

The passion in Mark begins and ends with mention of a linen cloth, the kind that was used to wrap a dead body for before burial.

It appears first in the garden at the arrest. We're told all his disciples "deserted him and fled." And as if to make the point visually we get this suggestive little snippet of story: "A certain young man was following him wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked." This specially narrated escape of this streaker of Gethsemane focuses our attention on the body of Jesus.

Our culture is obsessed with bodies. From the scrawny models that haunt our magazines, to the multiple versions of what we used to call cop and robber shows on TV that are centered on cadavers and where solving the crime depends on an autopsy, our fascination with bodies, hard bodies, obese bodies, deformed and disabled bodies seems to suggest something to me about the handing over of the body of Jesus in the Passion.

If you look at the visuals that the words appear to present there emerges a kind of pattern. Think of it as a dance not so much as a dance that wants to evoke an emotional response of reveal passion in that sense. But look at the figural relationships that are represented.

It begins with the disciples unable to stay awake while Jesus prays alone at a distance from them. They are already scattered to unconsciousness even before fear of the soldiers causes them to flee at the arrest. Then there is the appearance of this naked young man giving them the slip out of his shroud. Then in the palace of the high priest Jesus a lone figure is surrounded by the priests and the scribes and the whole council and false witnesses who claim he aimed to destroy the temple, the symbolic center and source of their sacred world. Until in a dramatic escalation of the tension the high priest tore his clothes, saying, "you have heard his blasphemy!" and the circle of contempt closes in on him and they begin to execrate his body, spitting on him, blindfolding him, and striking him, and finally the guards begin to torture him.

Our view cuts to Peter warming himself by a fire below in the high priest's courtyard. Peter has always represented the disciples, been a stand in for us. And remember he promised never to turn his back on Jesus even if it should mean death. So he is as the model disciple a counterpart to Jesus. As Jesus is surrounded by the powerful elite, so Peter is among the bystanders, the gawkers and onlookers, the rabble that smells a lynching. And a woman recognizes him and he tries to disappear, to hide and deny any association with Jesus until he finally seems to repeat the gesture of the high priest by cursing swearing by oath that he has nothing to do with Jesus. The anxious narcolepsy of the disciples in the garden is now fully exposed as a religiously sanctioned disavowal.

Next morning Jesus is "handed over," like an object—by the whole council he is handed over to Pilate the Roman Governor. And the scene features Jesus and the representative of the Empire of the whole world surrounded by the chief priests and the council, attempting to convince Pilate to execute him for treason and sedition, for claiming to be King. And Pilate Hands him over to the mob because that's the way politicians have to be. He even tried to bargain by releasing a prisoner, one Barrabas, whose name means literally "son of the father," yet another stand-in for Jesus. And the crowd—now that's you and I—we all handed him over to be crucified.

But before he was crucified another stranger takes his place carrying the cross to the place of the skull, literally fulfilling Jesus assertion that anyone who wanted to follow him must take up the cross and follow him. This pairing of Jesus with another Other continues with Jesus' cry of dereliction, in the midst of the crowd variously mocking and wondering what truth there might be, where quoting Psalm 22, Jesus speaks to another Other saying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

And the final stranger, the centurian, through whose eyes we see Jesus, proclaims his faith: "Truly, this man was God's Son!"