymoon” in a conversation between

8. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

Stevie, the straight, white woman who runs the motel the Roses have moved into, and David, the pansexual son in the Rose family.

Stevie: So, just to be clear, I'm a red wine drinker.

David: That's fine.

Stevie: Okay. Cool. I only drink red wine. And up until last night, I was under the impression that you, too, only drank red wine. But I guess I was wrong?

David: I see where you're going with this. I do drink red wine, but I also drink white wine. And I've been known to sample the occasional rosé. ... I like the wine and not the label, does that make sense?

The need for queer people to speak indirectly or to *flag* their identity is born of the necessity of staying safe, whole, and alive in a society that too often prefers us to be none of those. Through our actions and presentation, we make declarations about who we are and how we love that go unrecognized by those who are not part of our community. This is for our safety in situations that can be read as parallels to the situation the women at the tomb find themselves in. There is an important message that needs to be conveyed but the culture is hostile to both the message and those who carry it. So, when the Markan author says, "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" i believe we can understand that as true. They had every reason to be afraid because speaking the message could result in their execution, just as Jesus conveying it resulted in his execution. But i do not think we should be reading this as, *They did not convey the message to anyone, for they were afraid.*

The assumption that the women not speaking is the same as silence is a normative interpretation that discredits the women and reinforces ideas about who can and cannot share the gospel message. Given that the women were the ones who stayed close to the cross and came to the tomb to give Jesus a respectful burial, it is a poor narrative reading that would conclude the women would not find a way to convey the good news given to them by the young man. The Markan gospel, though written in a direct, matter-of-fact style, is a literary text that plays with and subverts reader/hearer expectations and it is unlikely that the author would have wanted his un-ending to be interpreted so restrictively. I propose that the author ends Mark in this way as a proto-flagging to others in the community: it is dangerous for us to speak these things openly therefore we must find other ways of conveying the gospel. Perhaps through their actions. Perhaps through subtext that only others who knew the messianic secret would understand. But it is unlikely these bold women, who did not hesitate to stay with Jesus and tend to his body, would have allowed the fear and trauma to stop them from proclaiming the message. They may not have said anything, but that does not mean they did not bear witness to the truth.

Furthermore, the additional endings tacked onto the original end, "And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal

The assumption that the women not speaking is the same as silence is a normative interpretation that discredits the women and reinforces ideas about who can and cannot share the gospel message. Given that the women were the ones who stayed close to the cross and came to the tomb to give Jesus a respectful burial, it is a poor narrative reading that would conclude the women would not find a way to convey the good news given to them by the young man.

salvation" reads more as an undercutting of Mark's end—either to discredit the women or to circumvent how first-century authorities would have discredited the women. A move which is itself subverted by the one authority that adds between the two endings, "And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter" which reinstates the women's commission as the first evangelists.

Conclusion

The author of the Gospel According to Mark created a text that subverted the traditional understandings of G/d, the Messiah, and the meaning of Salvation. Just as the story hinges on a murdered messiah and paints a picture of a G/d who is found in the subversion of traditional power structures, so too does the story root itself in our ability to survive ongoing trauma and oppression. The promised one comes not in power and violence but in connection and teaching. The ones who receive those teachings are outsiders who become insiders to the messianic secret. And those who would be dismissed or punished for speaking this story tell it without speaking the words. Theological truths are conveyed through bodies that defy the normative and resistance to the world-order is rooted more in what we do than what we say. The women at the tomb, like those dying of AIDS at the height of the crisis, must discern who is safe to speak to and who is not. The women at the tomb, like members of the queer community in a culture hostile to their existence, must convey the truth they are entrusted with in a manner that does not attract unwanted attention and has plausible deniability. May we too be as bold and as wise as they were.