

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April 2022**  
**Andy Banks. Mark 16:9-20**  
**Jesus' Resurrection, Commission And Ascension**

Today we conclude our series in Mark's Gospel. A reminder, we've been asking ourselves two key questions: Jesus' *personal* question, "Who do *you* say I am?"; and the natural follow up question, "What difference does who he is make to your life?" We read today from Mark 16:9-20.

**[Read Mark 16:9-20]**

*9When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. 11When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.*

*12Afterwards Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. 13These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.*

*14Later 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.*

*15He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. 16Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. 17And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18they 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 people who are ill, and they will get well.'*

*19After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. 20Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.*

**[Pray]**

I wonder, if and when you read a biography, do you read the preface or the epilogue? Sometimes they are written by someone who truly knows the subject of the biography and who offers additional insights into their life. For instance, in the epilogue to Nicky Cruz's amazing autobiography, *Run Baby Run*, his friend Kathryn Kuhlman records a conversation that marked the beginning of the next development of his ministry subsequent to the material in the book, as well as an earlier incident, also not in the book, when he walked into her radio studio and put all his former weapons of gangland warfare on her desk, with the words, "These were the tools of the trade ... I've lived by them. My life depended on them. But now I don't need them anymore. I give them to Him." Her epilogue adds something to Nicky Cruz's own account of how God transformed him.

Likewise, this final section is a kind of epilogue to the Gospel attributed to Mark. It was almost certainly not written by him, since it is not included in the earliest manuscripts, its style is different from the rest of the Gospel, and there was at least one other ending in circulation, either in addition to or instead of this ending. It is probably an early 2<sup>nd</sup> Century addition, perhaps even officially sanctioned by the Church to tidy up an unsatisfactorily vague ending. But it is the true and inspired Word of God, nevertheless. And it adds important detail to the Gospel by concisely summarising accounts and teachings found elsewhere in the New Testament – for which I'll give references as we go. In fact, only the detail about drinking deadly poison without harm is not specifically mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. So, since this is the inspired and true Word of God, it remains worthy of our attention.

### 1) Jesus' Resurrection

And first, the writer records evidence of Jesus' *resurrection*, seen in some of his appearances to his disciples, beginning with Mary Magdalene (vv.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."

These details echo John 20:11-18, with the added incidental detail about Jesus driving out seven demons from Mary, which is found in Luke 8:2. Although these verses appear to contradict v.8's statement that the women fled and told no-one of their experience at the tomb, the two accounts are not irreconcilable. John's Gospel states that Jesus appeared to Mary when she *returned* to the tomb, after telling Peter and John of Jesus' disappearance. So, we can easily imagine that, having *initially* fled in terror, she subsequently returned to share with the apostles that Jesus' body was missing (whether or not she yet fully believed the angel's words about his resurrection). Further, John 20:18 makes clear that *after* Jesus appeared to Mary in person, she went back again and told the disciples that she had seen him, and Luke records the disciples' failure to believe her (Luke 24:11, 22-25).

The writer then records a second resurrection appearance of Jesus "to two of them while they were walking in the country" (vv.12-13). This marries well with Luke's account of Jesus' appearance to Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-34).

Lastly, the writer records Jesus' appearance to the Eleven remaining apostles, and his rebuke to them for not believing the reports of his resurrection (v.14). Again, both Luke and John record a similar meeting, although John notes that Thomas, one of the Eleven, only saw him a week later. Although weaker than presented in Mark, Luke's account includes a mild rebuke: "Why do *doubts* rise in your minds?" (Luke 24:38), and John records a stronger rebuke, but to Thomas alone: "Stop doubting and believe" (John 20:27).

It may be that the writer of this epilogue summarised information from the other Gospels in order to better support Mark's opening statement to *his* Gospel: "The beginning of the good news about Jesus the *Messiah*, the *Son of God*." For Jesus' resurrection is one of the most conclusive proofs that he is both God's promised Messiah (Saviour) and that he is God the Son incarnated as a human. The resurrection vindicates Jesus' claim that his death was a saving *victory* over sin and death, and proves that he holds power over death that only God can hold. And the fact that such different people saw, talked with, and ate with Jesus after his resurrection, is substantial evidence that he truly did rise from the dead, especially as none of his disciples remotely *expected* to see him again.

For me, personally, this is the primary reason I am a Christian. When I started getting interested in Christianity, I still had all sorts of doubts about the reality of heaven (even after I was convinced about the reality of hell, believe it or not – that probably says something about my personality). But on Easter Sunday, 1995, God broke through my doubts by convincing me of the *truth* of Jesus' *resurrection*. That was the missing piece of the puzzle for me. And, subsequently, whenever I have doubted that God could really be as good as the Gospel says he is, the thing that, more than anything else, keeps me believing is that there is simply no other credible explanation of the Easter Sunday events other than the one given in the Bible that Jesus truly did rise from the dead. And Jesus challenges each of us, as he challenged his first disciples, to set aside our doubts and *believe*. Believe that he did rise from the dead, and is, therefore, "the Messiah, the Son of God."

## 2) Commission:

So, this epilogue offers evidence for Jesus' bodily *resurrection*. And then it relays Jesus' *commission* to his disciples and to us. Vv.15-16: "He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.'" There are clear similarities between v.15 and what we call the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20. Likewise, Jesus' warning in v.16 is similar to that given in John 3:18.

So, there can be no ignoring Jesus' statement that eternal life or death depends entirely upon a person's response to Jesus. Neither can we mistake his intention that his people should all be *missionary* people, sharing his good news wherever we go. Nor can we deny that baptism is the expected first response to faith in Jesus Christ. It is also worth noting in passing that Mark speaks of preaching to all "creation." That may be a synonym for "all nations," or "all the world," and we shouldn't put too much weight on one word. But it fits with other Scriptures to declare that Jesus' death and resurrection is good news for *all* God's creation, not just for people (as Romans 8:20-23 makes clear, for example).

And that leads us onto the truth that God's people were not merely to *preach* the good news about Jesus; they were also to *show* that God's Kingdom had begun in earnest with his death and resurrection. Vv.17-18 list a few sample phenomena that would characterise Jesus' followers: "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 people who are ill, and they will get well.'" This is not an exclusive list, and some of them we should not seek to prove, like drinking poison. Nor is there any suggestion that *every* Christian will perform *all* of these signs. That would contradict other Scriptures that clearly teach that Christians each have *different* gifts, with the full range only being realised in unity *together* (1 Corinthians 12:4-11).

Nevertheless, it should be expected and desired that God might confirm the preaching of his Gospel with supernatural signs. And this is exactly what we see in Acts. For example: in Acts 16:18, Paul drove out a demon from the fortune-telling slave woman in Philippi; in Acts 2:4, all the disciples were enabled to speak in unlearned tongues; in Acts 28:3-6, Paul was unharmed when a venomous snake attached itself to his hand; and both Peter in Acts 3:7 and Paul in Acts 28:8 placed their hands on people and they were healed in Jesus' name. These signs are no guarantee that our Gospel will be accepted. But we must have the courage to cooperate when God prompts us to be involved in his supernatural work.

## 3) Ascension

So, having provided evidence for Jesus' *resurrection*, and outlined his *commission* to his people, the writer of this epilogue concludes with a description of his *ascension* back into heaven, with which Jesus' mission was passed on to his disciples to spread (vv.19-20). Luke also describes Jesus' ascension both at the end of his Gospel (Luke 24:51) and at the start of his second volume (Acts 1:9-11). Similarly, Paul speaks of Jesus sat at God's right hand in both Ephesians 1:20 and Colossians 3:1. And, as I've already suggested, the whole of the book of Acts demonstrates the truth of verse 20. God does not *call* us to do what he does not *resource* us to do. But he will only resource us *if* we are willing to obey his commands, and sometimes even *while* we are stepping out in obedience and faith. Nevertheless, because he has ascended back to his Father, and is now seated at his right hand interceding for us, he has promised us that *we* will do even greater things than *he* did (John 14:12), and that he will be with us always in the Person of the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:20).

So, to summarise, not just this sermon, but this whole series: Mark makes the bold claim at the start of his Gospel that Jesus is “the Messiah, the Son of God.” His whole Gospel is written to demonstrate the truth of that claim, and this epilogue further supports it. But Mark also shows us different reactions to Jesus and the consequences of those reactions. So, the central question around which the whole Gospel revolves is Jesus’ question to his disciples after he had heard from them what others were saying about him (Mark 8:29): “But what about *you*? ... Who do *you* say I am?” That is the question we must all personally answer. We cannot sit on the fence and hedge our bets, for to do so is effectively to say he is *not* who he said he is.

For, if he is the Son of God and Saviour of the world, then those truths make significant demands upon our lifestyle choices. Firstly, there is Jesus’ call to publicly declare our faith in baptism. If you believe in Jesus, I want to challenge you that that is something that he *commands* us to do. I am planning to run a baptism enquirer’s course after the end of the GCSE and A-Level exams to maximise the opportunity for youth to take part. But I will very happily run one sooner, if there are enough people who want to explore it now. It’s a chance to explore baptism, without needing to have made a decision before you start.

Secondly, Jesus’ commission to his disciples still stands. “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.” This is not for the ultra-keen, the specially gifted, and the naturally outgoing. It is Jesus’ call to *all* who believe in his name, that whatever we do in life, and wherever we go, we should always be praying for, and alert to, opportunities to share his good news with others. I have a friend called Richard, who is now a dean in a Church of England cathedral, having previously been a missionary in Russia and then Rwanda. *His* journey to faith began at university, when he sat next to one of the quietest and shyest members of our Christian Union, who had the courage to put a sticker on her pencil case that said, “Smile, Jesus loves you.” That sticker so annoyed Richard that he struck up a conversation with her to find out more. So, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, what part are you *personally* playing in the spread of his Gospel? If you want some help, come along at 9:30 on Saturday to the Christian Life and Witness Course, here at Trinity.

And the preaching of the Gospel should be accompanied by evidence in support of its truth. That can include supernatural evidence if God so prompts us. But it will certainly include evidence of his transformation in our lives. People should be able to *see* that we are different in a positive way. They should be able to guess, from our good conduct before and after we open our mouths, that we are followers of Jesus Christ. As followers of Jesus Christ, we should be ever asking ourselves, “Does my behaviour demonstrate that I belong to Jesus? Is my conduct reflective of his character?” Of course, we all get it wrong, and when we do, we should apologise. But it should be the all-consuming desire of every believer in Jesus to live in such a way as to bring glory to him, and so to earn the right to speak of his love. Could that be said of your life and of mine? What difference does who he is make to your life today? Let’s pray together.

**[Pray]**