

## **“The Risen and Ascended Christ” (An Exposition of Mark 16:9-20)<sup>1</sup>**

### ***Introduction – The Textual Question of Mark 16***

This morning we hope to finish up our sermon series through the Gospel of Mark. (Our series through the entire book of Mark has lasted just over 2 ½ years! (*Time flies when you're having fun.*) Of course, according to many scholars we probably should have finished up with our study through Mark's Gospel a couple weeks ago when we looked at Mark 16:1-8.

That is because here in these verses we are faced with what at least one commentator calls “the gravest textual problem in the NT.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, there are at least three (3) different variations of the ending of Mark that are found in a number of manuscripts. Some manuscripts exclude v.9-20 altogether and end Mark's gospel at v.8. The majority of manuscripts, however, include these verses. One version (often referred to as the so-called “shorter ending” of Mark) says,

“But they reported briefly to Peter and those with him all that they had been told. And after this, Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.”

This particular ending of Mark has so little manuscript support that it is often only included in a footnote in many English translations (if at all). These words are most often added between v.8 and v.9 (and so perhaps instead ought to be referred to as the *longest* ending).

There are a great many scholars in our day (even solid Reformed scholars) who do *not* believe that v.9-20 were originally part of the Gospel of Mark at all. Such scholars contend that these verses were not written by Mark and so do not belong in the Canon of Scripture. It is for this reason that many English translations of the Bible place v.9-20 in brackets, and/or include a note of some kind that says something like, “Some Of The Earliest Manuscripts Do Not Include 16:9–20” (ESV).

Among this group there are *two* (2) basic views: Some believe that Mark 16:8 is the proper conclusion of Mark's Gospel (which seems a rather abrupt and unlikely way for Mark to conclude his Gospel), while others believe that Mark may have actually written a longer ending, but that ending was somehow lost, never to be seen again. It is as if they cannot help but acknowledge that something would be very much lacking if Mark's Gospel ended at v.8, and yet instead of accepting the ending that we *do* have (i.e. v.9-20), they surmise that either the original ending was lost, or that perhaps Mark died before he could finish writing it. (Should not the simplest solution be accepted instead?)

While v.9-20 are, in fact, missing from two (2) rather important early Greek manuscripts (*A* and *B*, also known as *Codex Sinaiticus* and *Codex Vaticanus*), they nevertheless *are* found in the *overwhelming majority* of both Greek and Latin manuscripts. Not only that, but they are also quoted by some of the early church fathers all the way back to the mid-second century, such as Justin Martyr (ca. A.D. 150) and Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 180).

For these and other reasons which we do not have the time to go into during this sermon, it is my contention that the ending of Mark properly includes v.9-20, and so we can and should preach and teach them as such. They are here for our benefit, and they agree with the rest of the scriptural witness.

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Pillar New Testament Commentary), p.497

### ***The Appearances of the Risen Christ (v.9-14)***

Having at least briefly dispensed with the proverbial elephant in the room (i.e. the textual question), we must now look at the text itself. The *first* thing that Mark tells us of here is *the appearances of the risen Christ*. He tells us of three (3) separate appearances: first to Mary Magdalene (v.9-11), then to two of the disciples while they were on the Emmaus road (v.12-13; cf. Luke 24:13-35), and then finally to the apostles - **“the eleven themselves”** (v.14).

Notice that of all the people whom Jesus could have chosen, it was *Mary Magdalene* that has the great privilege and honor of being the *first* person to see the risen Christ. In v.9-11 Mark tells us,

**“Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, *he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.*”** (Italics added)

And so Mary, the one from whom Jesus had cast our seven demons, was the *first* to see the risen Christ. Not the *disciples*, not even *Mary the mother of Jesus*, but Mary Magdalene! What a marvel of the grace and kindness of our Savior that He lavished on this formerly oppressed and outcast woman!

Some find it strange that the writer here would suddenly introduce her this way (as the one **“from whom he had cast out seven demons”** - v.9), when he had mentioned her by name previously at least three (3) times in Mark 15:40-16:1. But in telling us this about her now, are we not shown a glimpse of the extraordinary grace and kindness of Christ toward this former outcast, and also perhaps given some insight into the rejection of her testimony by the disciples, who did not believe her?

They were in the midst of mourning and weeping over Christ's death on the cross days later, and yet when someone brought them the greatest news they could ever hear – that Jesus lives! - **“they would not believe it”** (v.11).

The *second* group who got to witness the appearance of the risen Christ is the two (2) disciples who were on the Emmaus road. (A much more detailed account of this encounter is found in Luke 24:13-35.) The fact that Mark summarizes this account in two short verses (whereas Luke spends nearly half of the final chapter of his Gospel on it) is yet *another* indication that Mark truly *is* the author of this account. Mark, of all the four Gospel writers, is known for his *brevity*. In v.12-13 he writes,

**“After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.”**

Luke's account adds that these disciples themselves whom Jesus met on the Emmaus road also had not believed when the women first told them that Jesus had risen from the dead (Luke 24:22-26)! They had been told by Mary Magdalene and the others, but did not believe at first. And once again, when they in turn told the rest of the disciples, **“they did not believe them”** (v.13).

*Finally*, the risen Christ appeared to **“the eleven”** (v.14), *the apostles themselves*. But when the Lord Jesus appeared to the Apostles, He **“rebuked them for their *unbelief* and hardness of heart, because *they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen*”** (v.14)! What a strange thing for us to hear, that even they at first did not believe! Similarly, Matthew 28:17 tells us that even when they saw the risen Christ with their own two eyes, **“they worshiped him, but some doubted.”**

Strangely enough, the consistent pattern in all of these instances is that the disciples at first *refused to believe* that Jesus was really risen from the dead! (Frankly, this too is an argument in favor of the veracity of these verses as genuine Scripture!). Despite the fact that the Lord Jesus had plainly told the disciples beforehand on at least *three* (3) separate occasions that He was going to be rejected, killed, and then rise from the dead on the third day (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), they *still* did not believe it when they were told that Jesus had risen from the dead!

### ***The Apostles of the Risen Christ (v.15-18)***

But what does our Lord Jesus do? *Does He cast them aside onto the scrap heap?* No! Our Lord, in His great mercy and kindness to His sheep for whom He had laid down His life, *still* appoints them to be His apostles, and sends them out to **“proclaim the gospel to the whole creation”** (v.15). They would still get to share in the glorious task of making disciples of all the nations!

J.C Ryle remarks on these verses that we should all take note here *“how much weakness there is sometimes in the faith of the best Christians.”*<sup>3</sup> Ryle then goes on to say,

“Let us learn from the unbelief of the apostles a useful practical lesson for ourselves. Let us cease to feel surprise when we find doubts arising in our own heart. Let us cease to expect perfection of faith in other believers. We are yet in the body. We are men of like passions with the apostles. We must count it no strange thing if our experience is sometimes like theirs, and if our faith, like theirs, sometimes gives way. Let us resist unbelief manfully. Let us watch, and pray, and strive to be delivered from its power. But let us not conclude that we have no grace because we are sometimes harassed with doubts, nor suppose that we have no part or lot with the apostles, because at seasons we feel unbelieving.”<sup>4</sup>

In this life we who are genuinely in Christ by faith will often find ourselves crying out with the man in *Mark 9:24*, who cried out, **“I believe; help my unbelief!”** And let us not despair of the Lord not only *saving us* by His grace, but also *using us for His glory* by His grace as well!

And notice our Lord's words to the Apostles in v.16:

**“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”**

Make no mistake – these words are found here right near the end of Mark's Gospel in order to press upon us our great need of faith in Christ. See how many times our text speaks of believing or not believing (at least six times in v.11-17!). Mark is trying to make his point!

**“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved . . .”** *Do you believe?* Are you trusting in Christ for salvation from your sin? Then you too will be saved. You can know that you are saved now, and will be found to be in a state of salvation on that last day when the Lord Jesus Christ comes again, with glory, to judge the living and the dead!

And what about whoever does *not* believe? I pray that this does *not* describe *you* here today! (It doesn't have to be so!) Our Lord says that such **“will be condemned.”**

<sup>3</sup> *Expository Thoughts on Mark*, p.284

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p.285

In v.17-18 we find some things that many find to be objectionable, even some things that are often pointed to as reasons for rejecting the canonicity of this passage:

**“And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”**

Down through the years there have been some who have taken up the strange (and dangerous) practice of *snake-handling* on the basis of this passage. But does the record of the early church and the work of the apostles found in the book of Acts not corroborate all of these very signs?

Did they not *cast out demons* (Acts 5:16; 19:12); *speak in other languages* (Acts 2:4-11); be bitten by poisonous serpents like Paul was, and survive *unharm*ed (Acts 28:3-6); and *lay hands on the sick and heal them* (Acts 3:1-10). Acts 5:12 even says, **“Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles.”**

These things were the **“signs of a true apostle”** (2 Corinthians 12:12), and were granted for that time in order to **“confirm the message”** of the gospel, as Mark says here in v.20.

### ***The Ascension of the Risen Christ (v.19-20)***

The *last* thing that Mark speaks of here in our text is *the ascension of the risen Christ*. The ascension of our Lord Jesus is really one of the most important truths found in all of Scripture. It is confessed by us when we recite the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed. It is also the great subject of much of the book of Hebrews. The ascension of Christ, however, is a sadly neglected and under-appreciated doctrine.

Notice that here Mark tells us that after Jesus had spoken these things to His disciples, He was **“taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God”** (v.19). So what then? Is the Lord Jesus finished working? By no means! In v.20 Mark tells us,

**“And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.”**

The apostles did what they were told. They **“went out and preached everywhere . . . .”** But that is not all that Mark tells us, is it? He adds that while they were preaching, Jesus was at work! For **“the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs”**(v.20).

Certainly the Lord worked *through* them, but He was also at work *with* them! As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:9, **“we are God’s fellow workers.”** What an amazing statement! What a great privilege and consolation, that in all our work of making disciples of all the nations by preaching the gospel, we are *fellow workers with God*!

The risen and ascended Christ, as Acts 1:1 tells us, is *not* sitting on His hands, but is still busy *doing and teaching*, and seeing to it that disciples are being made! Just as He told the disciples in Matthew 28:20, He is with us always even to the end of the age.

If the risen and ascended Lord Jesus were not *with us*, and *working with us*, our task of making disciples would be utterly impossible. We would have every reason to be discouraged from the work.

But Jesus is risen – He lives! And Jesus ascended – He reigns! And He still works with His church through the outward and ordinary means of grace – especially the preaching of the Word of God and the gospel itself!

### ***Conclusion***

And so here at the end of Mark we come full-circle, don't we? In Mark 1:1 he began his Gospel with these words:

***“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”***

And here in Mark 16:15 the Lord Jesus tells His apostles to ***“Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.”*** Mark both begins and ends his Gospel with the message of the gospel!

We have now finished reading & preaching through *the beginning of the gospel* of Jesus Christ. And now we come to the end. But the end of Mark's Gospel is just the beginning of the gospel, isn't it?

We are called, as the church of *the risen and ascended Lord Jesus Christ*, to carry on the work of the gospel, preaching it to all the world, both our neighbors here where we live, as well as those who live on the other side of the world.

And in doing so we have the assurance, the great privilege and joy, of being called “God's fellow workers” (1 Corinthians 3:9), for we know that the risen and ascended Christ *works with us* by His grace. To Him be all the glory. - Amen