

"How Does This End?" - Mark 16:8-20

Last Sunday, we left off with an empty tomb. Faithful women had gone to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, one last expression of love and devotion to their crucified Master. But they didn't find His body there. Instead, they encountered an angel who told them, "He's not here. He is risen!"

So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:8)

Their reaction underscores a common theme we find throughout the gospel of Mark.

And they were astonished at His teaching, for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. (Mark 1:22)

Then they were all amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, "What is this? What new doctrine is this? For with authority He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey Him." (Mark 1:27)

Immediately he arose, took up the bed, and went out in the presence of them all, so that all were amazed and glorified God, saying, "We never saw anything like this!" (Mark 2:12)

And they feared exceedingly, and said to one another, "Who can this be, that even the wind and the sea obey Him!" (Mark 4:41)

Then they came to Jesus, and saw the one who had been demon-possessed and had the legion, sitting and clothed and in his right mind. And they were afraid. (Mark 5:15)

Then He went up into the boat to them, and the wind ceased. And they were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled. (Mark 6:51)

because he (Peter) did not know what to say, for they were greatly afraid. (Mark 9:6)

And Jesus answered and said to them, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." And they marveled at Him. (Mark 12:17)

Jesus consistently provoked amazement, astonishment, marvel and fear. He was always blowing them away! So, the reaction of these women is not surprising at all. Mark wants us to know that the supernatural power and presence Jesus had was utterly astounding. He wants to leave us with this sense of awe and wonder.

And that brings me to something that I've been praying about for a number of weeks. Because, you see, there are many respected, evangelical scholars who believe that Mark ended his gospel with verse 8.

"Wait a minute, pastor, what about verses 9-20? My Bible has more to say here."

I know. And I have been praying about how to faithfully approach this with you. You see, there are some questions about the authenticity of verses 9-20 and I do not want to ignore them and just sweep them under the rug. I also do not want to undermine your faith in the veracity of God's word.

We believe the Bible is the inspired word of God, in the original languages and in the original autographs.

All Scripture is [theopneustos (θεόπνευστος) – God-breathed] given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work. (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

We have overwhelming evidence that the Bible you hold in your hands is accurate. That is, that it accurately communicates the text as it was originally written. No other ancient book has anywhere near the number of manuscripts available to us.

We have over twenty-five thousand full and partial ancient manuscripts of the New Testament. To put this in perspective, in second place among ancient literature is Homer's Iliad. There are 634 of them. And the oldest one comes from the thirteenth century. When it comes to the New Testament, we have hundreds of copies and fragments that date back to the 200s, thousands that date back to the 400s. We have far more documentary evidence of the New Testament than there is of Shakespeare's writings. And remember, he wrote in the 1500s and 1600s.

But we don't have any of the original autographs. The manuscripts that we have were all hand-copied, at least until the printing press was invented in the 1400s. Now, the scribes that copied the Bible were meticulous about their work. They knew they were handling the word of God, and so by in large, they were very careful to be accurate. And so, it is well-known that 80-85% of the manuscripts that we have are in total agreement, even with regard to punctuation and spelling. That is remarkable. That is miraculous!

But there are disagreements. Some manuscripts have additions that most others don't. Some manuscripts are missing words or verses. Errors in copying did happen, either intentionally or unintentionally. But none of these differences impact any important Biblical doctrine. Scholars have determined that the vast majority of the Bible is verified accurate at a 99.5% level.

I can assure you that you can trust your Bible.

Well, why in the world am I telling you all this? I'm telling you this because there are questions about verses 9-20. We are going to look at why. And then we're going to see why we can still trust what it says. Please understand, these verses, even if they don't belong, do not contradict the rest of scripture.

we know that the earliest extant manuscripts do not contain these verses. They are missing in the *Codex Vaticanus*. This is a complete manuscript of both the Old and the New Testaments. It dates from the early 300s. They are also missing from the *Codex Sinaiticus*, which is dated from the middle 300s. The fourth-century church fathers Eusebius and Jerome stated that almost all Greek manuscripts available to them lacked vv. 9–20. That being said, they must have been familiar with those verses, or they wouldn't have said anything.

Here's another problem: the vocabulary and style of verses 9 through 20 do not match the vocabulary and style of the rest of Mark's Gospel. There are 18 words that are never used anywhere else in Mark. And the transition from verse 8 to verse 9 is a bit awkward. Let's look at it right now:

Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. (Mark 16:9-11)

There is nothing erroneous about this. It harmonizes perfectly with what we read in the book of John. But Mark had already identified Mary Magdalene as one of the women who went to the tomb in verse 1. Why would he introduce her again?

After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country. And they went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either. (Mark 16:12-13)

These verses are perfectly consistent with what we read in Luke's gospel. In Luke 24:13-35, we read a detailed account of Jesus appearing to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus. It's a beautiful story that is worthy of careful study, where ...

... beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself. (Luke 24:27)

Next, we have a section describing the Great commission:

Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. (Mark 16:14-15)

Again, this is perfectly consistent with the rest of the gospels. Remember the gentle rebuke Jesus gave to Thomas in the gospel of John?

And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!" Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing." (John 20:26-27)

And in Matthew, we read

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. (Matthew 28:19-20)

Perfectly consistent with Mark 16:15.

Next, we come to some verses that have stirred up controversy in the church.

And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover." (Mark 16:17-18)

There is nothing in the other three gospels that correspond directly to this. But in the Book of Acts, we do have situations where the Apostles cast out demons. There were several instances of speaking in foreign languages, languages in which they had never been instructed. And there were instances of healing the sick. In Acts 28, Paul was bitten by a poisonous viper.

But he shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. (Acts 28:5)

There is nothing about drinking poison and surviving, but there is some early church tradition that says some of the Apostles were forced to drink poison as a form of execution, and it didn't take. So, it is possible that all these things happened to the Apostles.

But let me just say that it is really sketchy to develop any sort of dogma from these verses. There are a few churches who teach that we should be handling venomous snakes and drinking poison. That's not right; don't do it. Scripture says we must not tempt the Lord God! (Deuteronomy 6:16; Matthew 4:7; Luke 4:12)

There are many more who teach that we should expect the gifts of healing and speaking in tongues to continue to this day. But if a doctrine is not taught consistently in all of scripture, we certainly should not become dogmatic about it.

Let me be clear. The Holy Spirit is God, and He can manifest Himself in any way He sees fit. But, I believe strongly that these so-called sign gifts were given to authenticate the witness of the original Apostles. We should not expect them to be a normal occurrence in our time, because we have been provided with the completed canon of scripture. We have the Apostolic witness. What more do we need?

Let me just give you one example of how these sign-gifts faded quickly even in the First Century. In Acts 19, we read this:

Now God worked unusual miracles by the hands of Paul, so that even handkerchiefs or aprons were brought from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out of them. (Acts 19:11-12)

Wow! Those are amazing signs. But by the end of Paul's ministry we read:

Erastus stayed in Corinth, but Trophimus I have left in Miletus sick. (2 Timothy 4:20)

Paul couldn't cure Trophimus at that point. Was it because he didn't want to? Of course not. The Holy Spirit had withdrawn the gift.

Let's get back to Mark.

So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen. (Mark 16:19-20)

There are no surprises in these verses. This is exactly what happened. Jesus appeared many times to His disciples in the 40 days following the resurrection. He gave them additional instruction. He restored Peter in a conversation on the beach in Galilee. And ultimately, after giving the Great Commission, He ascended into heaven. We read in the Book of Acts:

Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven." (Acts 1:9-11)

And then, after receiving power from the Holy Spirit, the Apostles established Jesus' Church and that is why we are here this morning. Because Jesus is still establishing His Church on the testimony of the prophets and Apostles. And the gates of Hades will never prevail against His Bride!

But the question remains: How did Mark actually end his Gospel? Did he intend to end it with verse 8, or are these additional verses authentic? By the way, some late manuscripts even have a couple additional verses plugged in after verse 8.

And they promptly reported all these instructions to Peter and his companions. And after that, Jesus Himself sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

It's usually called the shorter ending. Almost nobody thinks that ending is authentic. It probably doesn't appear in your Bibles except maybe as a footnote.

Well, as I said previously, verses 9-20 might not have been written by Mark. The sentence structure is different. The vocabulary is different. And the transition from verse 8 to verse 9 is really quite awkward. We find that the two oldest complete manuscripts of our New Testament do not include these verses.

Here is what might have happened: The ending of Mark's gospel at verse 8 seems really abrupt.

*So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.
(Mark 16:8)*

That ending, though it is consistent with Mark's style, leaves the reader thinking, "Wait, what happens next? What's the rest of the story?" So, maybe, at some point, very early in the history of the Church, some unnamed scribe added his own commentary. He had access to the other gospels and the book of Acts. He had access to Church tradition. And so, he wrote in a few paragraphs of explanation, much like many of our Bibles today contain commentary in the margins. And as his manuscript was copied by others, his words ended up being appended to Mark's words. If it happened, it happened very early on, probably toward the end of the second century. The majority of manuscripts contain this long ending. But whether it was written by Mark or by someone else, you can trust your Bibles. There is nothing in this long ending that contradicts the rest of scripture.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, entered the world He created as a human child. He grew and experienced the same sort of challenges every one of us faces. He shared our common lot, with one important difference; He never sinned. And then He voluntarily to His sinless life to the cross to pay the penalty we deserve. On the third day, He rose from the grave and appeared to many witnesses. And then, He ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father, interceding for us.

In Him, we find redemption, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life. And all you have to do is turn to Him in faith. Declare, as Thomas did, "Jesus, you are my Lord and my God. I believe You were raised from the dead. I believe I can have a living relationship with You." Because,

... if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Soli Deo Gloria!