

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> April Mark 16:9-20 The Great Commission – Littlebourne Chapel

[The earliest manuscripts and some other ancient witnesses do not have verses 9–20.]

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. <sup>11</sup> When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. <sup>12</sup> Afterwards Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. <sup>13</sup> These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. <sup>14</sup> Later 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. <sup>15</sup> He said to them, 'Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. <sup>16</sup> Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. <sup>17</sup> And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; <sup>18</sup> 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. ' <sup>19</sup> After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God. <sup>20</sup> Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.

In many Bibles, this last portion of the Gospel of Mark is footnoted in some way, indicating that it did not exist in the earliest Greek manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark. This troubles some Christians regarding the reliability of God's Word. They wonder if this passage belongs in our Bible.

#### **The argument *against* including Mark 16:9-20 in our Bibles.**

The two oldest existing Greek manuscripts (dated from 325 and 340 A.D.) do not contain this section and neither do about 100 other ancient manuscripts translated into other languages. The vocabulary of these last few verses is somewhat different from the rest of the Gospel. **Absence of evidence in many early manuscripts is not evidence of absence.**

#### **The argument *for* including Mark 16:9-20 in our Bibles.**

Many very early Christian writers refer to this passage in their writings. This shows that the early Christians knew about this passage in the Gospel of Mark and accepted it as genuine. · Papias refers to Mark 16:18. He wrote around A.D. 100. · Justin Martyr's first *Apology* quoted Mark 16:20 (A.D. 151). Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* quoted Mark 16:13 and remarked on it (A.D. 180). · Hippolytus in *Peri Charismaton* quoted Mark 16:18 and 19. In his homily on the heresy of Noetus, he refers to Mark 16:19. He wrote while he was Bishop of Portus (A.D. 190-227). · Vicentius, Bishop of Thibari, quoted from 2 of the verses in the 7<sup>th</sup> Council of Carthage held under Cyprian (A.D. 256). Augustine, a century and a half later, in his reply, recited the words again. The apocryphal *Acts of Pilate* contains Mark 16:15-18 (thought to be written in the somewhere around A.D. 200). The *Apostolic Constitutions* clearly allude to 16:15 in two places and quote Mark 16:16 outright (thought to be written somewhere in the late third century or the early fourth century). The overwhelming majority of ancient manuscripts *do* include this passage. **Presence of evidence in other old documents is evidence of presence.**

If the Gospel of Mark ended on verse 8, it is a very abrupt ending, with the women simply being afraid and nothing said about the resurrected Jesus – just the empty tomb being mentioned. The three other Gospels all include Jesus being with the disciples after his death and resurrection. It is possible that the last page was torn off the scroll of the first versions of Mark's Gospel for which we have copies (which are dated 250 years after the original would have been written), but the fact that early church fathers referred to parts of this passage is a good reason for accepting it as genuine.

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. <sup>11</sup> When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it.

Matthew's Gospel refers to Mary Magdalene being at the tomb, so does Luke, and so does John. Nothing contentious here. Luke 8:2 mentions Mary Magdalene as having been delivered from seven demons. She was the one who first met with the risen Christ which is also mentioned in John's Gospel. John's Gospel also reports that Mary Magdalene went to the disciples, but the disciples not believing her is only mentioned in Mark. There are many things mentioned just once in the Gospels where the same events are being described. What is in one of the Gospels may differ with another Gospel by excluding or including details not found in the others. So verses 9, 10 and 11 are not at all problematic in that they corroborate what is written elsewhere.

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

The road to Emmaus episode is detailed only in Luke's Gospel and is briefly referred to here by Mark in verse 12. Jesus wasn't recognised in the account in Luke, and Mark says Jesus "appeared in a different form". Verse 13 says the others didn't believe them, but this is not mentioned by Luke, though it is inferred because Thomas wanted proof when Jesus did appear to the disciples. It was quite natural for the disciples not to believe Jesus was alive. The only time the dead had come back to life after being entombed for days was in the case of Lazarus, and he stepped out of the tomb, while Jesus' body had vanished leaving only the graveclothes. All the Gospels, and the rest of the New Testament, place great emphasis that Jesus is risen from the dead, and is alive today. It is central to Christianity and leaving it out would be a serious omission on the part of Mark.

<sup>14</sup> Later 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.

Luke and John mention Jesus appearing, but not that he rebuked them for the lack of faith and refusal to believe witnesses who had seen him. There aren't many other passages where Jesus rebukes the disciples' lack of faith... In Mark 4:40 when Jesus rebukes the wind and waves, he says "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" In Matthew 14:40, Jesus rebukes Peter as he is sinking "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" In Matthew 17:14-20 <sup>14</sup> When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. <sup>15</sup> 'Lord, have mercy on my son,' he said. 'He has seizures and is suffering greatly. He often falls into the fire or into the water. <sup>16</sup> I brought him to your disciples, but they could not heal him.' <sup>17</sup> 'You unbelieving and perverse generation,' Jesus replied, 'how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy here to me.' <sup>18</sup> Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of the boy, and he was healed at that moment. <sup>19</sup> Then the disciples came to Jesus in private and asked, 'Why couldn't we drive it out?' <sup>20</sup> He replied, 'Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.'

One of the things it is often unwise to say to people is that they lack faith. If it were said to us, we would have to admit that we have asked Jesus to do things that didn't happen; so to be told they didn't happen because "lack of faith" is discouraging, even if it might be true. What this verse 14 in Mark's Gospel illustrates is that the risen Jesus was cross with the disciples – which indicates that God can be cross with us. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, full of love, compassion, mercy and

forgiveness is the sanitised version for those who do not want to have the natural fear of our awesome God of holiness, justice and righteousness, who is going to rebuke us for our lack of faith and unbelief at times when we fail. The Lord said to Thomas *“stop doubting and believe.”* There are times when we need to be told bluntly that we are not doing what God expects of us... easier when it is a straight forward sinful act which involves breaking the commandments... though even then some breaches will be harder to put across when the sinner doesn't see his sin as sinful being blinded by love, lust, severe neediness, or self-righteousness. When it comes to lack of faith, we tread on eggshells because who among us does not lack some degree of faith, given that we may have asked for something, believed we shall have received it, and then not seen it happen. In fact, do we believe that “nothing will be impossible for us”? Jesus said to Thomas after he rebuked him *“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”* It is a real challenge to all of us to have the faith to ask what is seemingly impossible. Without the power of Holy Spirit, the impossible remains impossible. The impossible is done not by us, but by God who is supernatural – that is above and outside nature – and He can alter the natural laws of all the sciences which mankind assumes are unchangeable, until new discoveries overturn what is accepted today. The remaining verses go further on the matters of faith and belief.

*<sup>15</sup> He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. <sup>16</sup> Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

Verse 15 is the Great Commission. In military terms they are our marching orders. *When a certain clergyman asked the Duke of Wellington, ‘Does your grace think it is any use preaching the gospel to the Hindoos?’ he simply replied, ‘What are your marching orders?’ As a soldier, he believed in obeying orders; and when the clergyman answered that, the orders were, ‘Preach the gospel to every creature,’ the duke said. ‘Then your duty is quite clear; obey your Master’s orders, and don’t you trouble, about anybody else’s opinions.’” This was quoted by Charles Spurgeon in one of his sermons, who added “ What are our marching orders? They are indeed clear. As a congregation, as individuals, we have no excuse for disobedience.”*

These orders apply to every believer and are not just for those trained to be evangelists or missionaries or clergy. Our orders are to preach the Good News of Jesus Christ to all creation, or all mankind created in the image of God. The challenge for us all, is how well are we following our marching orders? Some have said that the sign above the exit of every church should read “You are now entering your mission field”. However trite that may seem, it proclaims a truth many find uncomfortable, which is why it is rarely seen. Uncomfortable truths tend to be neglected, which leads to complacency and apathy, and then churches closing. Verse 16 states that belief comes first, and is followed by baptism. Failure to believe results in condemnation. The oft quoted John 3:16 says: *<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.* This is the Good News we like to present to the world, and it continues in the less often quoted verse 17 *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.* When it comes to verses 18 to 21, we have the bad news which is uncomfortable reading for sinners who reject the Gospel of Jesus Christ *<sup>18</sup> Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe, stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. <sup>19</sup> This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.*

*There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus* Romans 8:1 – another sound bite to comfort us, but the opposite is that there is condemnation for those who are not in Christ Jesus. That implies there is an urgency to make Jesus known to all mankind.

*<sup>17</sup> And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; <sup>18</sup> 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.'*

Verse 17 refers to what the disciples did when sent out by Jesus to various places. Verse 18 is rather more contentious, as deliberately picking up snakes and drinking poison is unwise in any circumstances and not to be attempted when at all possible, but the final part of the verse refers to the laying on of hands to heal the sick, which is referred to in the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistle of James, the letters to Timothy as well as Mark 6:5 and 7:32 and Luke 13:13. These things attest the supernatural power of God and are done under the leading of the Holy Spirit.

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

The final two verses are expanded upon in the Acts of the Apostles whose author is Luke. Mark tells us briefly about what happened after Jesus appeared to the disciples as the resurrected Lord, and what the disciples did to obey Him in founding the Church.

Whether or not Mark actually wrote these twelve verses is unimportant because they contain truths and round off the Gospel of Mark which we have looked at for the past year with four points:

- 1 Disciples have a duty to make Jesus known to those who do not know Him
- 2 Disciples have a healing ministry for both spiritual and physical ailments
- 3 Disciples are able to receive power through the Holy Spirit to minister to others and cope with whatever life throws at them
- 4 Disciples are the Church of God and bear witness to the love of God and the relationship God has with His creation

Mark's Gospel finishes with the message that the Christian life is lived in the presence and power of Jesus who was crucified and rose again. Jesus is alive! Hallelujah!