

## THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD (12 May 2024)

And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

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. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it (Mark 16:15-20 – NRSV).

### Introductory notes

#### General

“Since none of the autograph copies of documents of the NT survives, the Greek text of the NT is constructed from later copies of manuscripts dating from A.D. 135 at the earliest to about A.D. 1200 at the latest. These copies, of which more than five thousand exist, range in size from scraps a little larger than postage stamps to complete manuscripts of the Bible. In general, these copies show remarkable agreement among themselves. The most notorious exception to this otherwise happy rule, however, is the ending of Mark, which presents the gravest textual problem in the NT. The two oldest and most important manuscripts of the Bible, *codex Vaticanus* (B) and *codex Sinaiticus* (א), omit 16:9–20, as do several early translations or versions, including the Old Latin, the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript, about one hundred Armenian manuscripts, and the two oldest Georgian manuscripts.

“Neither Clement of Alexandria nor Origen shows any awareness of the existence of the longer ending, and Eusebius and Jerome attest that vv. 9–20 were absent from the majority of Greek copies of Mark known to them. An ingenious system of cross-referencing parallel passages in the Gospels that was devised by Ammonius in the second century and adopted by Eusebius in the fourth century (hence the name Eusebian Canons) does not include Mark 16:9–20. The apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* does not contain the longer ending, and concludes, as does Mark 16:8, with the fear of the women.

“Although a majority of ancient witnesses, including Greek uncial and minuscule manuscripts, church fathers, and versions in other languages do include vv. 9–20, this does not compensate for the textual evidence against them. The inclusion of vv. 9–20 in many manuscripts is accounted for rather by the fact that the longer ending, which must have been added quite early, was naturally included in subsequent copies of the Gospel. Many of the ancient manuscripts that do contain the longer ending, however, indicate by scribal notes or various markings that the ending is regarded as a spurious addition to the Gospel. External evidence (manuscript witnesses) thus argues strongly against the originality of the

longer ending” (J R Edwards, *The Gospel according to Mark*, Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2002, 497-498).

In summary: “The earliest ascertainable form of the Gospel of Mark ended with 16:8” (Bruce Metzger cited in J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press. 2002, 462-464).

### Specific

*“Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation”*: This is very similar to Matthew 28:16-20 and Luke 24:46–48. It is also similar to the third last verse of Acts: “Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen” (Acts 28:28). St Paul, writing to the Colossians rejoices that he has seen this universal proclamation fulfilled: “the gospel that you heard .... has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven” (Colossians 1:23). Everyone is to hear the Good News of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. There is some irony about this in Mark’s Gospel. There the command comes immediately after Mary of Magdala and the two who had encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus announced the Good News to the disciples and they refused to believe. And immediately before the command is given we read: “He appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen.” The command to go out and announce the message then follows this recognition of the disciples’ lack of faith! “A major theme in the first part of the Longer Ending is the disbelief shown by the Eleven regarding the reports about appearances of the risen Jesus (see 16:11, 13, 14) (J R Donahue, & D J Harrington, op cit, 463).

*The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned*: This statement probably reflects a summary of beliefs and expectations of the early proclaimers. Clearly, it cannot mean that physical baptism is necessary for salvation. That would fly in the face of everything else we read in the Christian Scriptures. It may reflect what some actually believed at that time however.

*these signs*: Probably a gathering of reported “signs”. The “casting out of demons” is found in Mark 6:7 and a number of other places – for example, Matthew 10:1, 8; Luke 10:17; Acts 8:7; 16:18; 19:6. “Speaking in tongues” is also found in 1 Corinthians 12:10, 30; 14:2, 18. In Acts 28:3–6 St Paul is said to have survived a snakebite. Interestingly enough there are two words for snake – *ophis* and *echidna*. The first is a generic term and it is used, for example, in Genesis 3:1, the second is used to refer to a poisonous snake, as in Acts 28:3-6. Here in Mark’s Gospel it is the generic *ophis* that is used. In Luke 10:19 we also find a reference to surviving snakebite. Again, the Greek word is *ophis*. “Healing”, particularly by the laying on of hands, is found in Mark 6:13 and Matthew 9:18, Acts 3:1–7, 14:8–10 and James 5:14. The reference to “drinking poisons” is a little more difficult to explain. One scholar writes: “With regard to drinking ‘deadly poison’, there is no account of drinking poison with immunity in the NT, although Eusebius (*Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.9) speaks of Justus Barsabas (the disciple not chosen in Acts 1:23), who drank poison without harm. It appears, however, that in the late first century a cult related to poisonous drugs was exerting at least some influence in

Jewish-Christian circles. This is made apparent by a reference in Josephus's *Antiquities*, which he completed in A.D. 93–94, that “no one should possess magic potions (Gk. *pharmakoi*) or poison (Gk. *thanasimos*) nor any of the harmful things made by Israelites for harmful purposes” (*Ant.* 4.279). Josephus is ostensibly commenting on Exod 22:18 (which makes no mention of “poison” [Gk. *thanasimos*]). The addition of the term, however, suggests that it was a concern in Josephus's day at the close of the first century. Writing about the same time or shortly later, Ignatius warns the Trallians to refrain from foods that heretics foist on the gullible, mixed like deadly poisons (Gk. *thanasimos*) with honeyed wine, which the ignorant drink blissfully to their death (*Ign. Trall.* 6). The text of the passage is partially corrupted, and it is not entirely clear whether Ignatius intends the poisonous drink to be taken literally or symbolically of the unnamed heresy. But even a symbolic meaning indicates that the practice of poisonous drink was known to his readers. Mark's word for poisonous drink in v. 18 is the same Greek word (*thanasimos*) used by Josephus and Ignatius. The reference to drinking deadly poison without harm thus signals to Mark's readers that those who believe and follow the gospel are guaranteed immunity from heresy, including heretical potions to drink.” (J R Edwards, op cit, 506–507)

## Reflection

Endings are part and parcel of everyday life. Endings change things. Endings may be predictable or unpredictable, remarkable or unremarkable. The day ends, a night's sleep ends, a meal ends, a conversation ends, a journey ends, a relationship ends, a career ends, a life ends. Day to day living simply would not go on without endings.

In our times, there is an abnormal number of significant endings. Institutions, societies, ways of thinking, cultural patterns, religious customs, expectations . . . . So many of these taken for granted parts of our lives can no longer be taken for granted. Many are simply fading from our lives. Already, many have become distant memories, if we remember them at all.

New possibilities are often born out of endings: “I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24).

The transition – from an ending to a beginning – can be easy or very difficult. Endings may thus provoke differing emotions – relief, anxiety, excitement, fear, confusion, joy, sadness, satisfaction.

Some endings are particularly momentous. For example, the passion and death of Jesus would have been such a momentous ending for the disciples. So would the “ascension of Jesus into heaven”, described in today's Gospel – Mark 16:15-20. Whatever the disciples witnessed at that time of “the ascension”, they were clearly made aware that the time with Jesus physically present among them, had gone forever. The implications of that ending for the first disciples, are also the implications for all disciples since – including us.

If Jesus was not to be physically present any longer, that did not mean he would cease to be present altogether. A beginning is born out of the ending. His physical presence had ended but he would continue to be present with his disciples. "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Luke 21:33). A new way of the disciples being with him and he with the disciples, has begun. This is highlighted by the command: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation". It is now the role of the disciple to radiate Jesus' presence everywhere. And "the Lord worked with them".

Recall the ritual of the Paschal Candle at the Easter Vigil. The Celebrant traces the sign of the cross on the candle, the numerals for the year and puts the incense capsules into the candle saying: "Christ yesterday and today, the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega. All time belongs to him and all the ages. To him be glory and power through every age and for ever. Amen"

We can lose our focus on "Christ yesterday and today, the Beginning and the End" in a time such as ours. Reflecting on "the ascension" acknowledges the fact of endings, even the endings of some very significant things. It also reminds us of what does not end, will never end: "Christ yesterday and today, the Beginning and the End".