

## JESUS AND HIS CHURCH

### Mark 16:9-20

Today we reach the end of our series on Mark's gospel as we come to the end of the gospel itself. Those of you who followed our reading this morning in the church Bibles likely noticed that the NIV editors included a note saying that these verses were probably not part of Mark's original gospel as they are not included in the best early manuscripts we have. The original ending has almost certainly been lost, probably due to damage to the original manuscript, as it's very unlikely that Mark ended his gospel abruptly in a note of panic at verse 8. So, the text of our reading today, chapter 16 verses 9-20, was probably a very early addition – made between AD 100 and AD 140 – at the end of Mark's gospel to replace what the early church felt had been lost. These verses consist of descriptions of post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and a transfer of his authority to the disciples – descriptions taken from the other three gospels. Of course, we can't know for certain what the original ending was, but given that Matthew chapter 28 follows Mark quite closely (here Matthew was probably using material from Mark's gospel), it's very possible that the original ending was similar to Matthew 28 verses 9-10 and 16-20 and this covers similar material to the ending we now have.

Given what I've just said and the fact that this material does come from the other gospels, I believe we should accept these verses as fully authentic and part of the inspired word of God. So please open your Bibles at page [\*\*\*] so that you can follow along with me as we look at this passage together.

We start with an appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene – look at verses 9-11:

“When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.” (Mark 16:9-11 NIV)

In all four Gospels, Mary Magdalene's name is found among the first witnesses of the resurrection. Isn't it astounding that God chose a woman as the first witness to the resurrected Jesus in an age where the testimony of a woman was not valid in a court of law.

We then are told of an appearance to two travelers – look at verses 12-13:

“Afterwards Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.” (Mark 16:12-13 NIV)

This is a summary of the appearance on the road to Emmaus that Luke tells us about in more detail in chapter 24 of his gospel. We're not sure exactly what the note about appearing “in a different form” means, but it clearly explains why Jesus was not recognized in the original story (Luke 24:16) and is thus the earliest known commentary on a Bible passage. Now we have a testimony to the resurrection by two men, so here it's astounding that they weren't believed as the testimony of two men would have been conclusive before a Jewish court of law.

Finally we learn of an appearance to the 11 remaining disciples in verse 14:

“Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.” (Mark 16:14 NIV)

So, given that the disciples have refused to accept the testimony of witnesses, Jesus now appears to them in person. The disciples are rebuked for their lack of faith and their refusal to accept the reality of Jesus' resurrection. Christ wanted them to believe without having physically seen his resurrected body – and he asks the same of each one of us today.

Verse 15:

“He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” (Mark 16:15 NIV)

recalls the great commission to make disciples of all nations in Matthew 28:19. The gospel wasn't intended just for Jews, but was and is for the whole world.

Verse 16 reflects the preaching and teaching of the early church very well:

“Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:16 NIV)

So, the gospel is not only of universal significance but is also of eternal consequence for salvation or damnation. We need to remember these words in an age where many declare that all religions are equally valid ways to God – because they are not. The uniqueness of Christ and the Gospel message may be unfashionable and not politically correct, but Jesus' words recorded in scripture do not allow us to escape this uncomfortable fact.

The belief in and the preaching of the gospel message will be marked by signs of power – look at verses 17-18:

“And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.” (Mark 16:17-18 NIV)

The NT certainly tells us of the apostles and leaders in the early church driving out evil spirits, speaking in tongues and healing the sick – and tells us that these acts convinced many to believe in their teaching. When we believe in the Gospel message we receive power from the Holy Spirit and are given gifts of the Spirit. But, we don't hear much about snakes and poisons, although Paul was unharmed after being bitten by a snake (Acts 28: 1-6). I don't think we should take these verses literally – so don't go home and drink Javelle! I think that the picking up of snakes could refer to overcoming the serpent – Satan – and the reference to drinking poisons without harm could be a comment on the culture of using dangerous drugs which appears to have been common in Israel in the second half of the first century AD according to Josephus and other historians. Finally we should note firstly that the signs are not the Gospel message, they

merely serve to confirm it, secondly that signs do not prove our salvation and thirdly that our salvation does not in any way depend on our manifesting signs and powers. We are saved by God's amazing grace and not by our feeble works.

In verse 19 we are briefly told of the ascension of Christ:

“After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.” (Mark 16:19 NIV)

This verse combines Luke's account of the ascension in Acts 1:9-11 with Psalm 110:1, presenting us with a triumphant Christ taking back the glory he surrendered at his incarnation.

We end with the disciples going out to fulfil their commission in verse 20:

“Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.” (Mark 16:20 NIV)

this once again emphasises the universal importance and appeal of the gospel. It also tells us that Jesus' work on earth was not finished by the ascension, the disciples carried on his work, spread the gospel and built the church.

In conclusion, let me emphasise one very important, indeed crucial, point. Even if we were to regard Mark's gospel as ending at verse 8 – which as I've already said seems most unlikely – then Mark's testimony of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection still stands, because these things have already been stated by Mark. We also have the testimony of the other Gospel writers and of Paul. Despite differences about particular events surrounding the resurrection, the Bible and the early church present a single and unified witness *that* God raised the crucified Jesus from the dead. The church declared to its age, as it does to ours, that “you will see him, just as he told you”

When Jesus was betrayed, arrested and crucified the disciples were afraid and lost hope, but when they saw him after his resurrection and were convinced he was alive their fear and unbelief were removed. Once they were convinced that Christ was alive, the disciples were

able to fulfill the commission which Jesus had already given them to go out and preach the ‘good news’ and make disciples of all nations and were able to set in place the foundations of the Christian church. For me this change of attitude and behaviour in the disciples is one of the strongest pieces of evidence for the historical reality of the resurrection.

So, let us not be hampered by our unbelief, but fully accepting the reality of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, let us receive the power of the Holy Spirit and go out and preach the good news of the gospel message to as many people as we can and build up the church here in Cannes and wherever God may call us to go. We don’t have to be expert theologians or gifted speakers to preach the Gospel message. All we have to do is to tell people about Jesus and what he has meant in our lives and what he has done for us. Also, you’ve probably heard it said, “Preach the gospel – and if necessary use words.” This phrase was drawn from St. Francis who wrote, “Let all the brothers...preach by their deeds.” – so let our lives and our deeds proclaim the risen Christ each day to all we meet.