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Mark / Mark 16:1-20

Prayer of Illumination

Most Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, in whom alone dwells the fullness of light and wisdom, illuminate our minds, we pray, by your Holy Spirit, in the true understanding of your Word. Give us grace to receive it with reverence and sincere humility. May it lead us to put our whole trust in you alone, and so to serve and honour you, so that we may glorify your name and edify our neighbours by our godly example. Since you are pleased to number us among your people, enable and dispose us to give you the love and honour that we owe, as children to our Father, and as servants to our Lord. Amen. (Calvin)

Text: Mark 16:1-20

Mark 16:1-20 ESV

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

⁹ Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. ¹⁰ She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. ¹¹ But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would

not believe it.

¹² After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. ¹³ And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

¹⁴ Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. ¹⁵ And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. ¹⁶ Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. ¹⁷ And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸ they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

¹⁹ So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. ²⁰ And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.

A Note on The Footnote

First of all, I want to note that some of you may see a footnote in your Bible saying, 'Some of the earliest manuscripts do not include verses 9–20.' It's true that a handful of the earliest manuscripts we have don't contain verses 9-20, but the vast majority of ancient copies of Mark do contain these verses, and the church has read them as God's Word for many centuries. It's almost universally accepted that verses 9-20 were not written by *Mark*, but the most important thing for Christians is whether or not *God* inspired the text. Human authorship is secondary.

To help us with the issue of divine authorship, the Westminster Confession chapter 1 section 8 affirms that by God's 'singular care and providence,' He has kept the Scriptures 'pure in all ages.' In other words, God's inspiring of Scripture wasn't just in the *writing* of the original text — for example, when Mark first put quill to parchment — but in the *preservation and transmission* of the inspired text. This means the copying, translating, and reproduction of the biblical text. We can have great confidence in our copies of the Scriptures because God has been

active in history in keeping the Scripture 'pure in all ages.'

He has been ensuring that the Church has a pure and true Scripture, and one of the ways He has done this is to provide a vast amount of ancient manuscripts from which we can translate the Bible into our language. Regarding the longer ending of Mark (verses 9-20), the first handful of manuscripts don't contain it, but more than 99% of the manuscripts *since then* do contain it. So, we believe God has, by His providence, preserved His Word for His people through the ages, and these verses are part of that preserved text. Therefore, we will read and preach them as Holy Scripture, confident that what is recorded here is true and consistent with the rest of the New Testament. Mark may not have penned the words of verses 9-20, but someone in the early church did, and the Holy Spirit has evidently seen fit to preserve these words for us. There is nothing in them that isn't elsewhere in Scripture, and so we can have a high degree of confidence in them.

Introduction

Having said all that, we have finally come to the end of the Gospel of Mark. In true Mark-style, it is short, direct, rather un-embellished, and to the point. Mark doesn't waste ink in verse 1-8 and whoever wrote verses 9-20 doesn't either.

Jesus in Mark 15 has just been crucified, proclaimed to be the Son of God by a Roman centurion, and buried in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb. A stone was rolled in front of the tomb as two Marys — Magdalene and the mother of Jesus — watched on, witnessing.

In Mark 16, verses 1-8 tell us of these women (along with another woman named Salome) returning to the tomb and finding it empty. Christ has indeed been raised!

Then in verses 9-20, the scenes flash by in quick succession: resurrection appearances to Mary Magdalene, to two others, and to the whole group of disciples. The chapter ends with the Great Commission. The thrust of verse 9-11 is turning *unbelief* into *belief*, with those words being mentioned in one form or another seven times.

When studying this text, one of the questions for an interpreter is *when is the end?* When does Mark's gospel end? I've argued for receiving the longer ending. But then another question arrives: when is the end *not* the end? The answer comes: when a dead man comes back to life again.

Explanation of The Text

The Empty Tomb

So come with me to **verse 1**. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Joses, and Salome — some of Jesus's women followers — were dutifully heading to the tomb following Christ's death to anoint the body. Note that they were expecting just that: *a body*. The custom was to cover the body in oils and spices to hide the smell that comes from decomposition. Perhaps a year later, once nature had taken its course, the bones of the dead person would be collected and stored in a family tomb.

Note who these women are — at least two of them were there when the stone was rolled in front of the tomb to seal it. They had seen Jesus go in the tomb (Mark 15:47). They were first-hand eye-witnesses to that fact.

Another thing to mention is that in this time and place, the testimony of women was not to be regarded as trustworthy. Their testimonies were not admitted as evidence in a court. This all means something very important: if this story had been fabricated, if these events had been made up, then you wouldn't write that *women* were the witnesses to all this. The fact that they were recorded as such makes this near enough historically certain. More importantly however is that this is the way God loves to work! He loves to use the weak to shame the strong and the foolish to confound the wise. He uses former moon-worshippers (Abram); He uses youngest sons (Isaac); He even uses adulterers (David) and prostitutes (Rahab). Not *because* of their behaviour or qualifications, but in spite of them, because then *He* gets the glory. Here, God includes these women — those whose voices meant next to nothing in human society — to be the first witnesses and testifiers to the resurrection.

Verse 2 tells us they went to the tomb when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, which is Sunday. The sun had risen — and yes I think the pun must be intentional. Even in Greek the words are similar. The word *Son* is *hyios*, and the word for *Sun* is *helios*. Nevertheless, this has a practical implication: whereas Jesus's sham trial was conducted under the cover of darkness to avoid being undermined, here the greatest event in human history happened in the full light of day. This wasn't hidden, this wasn't covert. They couldn't have made a mistake and gone to the wrong tomb, because the sun was risen and by it they could see perfectly well which tomb to visit.

In **verse 3** the women realise on their way to the tomb that they would need help rolling the stone away, because as **verse 4** tells us, it was very large. But wouldn't you know it, they look up and see that the stone *had* been rolled back for them. The language is structured in such a way to be what's called a *divine passive*. In other words, the conclusion you are meant to come to is that *God* did it. The stone was rolled away by God.

In **verse 5** they enter the tomb, and see a young man in there dressed all in white. Seeing him produces a strong reaction in the women — they are alarmed. We know from the other gospels that the women encountered angels at the tomb. Here Mark keeps the details sparing, but being dressed in white and producing a terrified response is something that accompanies angelic or divine encounters throughout Scripture.

The man/angel responds in **verse 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."*

The man/angel knows whom they are seeking: Jesus of Nazareth; he knows what had happened to Jesus: He was crucified; and he knows where Jesus is now: He has risen and seeing as He has risen, He is no longer here! Look, he says, *"see the place where they laid Him,"* that's where you left Him! But He has risen.

In Mark 9:1 Jesus said that the Kingdom of God would come with power. Here is that moment. Jesus went into the tomb *dead* and walked out *alive*. In Romans 1:16 Paul writes, *"16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek."* The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus — the core content of the message of the gospel — is the power of God for salvation. And Christ was raised *in His body*. He was raised bodily from the dead. He died in His body, was buried in His body, and walked out of the tomb in His body. This is not some merely *spiritual* reality. It's not an idea in your head. It's not a sacred myth that gives you strength. We live in a world in which a Man actually came back from the dead — and is *still alive* today.

The man/angel tells the women in **verse 7** to go and tell the disciples — and here's an important point — *and Peter* about what they have seen. Peter gets mentioned by name. Make sure he knows! Make sure Peter knows that Christ rose again for *his* justification too! Make sure Peter knows that for all his arrogance, all his presumptuousness, all his

foolishness, all his blasphemy, and for all his abandonment of Jesus, that Jesus is going ahead of him too. If Peter can be rescued and restored, so can you.

In **verse 8**, we hear that the women bravely and boldly proclaimed the gospel! No we don't... they run away terrified, trembling with fear, and said nothing to anyone! Even at the close of Mark's portion of his gospel, the human characters keep on showing their fallen humanity. Whatever failing they demonstrated, however, it must have been short-lived. We know from Matthew's gospel that they did tell the disciples soon after.

A False Ending

Thus endeth *Mark's* account. But I don't think that this was meant to be the end, for reasons already stated of Mark's gospel. Another reason I think this is that in the Greek, the last sentence of verse 8 ends with a *preposition*. It ends with the word 'for.' We know that sentences shouldn't really end with prepositions. Churchill famously said, "From now on, ending a sentence with a preposition is something up with which I will not put!" ^

And so we have a kind of false ending if we stop in verse 8. It literally ends mid-sentence, grammatically speaking. There are tensions not yet relieved: Jesus hasn't yet appeared to the disciples or to Peter; we don't have a reconciliation in Galilee; we don't have a Great Commission. But the longer ending, added later, but, I believe, inspired by the Spirit nonetheless, *does* include these things. And through it all, there is a journey from unbelief to belief, which follows perfectly from the terrified women witnesses.

From Unbelief to Belief

In **verse 9** we are again told that Jesus rose on the first day of the week: Sunday, and we are told about Mary Magdalene and are given the detail that it was this Mary from whom Jesus cast seven demons. Why are we told this detail?

Perhaps it's because here we see a glimpse of the restoration of the fallen world. This previously demon-possessed woman being set free from the demonic and from her sin. The first witness of the resurrection of Jesus. And in response, after initially fleeing in fear, at least, is to go and tell '*those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept*' (**verse 10**). The disciples and other followers of Jesus were in shock and in grief,

and Mary Magdalene, a woman whose testimony wasn't to be trusted; a formerly-demon-possessed woman for that matter, turns up, tells them Jesus is alive and that she had seen Him, but, as **verse 11** tells us, *'they would not believe it.'*

In **verse 12** the scene shifts, and Jesus Himself appears to two of them — His followers — as they were walking in the country. These two likewise go to the others and share their testimony but they did not believe *them* either (**verse 13**). Mary's testimony wasn't good enough. These two followers — their testimony wasn't good enough. But then in **verse 14** Jesus, appears to the eleven *themselves* as they were reclining at table. He rebukes them for their unbelief because they hadn't listened to the witness testimonies. Old Testament law established the principle that two or three witnesses are required before a charge could be established. It should have been enough for these disciples — the two on the road leaving them no excuse, even if they wanted to exclude Mary's testimony.

This theme of unbelief has been all the way through Mark's gospel. In Mark 4 Jesus asks the disciples why they still have no faith when He calms the storm. In Mark 6, after Jesus walks on the water, their hearts were hardened. In Mark 7, when speaking about what defiles a person Jesus asks them why they still don't understand. IN Mark 8, when talking about the leaven of the Pharisees, He tells them they have hardened hearts and lack understanding. I could go on: rebuking Peter's unbelief in Mark 8; rebuking the disciples lack of faith when failing to cast out a demon in Mark 9; rebuking the disciples for not having child-like faith and even preventing children from coming to Him; and telling Peter that he will fall away in Mark 14. And now in Mark 16, Jesus is saying that it is on the basis of witnesses that we are to trust in His resurrection.

Like the disciples, you and I weren't there when the empty tomb was discovered. Like the disciples, you and I weren't able to see the place where He had been laid, or to see the angel who proclaimed His resurrection. Like the disciples — at least before He appeared to them as well — we are to take it on faith that Jesus actually rose from the dead. But this faith isn't just something we can drum up in our own hearts. We need the Holy Spirit to give that faith to us as a gift of grace.

I can give you the arguments and evidence. I can tell you that the resurrection provides greater explanatory power and scope, that the resurrection in terms of simplicity of explanation, plausibility, and consistency with the known facts, is by far the best historical explanation

for those facts.

I could give you those facts that need explaining: the public burial of Jesus in a rich man's tomb for all to see and know about; the discovery of that empty tomb on the Sunday following Jesus' death by a group of His women followers; the post-mortem appearances of Jesus to His followers; and the origin of the disciples' faith in the sense that they believed in a risen Messiah even though they had no prior expectation of such a thing.

The resurrection accounts for all these facts far better than any other explanation. It couldn't have been a conspiracy. Who dies a martyr's death for something they made up? It couldn't have been a mass hallucination, there are just too many eye-witnesses for that to make sense. It couldn't have been the wrong tomb, otherwise the Romans would have simply produced the correct body from the correct tomb. Jesus couldn't have merely passed out on the cross, given the spear in His side. And no, He didn't have a twin. I mean, come on.

No, the simple and powerful truth is that God raised Jesus from the dead. But, you cannot believe in the resurrection in a saving way without true saving faith. You must *believe*. And, as Christians living in the 21st Century, you must believe by faith and not by sight. You must believe in something you cannot see or touch for yourselves. This is why belief is so critical in Mark 16. Mark's audience were in Rome, far away from these events in Jerusalem. They were trusting in someone else's testimony, and so too are we called to do the same. But we don't have just two or three witnesses, we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, and the greatest witness you possess as a believer of course is the witness of the Holy Spirit who convicts of sin, who assures you of your standing as a child of God, and who works to sanctify you in the truth. The great call of the end of the Gospel of Mark is to *believe*.

Because here's what happens when people believe.

Verse 15 - Jesus tells them, '*Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation.*' That's not something an unbelieving disciple will do. Jesus says in **verse 16** that whoever believes and is baptised will be saved. Unbelief however leads to condemnation. **Verses 17 and 18** tell us that signs will accompany those who believe: casting out demons, speaking in new tongues, picking up serpents with their hands, not being harmed by poisons, and healing the sick. These very things all happen in the lives of the Apostles throughout their ministries as the New

Testament was still being written. Now we have the New Testament, we have no need for those authenticating signs anymore because we have the self-authenticating Word of God.

In **verse 19**, Jesus ascends, bodily, and sits down at the right hand of God, from where, Romans tells us, He still intercedes for us. And in **verse 20**, now believing, the disciples finally obey. They've had plenty of false starts, but now they get it, now they believe, and *'they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.'*

And I love that phrase: the Lord worked with them. Matthew's gospel puts it like this: and behold I am with you always.

Christ goes with them, by the Spirit, on this mission, ensuring its success.

Conclusion and Application

So in a chapter of Scripture with an uncertain ending, we are once again to ask ourselves, when is the end not the end? And the answer is when death is not the end. When Jesus rose from the dead, He defeated the *end* which is death, and put death itself to death.

The end is not the end as long as there are believers through whom the gospel of Christ will be proclaimed. He doesn't wait for the disciples to figure everything out before sending them out. He merely calls them to believe, and apparently now they do.

In the midst of a varieties of unbelief in the Church today: not being submitted to the more challenging parts of the Bible, not trusting God's methods for the mission and instead coming up with 'better' ways to see the world changed, failing to be obedient in the details of life as God works out His whole plan — in the midst of our unbelief, He is calling people to demonstrate true belief by obeying Him in proclaiming Him.

And we proclaim Him to all creation. Not just individual salvation — although without that you don't get anything else — but the transformation and restoration of the world. We preach the gospel to souls and we preach the gospel by proclaiming Christ's Lordship over everything in all that we do.

We are to proclaim *this Word*. As Isaiah 8:20 tells us, *"20 To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn."* This book contains the witness we have to

these events. It is the message contained in this book that we are to proclaim.

That's what belief does.

Let's pray.

Footnotes

^ I gleaned this information and the Churchill quote from a sermon preached on this same text by Ben Zornes.