



Speaker:
Paul Forrest

Ascension Day

◀ Series: The Gospel of Mark · 58 of 58

7/25/2021 (SUN) | Bible: **Mark 16:9-20**

Now when Jesus was risen early the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had cast seven devils. And she went and told them that had been with him as they mourned and wept. And they, when they had heard that he was alive, and had been seen of her, believed not.

After that, he appeared in another form unto two of them as they walked and went into the country. And they went and told it unto the residue. Neither believed they them.

Afterward, he appeared unto the eleven as they sat at meat and upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart because they believed not them which had seen him after he was risen.

And he said unto them, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe: in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.”

So then after the Lord had spoken unto them, he was received up into heaven, and sat on the right hand of God.

And they went forth, and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word with signs following.

Amen.

We’ve come to our final message in the gospel according to Mark.

It’s been an extremely interesting journey from my perspective. I hope obviously you’ve shared that experience with me. We’ve seen Jesus teaching, healing, rebuking, commending, exorcising, prophesying, praying, suffering, dying and rising from the dead.

I’ve been surprised by the wealth of teaching in this gospel, even though it’s the shortest of the four. It’s challenged and encouraged us; made us happy and sad; thrilled us and shocked us.

And now we come to the end of Jesus’s time on this earth. It’s the time of his ascension to heaven. He’s still a very young man — roughly the age of my elder son.

But as I said last time, he’s going to where he belongs. He’s about to take up his rightful place at the right hand of God Almighty, a place of equality.

Shortly, we’ll be looking at three different aspects of his resurrected activity recorded here. We’ll think about the rebuke of Jesus concerning unbelief, we’ll consider the instruction he gives to his followers, and we’ll conclude with the ascension itself.

Before I make some general comments about the passage, I wanted to mention the long running debate about this passage. This debate's being going on for almost all of the past 2000 years. It began because the literary style of these final verses is different from every other part of Mark's gospel.

There's been all kinds of theories about why this is the case. Some think Mark died unexpectedly and his gospel was finished by someone else, for example.

The debate is extremely complex, and I have no interest right now in becoming tied up with it. There've been good cases made both for its inclusion and its exclusion. Now from the perspective of a preacher, I'm obviously just as keen to avoid any writings which don't belong in the Canon of Scripture as I am to include writings which do belong. You remember the principal at the end of the book of Revelation which warned about both taking from and adding to Scripture. Both are to be avoided.

Since studying the way the Canon of Scripture was put together to give us our present-day Bibles, I've become more confident than ever that the right decisions were made. We can still quote from other books like Maccabees as long as we differentiate them from inspired Scripture.

So what approach did I make to these verses today about which there's been so much debate? Well, I can see what they contain is consistent with the rest of Scripture. I also see elements within it that continue themes seen throughout Mark. It's for these and other reasons I take the side of people like Dean Burgin and believe these verses do belong in the Bible. So I'm proceeding on that basis. If you do come across believers who argue certain verses shouldn't be in our Bibles, be charitable. There are men on both sides of these debates who have the highest view of God and the Scriptures.

Just a few introductory comments then on the passage before us today.

We note Jesus's first resurrection appearance was to a woman. I've already commented on the prominence of women among the followers of Jesus Christ. Why I'm so happy at this is because it encourages women who are perhaps dismayed that the Bible limits leadership in the church to men. The more favourable picture painted of women in the Gospels should assure women they are valued as much as men even if God assigned them different roles.

Some details but the Bible we believe we're taught to us through popular culture rather than the Scriptures. Believe it or not, some people believe Satan rules hell, pitchfork in hand. Others think Peter guards the gates of heaven and decides who can enter. And there's a common view Mary Magdalene was a prostitute.

This idea came from one of the Popes, and it was afterwards adopted as fact by the Roman Catholic Church. From there, it found its way into popular culture. I haven't investigated it in depth myself, but reliable sources tell us there is now evidence anywhere this Mary was a prostitute.

She had been a sinful woman, obviously. Like Mary the mother of Jesus, this one was born sinner, and throughout her life, and died a sinner. And it tells us Mary Magdalen was at one point demonised.

You might recall Jesus exercising the demon from one person and a multitude of demons from another. This lady had seven of them pestering her soul. And Jesus banished all seven of them.

You'll see in verse 17 how the apostles and early Christians were given unique gifts to kickstart the revival about to take place. A couple of them we're quite familiar with, such as speaking in foreign languages and healing people. There's plenty of examples and teaching about that in Acts and some of the letters.

A couple of them are more unusual. The disciples were told by Jesus they'd have an immunity from poison and venomous snakes. I know there are some Christian cults who dance round their church holding snakes thinking they're fulfilling these Scriptures. Silliness.

A more sensible example would be if persecutors forced Christians to drink poison. Jesus is assuring them they'll be protected from such things. There is of course one example of an apostle miraculously being unaffected by a bite from a venomous snake. In Acts 28, Paul was bitten by one and just shook it off. I'm sure he had puncture wounds, but he didn't drop down dead as they expected. There wasn't even any swelling. The venom had no effect, and this was so shocking to the locals they assumed Paul must be a god!

I think you know my view on these miraculous gifts. I believe they were meant to be temporary. Many good Christians think otherwise. One difficulty I could throw their way is to ask why modern practitioners claim to speak in tongues and heal people by the laying on of hands while not having this immunity to poison or venom.

This is just one argument. I have a number of other reasons which I won't go into now for the position I take. These signs were to authenticate the ministry of believers during the apostolic era alone. If he wanted to, God could give every one of us the miraculous ability to heal people with a touch. It's not about what he *can* do, but what he *chooses* to do.

Let's get into the words and actions of Jesus then as he's about to depart this world.

His rebuke

When he finally appears to his disciples, Jesus rebukes them. He expresses his disappointment they didn't believe the statements of the witnesses. After all, these weren't people they didn't know, people who could be suffering from a mental health issue. These witnesses were people they knew from their own believing community. What's more, Jesus had continually reminded them to expect his resurrection. When you think about it, they didn't really believe in the resurrection when Jesus *told* them. Their minds were always rejecting his teaching that he'd rise again. He was right to blame them for their hardness of heart.

The first testimony came from a woman. In their society, a female witness had no value. But again, this was a sister in the Lord. Let's give them the benefit of the doubt. Let's assume they thought her temporarily unstable through the grief of losing her friend and master.

But then they're told by two men. Firstly, they're men, so their witness counts. Secondly, there were *two* of them, and the witness of two men had to be taken seriously. It's hard to believe they could think both these men had lost their mind independently of each other and were deluded. It shows just how hard the human heart can get.

It was a useful lesson for them. They got to feel what it's like to be an unbeliever—what it's like to hear someone testify about Jesus and reject it as a delusion. Having had their eyes opened later on, they were better able to understand the hardness of heart in the people they were taking the gospel to.

If you're listening today and you're not yet in God's kingdom, there's an important lesson here for you. The testimony of Jesus to the two disciples was sufficient evidence for them to believe Jesus had risen from the dead. Their testimony to the others should have been sufficient testimony for *them* to believe. They did eventually, of course.

Today, we testify to you **we are fully convinced Jesus rose from the dead**. Part of you will be thinking that sort of thing doesn't happen, so it's unlikely to be true. But if you take an impartial look at the bare historical facts, I believe you'd be forced on balance to believe the resurrection of Jesus.

Our faith is of course made up of a lot more than an historical case.

- We have a living relationship with God
- He's given us characteristics not ours by nature
- He's answered our prayers in startling ways
- And this Bible we value so clearly confirms its own truthfulness that it's completely changed our lives.

And we're so excited about this faith we possess, we want to share it with you. On the one hand, we want you to share the benefits of salvation: peace and the joy now and, afterwards, everlasting life. On the other hand, the fewer people there are living in rebellion against God, the better.

This gospel we want to share with you is summarised in verse 16. It talks about two groups: one which will be saved, the other damned. I know there's mention of baptism there. The reason is it's expected if God saves you, you'll go through the ritual of water baptism to signify the change that's taken place in you.

So the real distinction is between those who believe and those who don't. Those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved:

Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Acts 2:38

True belief is a very full concept. What I mean is it isn't just believing in God or even believing Jesus died on a cross. Virtually the whole planet believes in God, and that Jesus died on the cross is a fact disputed by virtually no historian.

True belief for one thing involves repentance. There's an acknowledgement of your sinfulness. You have to try and see it from God's perspective. When he looks down on a sinner, he's repulsed by them. And your repentance must include your admission that you're a vile individual. If you think this language is too extreme in your case, you're mistaken. You're to admit to God your utter unworthiness and declare your intention to do all you can, in his strength, to stop sinning.

True belief also involves faith. You certainly do need to believe Jesus died on a cross. But a true faith understands more. It realises Jesus dying on the cross was partly about you; that *you* were one of the reasons he was killed. That his intention was to suffer and die in your place so you could be set free, avoiding damnation and inheriting everlasting life.

If you are listening to this, it's because you have some interest. And you'll know most people would rather chop off their own arm than listen to me talking about the Bible. Here's just one verse of the Bible concerning those people:

Woe unto you that are full, for ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now, for ye shall mourn and weep.

Luke 6:25

Let me run through that. The people who are full are those who are able to live their lives without God. They have their family, maybe a career, possibly plenty of money, their sport, their television programmes, or their weekend spent in the pub. They're not hungry for Jesus Christ. In that sense, they're full.

But there's a judgement coming. And the temporary pleasures they fill their life with now will be taken from them. Not only will they spend eternity without God, but they'll be without those very things they used to fill their godless lives. They'll be hungry for light, calm, company, and an end to their suffering. But this hunger will never end.

The verse continues to describe the same people as those who *laugh*. They do laugh. They enjoy happiness with friends and family. The experience times of joy as they take part in their various pleasures in life. And this should be a good thing.

But their laughter makes things worse for them. God sees them living in rebellion to him while all the time laughing and enjoying themselves. They're effectively laughing in his face.

And they laugh at God's servants too. Anyone who's preached in a town centre will have experienced people laughing at them. They think the gospel is stupid and the preacher just another religious nutcase.

The day's coming when those people will find their laughter turned to *grief*. Weighty grief. All they'll be able to do is cry constantly at their situation. The judgement will have taken

place. They'll have been found guilty of offences against the Almighty and rejection of his gospel agents. The dismal sentence will be an eternal one, and they know it.

But that's not you, of course (is it?) You're listening to a sermon. You probably think there's a scale of goodness and badness, with you closer to the good end than the bad end.

And you might not ever repent and believe. As you listen to this, you might be nodding inwardly. You might have great respect for the message and even the messenger. You might enjoy listening to the sublime language of the Bible. You might think the story of Jesus is the greatest ever told.

Yet for all that you might not put your trust in him. It could be you want to sort a few things out first. Maybe you want to improve yourself morally before you make your application to God. Or maybe you think we're just a bit too extreme. You can cope with listening to sermons, going to church, singing hymns, but you think people like me are a bit over the top. A bit obsessed.

Satan, you know, can influence your thoughts at a subconscious level. He's able to communicate to you without using audible words. And he's been filling your head with his propaganda your whole life.

- If you think salvation's something which can be put off till a convenient time, you've fallen for his lies.
- If you think people like me too much of a zealot, you've fallen for his lies.
- And if you think you're not so bad, that you're doing okay compared to most people, you've fallen for his lies.

You, my friend, will end up in the same place as the worst criminals the world has ever known. You'll have the whole of eternity to figure out how God has given eternal life to people who committed murder and rape, while a respectable person like you as ended up imprisoned for ever.

His command

Having rebuked the disciples for their unbelief, Jesus goes on to give them instruction. They were to spread the message far and wide. This message was the gospel.

- This gospel is to be both *believed AND obeyed*. There's belief in the fact of Jesus's atoning sacrifice, and obedience in going to God to plead for mercy.
- This gospel is, of course, to be *Christ centred*. He's the one who's to be exalted. He's the one who's to be credited as the saviour.
- This gospel is also about *the kingdom of God*. God is the King of Kings, and believers are his subjects. Men and women are told of this kingdom and urged to make it their life's most important act to discover how to enter this kingdom.
- This gospel puts the *death and resurrection of Jesus as its basis*. Jesus gave his very life for his people, and God's salvation plan continued with his resurrection.

- This gospel declares *salvation* to all who turn to Jesus Christ. If they're sincere, he promises not to reject them. And all who humble themselves in prayer to God are pronounced Not Guilty and can enjoy God forever.
- And this gospel is commended to people because of the *wonderful benefits* it brings a in this life. Those who God converts receive the Holy Spirit in their hearts. And the great love shown by the Holy Spirit is seen in the peace and joy he gives to those he loves.

The disciples eventually did become enthusiastic missionaries for Jesus. But what about you, believing friends? There's possibly not one of you that's been called to be a missionary of the kind we see here.

You might be thinking now you don't have those type of obligations since you haven't been called as an evangelist. Well, the Bible tells us pretty clearly that part of the contract with God you signed up for involves you testifying to other people about Jesus Christ.

If you don't witness to others about Jesus, you should be fearful right now. I mean, just how long have you been living as a Christian with such a disobedient attitude? My advice is you go to God in prayer today and repent. Admit to God your failing, whether laziness or pride, and promise him you do better.

You'll see in verse 15 Jesus tells his disciples to go into all the world and preach the gospel to everyone. Here's how he assigns them this task in the opening chapter of Acts:

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

Acts 1:8

By the time Paul was writing letters to the churches, he said the gospel had gone out into the whole world and been preach to everyone. Obviously, it was a figure of speech. The followers of Jesus *had* gone into every area within the known world and preached the gospel widely.

Back in Chapter 13, when we talked about the end coming, it was my aim to show this had its fulfilment in the destruction of Jerusalem in the first century. So when Jesus gives the instruction to go and preach the gospel to everyone, the primary meaning was that they'd go around the known world and preach widely, establishing churches, before this happened.

But as I intimated when we went through the book of Revelation, and through other Bible prophecies, these fulfilments are often precursors to a larger fulfilment in the future. That being so, there's also an instruction for us. We're to carry on the job the apostles started. Wherever we find ourselves in our lives, we're to make proper efforts to spread this message of the gospel. And when the gospel has reached everyone God intends it to, and when all his elect have been brought into his kingdom, I'm sure the end will then come.

Jesus came in judgement when Jericho was ruined. Jesus came in judgement in AD70 when Jerusalem was sacked. And Jesus will come again at the end of days, again in judgement, but with a worldwide scope.

Whether it's through a text, a Facebook post, a letter, an email, a phone call, a leaflet or an unexpected opportunity while standing at a bus stop, there's a multitude of ways to communicate your message—the gospel message. God's given it to you to spread.

Don't worry about the effects. The majority, if not all, of the people you share this message with will either ignore you, ridicule you, or express some respect for you and do nothing else. The results of your efforts are in the hand of God. Listen to this example from Acts of the results of evangelism by God's people:

Some believed the things which were spoken and some believed not.

Acts 28:24

Like the risen Jesus was unrecognised until he chose to make himself recognisable, so God's will either close the ears of the people you communicate to or he'll open them.

It's okay to be grieved at the lack of interest in the things of God in the society around you. Jesus himself was pained at the unbelief he encountered. The apostle Paul lamented about the coldness of his fellow countrymen, even offering to go to hell for them if such a thing was possible!

But you should never despair. Despite their wickedness; despite their open hatred of God; despite their indifference; God uses your witness to accomplish his ends. Some people will be repelled by your message, and others will be attracted.

And remember: even if your efforts don't seem to have an effect, some of the seed you throw out there may well take root, be watered through the witness of another Christian—perhaps years later—and result in the salvation of that person.

His ascension

Jesus had finished what he wanted to say to them. It was time to leave. He didn't belong in the sinful arena of this world. He belonged in glory, and I'm sure he couldn't wait.

In his ascension, he not only regained the glory he had with the father originally. For whatever reason, he said he wouldn't send the Holy Spirit in power to this world unless he himself ascended to the Father's side.

He also said he was ascending to "prepare a place" for his disciples. If you compare this language with what Paul says in Corinthians, you understand our new habitation is not a big house in the sky but a new, resurrected body.

The truth is he didn't need to prepare bodies. It simply means he ascended to continue the process of salvation, a process *which results in* new tabernacles for all of God's elect.

So where exactly did Jesus go? It's clear he lifted up from the earth. Now people get carried away with this idea and assume our everlasting life will involve flying around like Superman and walking backwards and forwards through brick walls just because we can. I know no more about our eternal state than you do, but I'm sure this isn't what it's about.

In Scripture, heaven's usually described as being "up there" and is contrasted with the realm of the dead being "down below". **This is all just imagery.** Jesus did rise up from the earth and eventually disappear, but we're not to think heaven's "up there" somewhere. I'm pretty sure if someone were able to follow Jesus that day, they wouldn't be following him into the outer reaches of the solar system, the galaxy and the universe.

His rising upwards was for their benefit, a memorable image of Jesus ascending to heaven. There's no sense in which it is reasonable to think heaven's somewhere above the Middle East.

But the fact he left this material universe leaves us with plenty of questions. Fortunately, none of them are of vital importance. It doesn't mean it's wrong for us to consider the possibilities, but we're just not going to go into them now.

If the disciples had this wonderful memory of Jesus floating upwards signifying his ascent to the dimension of heaven, the first martyr for Jesus was comforted in his final moments by the imagery of enthroned Jesus in a vision:

But he [Stephen], being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up steadfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing on the right hand of God.

Acts 7:55

You can see how the vision God gave to Stephen as he was being killed for his faith uses different imagery, here showing Jesus *standing* rather than sitting. Christ is sometimes portrayed as sitting in a separate throne to his father, the same throne as his father or, as here, having no throne at all.

This use of a variety of images should stop people from creating doctrines about what heaven looks like or what God looks like. It forces them to see past the differing imagery to find what they have in common, and **they all speak about the rule and authority and power and glory of the risen Christ.**

Here's our duty:

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God.

Colossians 3:1

You believers are said to be risen with Christ and are even said to have ascended with him. We're joined to Jesus Christ and cannot be separated. We don't have his power, but we rule with him.

And we're to seek those things which are above. Heavenly things. That is, our thoughts, words and actions should be appropriate for those who walk, as it were, the hallowed floors of God's palaces.

The ascension of Jesus Christ ends our survey of Mark's gospel. We discovered just what a great man Jesus Christ is—what a great GOD he is!

You've kindly borne with me through almost sixty sermons. I hope my efforts in prayer and preparation haven't been wasted and that you'll have been blessed along the way.

I'm just the message boy. All I do is take God's words and repackage them for you. If God's answered my prayers and allowed me to communicate his word faithfully, I've no doubt whatsoever you'll have been blessed, because that's what God's word does.

In a few weeks' time, we'll begin a survey of a different book of the Bible. Still, my aim in every message remains the same: to present Jesus Christ to you then go offstage and enjoy seeing him receive all the praise and all the glory.

Amen.