

June 2, 2019
Sermon Manuscript

Reconsidering the Resurrection at the Ascension: Ending at 8 (Mark 16)

So with this past Thursday marking the 40th day after Easter that means it was Ascension Day in the Church calendar, when we commemorate the Ascension of Christ into heaven forty days after his resurrection. And so today I've chosen to push forward the lectionary passages appointed for Thursday's Feast of the Ascension to this morning. As you can see our First Lesson was taken from the opening of the book of Acts where Jesus' ascension is described. But *also appointed* is the final passage of Mark (16:9-20), which includes a description of Jesus' ascension in verse 19.

However, what really interests me about this gospel passage is not so much what it says about the ascension, but the subject it raises of how Mark's gospel ends. You see, if you'll look with me on your bulletin insert that has all of Mark 16, you'll see a note after verse 8 that states that in some of the earliest known manuscripts the book of Mark ends at that point and verses 9 through 20 are nowhere to be found! And this most every contemporary translation of the Bible will have some sort of note like this, because the scholarly consensus today overwhelmingly agrees

that verses 9-20 are likely not original to Mark's gospel, but were instead added on sometime during the second century. #

So I want to take a few minutes to outline for you some of the evidence that has led to this conclusion – that verses 9-20 was a later addition to Mark – before then considering why it matters or what difference it makes.

First of all, you should understand that the oldest complete manuscript of the New Testament we have dates back only to the 4th century.¹ However, there are incomplete fragments of the New Testament – some of which are much older – from about 25,000 different manuscripts.²

These fragments are from scrolls made of parchment paper and some of them date as far back as the year 125 A.D. Well, of all the fragments that include Mark 16, all of the earliest ones end abruptly at verse 8, which you'll notice on the insert is right after Mark's description of Jesus' resurrection. And some of the earliest manuscripts that *do have* verses 9-20 actually have a note attributing the section to a very early church figure named "Ariston the presbyter" (or "priest"); in other words, they indicate that rather than verses 9-20 being written by Mark, this Ariston later added

¹ This manuscript is known as Codex Sinaiticus

² about one-fifth of them in Greek, two-fifths of them in Latin, and the rest in other languages

them on.³ And we'll get to why he might've done that in a moment.

But in addition to the evidence from old manuscripts, the text of the passage itself *a/so* contains some indication that verses 9-20 were a later addition. You may have noticed I've highlighted in orange on the insert first verse 8 where it says the women⁴ who discovered Jesus' tomb was empty "said nothing to anyone", while just two verses later, verse 10 states that one of these women (Mary Magdalene) "went and told those who had been with (Jesus)". So this pretty blatant contradiction points to these two verses having two different authors.

Now, rest assured the notion that someone other than Mark wrote verses 9-20 perhaps as much as a hundred years after they year 60 A.D. when Mark was originally written... this is nothing for us to get bent out of shape about. What I primarily wanted you to notice from the copious number of endnotes on your insert – though I don't expect for you to look them all up or anything – is that whomever wrote 9 through 20 took almost everything he wrote from the other three Gospels (Matthew, Luke & John), which were all written later than original Mark, or from the book of Acts,

³ It is notable that in the 1896 edition of *The Expositor* (edited by Samuel Cox, Sir William Robertson Nicoll, James Moffatt) Zahn argues that Mark 16:9-20 is the oral tradition of Mark written down by Papias (p. 226).

⁴ These women were "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome" according to Mark 16:1.

which was Luke's sequel to his Gospel describing the early Church from the Ascension forward.

However, I will draw your attention to verse 18, which includes an exception to this we will get to in a moment. But first notice in verse 18 where Jesus says infamously that those who believe in him "will pick up serpents with their hands". I say infamously because there is a small minority of Christians – particularly some from the part of the country where I am from – who have mistaken this passage⁵ to indicate that Jesus is assigning to believers a miraculous power over snakes and therefore they incorporate handling poisonous snakes into worship services. Sand Mountain, Alabama is only 50 miles from Birmingham, where I went to college, but in many ways it's a world away, as it is ground-zero for this practice of snake-handling, where "people in these churches die every year, and almost all who have handled for a lifetime have suffered bites at some point."⁶ And I'm sure they would explain these incidents are due to a lack of faith, but I would explain it as a prime example of the hazards of uneducated and uninformed interpretations of scripture. Because, you see, rather than endorsing snake-handling, Mark 16:18 is simply one of 8

⁵ Combined with Luke 10:19, where Jesus says, "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you." The concept of metaphor seems to have been lost on snake-handlers.

⁶ <https://medium.com/the-coastline-is-quiet/salvation-on-sand-mountain-snake-handling-and-the-absurdity-of-the-american-south-29147021906a>

references that the writer makes in this passage to words or events recorded in Luke's book of Acts. In this instance, as you can see from note 'm' (as in 'mountain' on the back side of the flyer) it's a reference to an episode recounted in Acts 28, when Paul is bitten by a poisonous viper and yet miraculously suffers no harm.⁷ #

But verse 18 *also* contains the one instance in verses 9-20 of a reference to something that isn't attested anywhere else in scripture when Jesus says, "and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them". However, as note 'n' indicates, the writings of Papias (60-163 A.D.) – whose years overlapped with some of the Apostles and who would later become a bishop – his writings include just such an account about a believer named Justus Barsabbas who "drank a deadly poison," – I'm not sure if perhaps he was forced to do this as a form of persecution (?) – "and yet, by grace of the Lord, (he) suffered no harm."⁸ #

So given that the *provenance* of all the different references in verse 9-20 are either biblical, historical, or both, there is no need for us to fret about it being included in our Bible from a credibility

⁷ Now, should whomever added on this passage have attributed those words to Jesus? Well, it's certainly possible that Jesus could have predicted what happened in Acts 28 before his Ascension.

⁸ "That Philip the apostle dwelt in Hierapolis with his daughters has been already stated. But it must be noted here that Papias, their contemporary, says that he heard a wonderful tale from the daughters of Philip. For he relates that in his time one rose from the dead. And he tells another wonderful story of Justus, surnamed Barsabbas: that he drank a deadly poison, and yet, by grace of the Lord, suffered no harm." (Eusebius' (3rd-4th century A.D.) *History of the Church* III.39.9 from *The Writings of Papias*)

standpoint. And it's also not hard to imagine why someone like this Ariston the presbyter would feel compelled to give Mark an ending that wasn't so abrupt and that was more like the other three gospels.

However, the downside of the inclusion of 9-20 can mask for us what Mark might've been up to with the way he originally intended for his gospel to end. One can imagine that *whomever* wrote 9-20 had felt like the version of Mark they'd received, which ended at verse 8, had just too abrupt of an ending. Just humor me for a moment as I read how the final 8 verses of Mark's gospel would finish if it ended at verse 8. Beginning at verse 1:

¹When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right

side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

And that's it!! Curtains!! And keep in mind that for perhaps a decade or more, Mark's was the *only* gospel written! Mark was written in 60 A.D. and another one may not have been written until 10 or even 20 years later. So you can imagine why maybe a hundred years later, when all 4 gospels had been completed, someone might compare Mark to them and think it sort of incomplete.

Now there are a few who suggest that perhaps the original ending of Mark was lost, and that this new ending was written to replace it. But more and more scholars are being persuaded, based upon looking at the way Mark approached his gospel as a

whole, that such an abrupt ending at verse 8 is exactly what Mark intended. And so, with what's left of my time this morning, I want us to consider what it means that Mark *likely* intended to end his Gospel essentially with the climax of these women discovering that Jesus had risen from the dead, followed essentially by an ellipsis; you know: a dot-dot-dot.

Some have said it would make Mark comparable to a narrator in a play who just walks off stage mid-sentence. So why would Mark do this? What would compel him to craft his gospel in this way?

Well, Mark's abrupt ending would, first of all, serve as a ***beckons*** to us, the reader or hearer – an invitation – to **respond ourselves**. You see, while ending at verse 8 would certainly leave the reader wondering about what all occurred after Easter morning, it also positions readers in any age on a sort of *equal footing* with those women. So rather than being told about the impact of Jesus' resurrection in a way that we remain like an audience watching a play, we are invited to **discover** what this good news means for our own lives. What the news that Jesus rose from the dead leaves us with is the implication that a relationship with the risen Lord is a possibility (albeit, now it would

be a spiritual relationship, since He has ascended). Therefore, rather than being told what difference Jesus' resurrection eventually made for these women and the apostles, Mark's ending at verse 8 invites to learn experientially what sort of difference following Him – and learning from Him the way of sacrificial love – what sort of difference that really will really make *in our life*. So it seems Mark was placing the onus on us to finish the story; or better yet, to discover how this story ends through *joining in* and living it in our own lives.

But, of course, the gospel story is also not intended to *terminate* with us. Instead, as we discover what life-changing good news Jesus' resurrection is, we can share that story with others. Just as the angel directs the women in verse 7 and the other gospels – and the addition to Mark report Jesus as saying – “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (v15) so that others might believe and be saved from condemnation to inherit the same eternal life that has been opened up to us.

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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