

**“The End: Or Is It?”**  
**The Gospel According to Mark 16:9-20**  
**March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2019**

A man asked his friend, “What color are your pastor’s eyes?” He answered, “I don’t know. When he prays he closes his eyes...and when he preaches I close mine.”

The story is told about a pastor who after he got in the pulpit, apologized for the Band-Aid on his face. He said, “I was thinking about my sermon while shaving and cut my face.”

Afterward the deacons found a note in the collection plate, “Next time, think about your face and cut the sermon.”

It has arrived – the last sermon in our lengthy Sunday morning sermon series through the New Testament book, the Gospel According to Mark. I preached the first sermon in this series back on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2017 – 16 months and 60 sermons ago! And, you’ve survived it! It’s the end – *or is it?*

Interestingly, I could have closed out this series with last Sunday’s message. Our text last Sunday morning was the opening 8 verses of **Mark Chapter 16**. *Now, why would I say I could have closed out the series then?* Well, in some Bibles, today’s text of Scripture is missing. Or, at least, you may have a margin note in your Bible that explains the verses for today’s message are not in the oldest Greek manuscripts discovered to date.

These verses before us today are in the *King James Version*, as well as the New King James Version of Scripture that I preach from and that you’ll find in the pew racks in front of you. The *King James Version* of Scripture was completed in 1611, 408 years ago. It was developed from the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic manuscripts available at that time.

Since the writing of the *King James Version*, however, even older manuscripts have been discovered. “The earliest and most important of the biblical texts that have been discovered would be what’s called Codex Sinaiticus. It is thought to have been written in 350 AD, and contains the entire Old Testament. There is also the Codex Vaticanus from 325 AD, which contains both the Old and New Testaments. In both of these manuscripts, **Mark Chapter 16** ends with verse 8.” (MacArthur, **Sermon on Mark 16:9-20**, gty.org)

*Why is it important that we have the oldest manuscripts we possibly can have?* Because the older the manuscript, the closer to the time it was initially written. And, the closer to the time sacred Scripture was first written, the more confidence we can have that what is written is **what** was written! For instance, we have a portion of John’s gospel account written as few as 30 to 35 years after John first wrote it down. That’s an amazing testimony of lasting truth!

Conversely, the earliest manuscript we have of the great Greek philosopher Plato’s writings is 1,300 years after the time he wrote it. And, the oldest manuscript of Greek philosopher

Homer's classic *The Odyssey*, is 2,200 years since it was first written! Yet, no one disputes the validity of copies made more than two centuries after the original was first written!

**Mark 16:9-20:**

"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. <sup>10</sup>She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. <sup>11</sup>And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.

<sup>12</sup>After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country. <sup>13</sup>And they went and told *it* to the rest, *but* they did not believe them either.

<sup>14</sup>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. <sup>15</sup>And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. <sup>16</sup>He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. <sup>17</sup>And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; <sup>18</sup>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."

<sup>19</sup>So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. <sup>20</sup>And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with *them* and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen."

It is likely that these words were added to what may have been the original last chapter of Mark's gospel account. *Who put them there, if that's the case?* Scribes who wrote copies from the old manuscripts. The first printing press wasn't invented until about the year 1500. Before that time, copies of sacred Scripture had to be made by writing them word for word!

But, before you criticize God's Word, or you grow disillusioned, consider that those people who copied Scripture before 1440 knew the importance of their task. They were in all likelihood faithful followers of Jesus Christ who stood on God's Word for life and salvation. Further, we must understand that God is fully capable of preserving His Word down through the ages, so that we can be confident the Bible we carry and read is the actual Word of the living God.

Some 30 thousand (plus) manuscripts of the sacred Scriptures have been discovered over the years. One of the world's most renowned biblical scholars of humankind was AT Robertson, who lived from 1863 to 1934 said as much. He wrote, "The vast array of manuscripts has enabled textual scholars to accurately reconstruct the original text (of the Bible) with more than 99.9% accuracy." (Quoted in MacArthur, Sermon on **Mark 16:9-20**, gty.org)

There's something else to consider. In the history of modern Bible scholarship, no one has tried to hide this variance. To hide it implies that something is wrong. As it is, we have many tools available to us to realize that even if these verses in **Mark Chapter 16** weren't in any manuscript (but they are in about 9,000 of them), we realize that any differences are not formidable.

I'd like to take a quick stroll through these verses to see how, with the exception of a couple of words, what is taught in these verses is also included in sacred Scripture elsewhere. Let's begin with verse 9 – "...He rose early on the first day of the week," This is how Matthew puts it in his gospel account, "as the first day of the week began to dawn," (**Matthew 28:1**). **Luke 24:1** reads, "Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning..." And, **John 20:1** reads, "Now the first day of the week Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early,"

Speaking of Mary Magdalene, she's mentioned as the one to first see the resurrected Jesus in verse 9 of Mark, **Matthew 28:1**, and **John 20:1**.

Verse 9 also shares this information about Mary – she had 7 demons cast out of her. That's supported as well by **Luke 8:2**.

**Mark 16:10** reveals that Mary "went and told those who had been with Him (Jesus)." **Matthew 28:8** reports she "ran to bring (Jesus') disciples word" of His resurrection from the dead; **John 20:18** teaches us that "Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and *that* He had spoken these things to her."

Then, **Mark 16:11** instructs the disciples didn't believe Mary's report of Jesus' being raised from the dead. Luke also acknowledges the disciples' unbelief when he writes in **Luke 24:11** of the message Mary and other women reported to the disciples, "And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them."

In the 12<sup>th</sup> verse of today's passage, Mark notes, "He appeared...to two of them as they walked and went into the country." Luke speaks of this incident at length in his 24<sup>th</sup> chapter, beginning with verse 13 and following.

As we move to **Mark 16:14**, we see that Jesus appeared to the 11 (apostles) as they sat at the table. Luke also mentions this in **Luke 24:33 & 36**. John accounts for it in **John 20:19 (ff)**, and the Apostle Paul writes of this appearance in **I Corinthians 15:5**.

What theologians have come to know as the Great Commission is found in **Mark's 16<sup>th</sup> chapter, verse 15** – "And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." Matthew's familiar version reads like this in **Matthew 28:19 & 20** – "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, <sup>20</sup>teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you..."

Finally, in verse 19 of today's text, Jesus "was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God." Luke makes reference to this in the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of his gospel account, verse 51, "Now it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven." This event is also reported in **Acts Chapter 1:9**, "Now...while they (disciples) watched, He (Jesus) was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight."

All of what we've just discussed shows that the significant majority of this passage is filled with teaching that is supported by other Scriptures. Whether they were original or not, for the most part, these verses contain orthodox teaching and doctrine. That is, with the exception of what we find in **Mark 16:18**. Look there again with me, "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." In a sermon on this text, John MacArthur notes, "In no account, post-resurrection of Jesus, is there any discussion of signs, like picking up serpents (and) drinking poison." (MacArthur, Sermon on **Mark 16:9-20**, gty.org)

The only reference to either of these practices (picking up serpents and drinking poison) is found in the closing chapters of Acts. You'll remember Paul and his party shipwrecked on the island of Malta. **Acts Chapter 28** opens with Paul gathering sticks for a fire they built to warm themselves. As he did this, a viper... fastened on his hand. He shook off the snake into the fire without being bitten it. The natives thought they were in the presence of a god.

Some within the Christian community have taken this teaching to extremes.

The tiny community of Squire, West Virginia, near a coal mine in the Appalachian Mountains is made up of a few houses, a car wash, and one of the few remaining Pentecostal Signs churches. With old fashioned apostolic gospel music echoing through the small wooden building, members of the congregation dance and spin in a trance as Pastor Chris Wolford reaches into a box and pulls out a three-foot long timber rattlesnake, a test of faith.

Swinging the snake over his shoulder he proclaims that God is present, and allows the snake to move around in his hands, before laying it across the lap of another worshipper playing the guitar. Serpent-handling Christians believe taking up snakes, as well as drinking poison is something they are commanded to do.

They take their scriptural mandate from the Bible's **Gospel According to Mark 16: 17-18**, "In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all."

"Now we don't believe that they won't bite us," says Pastor Wolford. "We know every time we go in the box that there may be a chance that we may get bit, and that we may die. "But see, when I got saved, he put something in me that, to live for me is for God, and to die is for God."

West Virginia is the last remaining state where serpent-handling is legal. There are an estimated 125 serpent-handling churches left, mainly in Tennessee, Kentucky, and West Virginia.

There is no other reference in the New Testament to God's people drinking poison. This is akin to tempting God like Satan did with Jesus in the wilderness (**Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13**). Satan, in effect here, wants us to "show off" our faith and force God to perform unnecessary miracles. I think Warren Wiersbe has it right when he notes, "Jesus refused to tempt God, and we should follow His example. Yes, God cares for His children when, in His will, they are in dangerous places; but He is not obligated to care for us when we foolishly get out of His will. We are called to live by faith, not by chance, and to trust God, not tempt Him." (Wiersbe, 168)

As we conclude, we can have great confidence in this gospel account, which has shown us our sin, and therefore our need for salvation. And, it has also shown us our Savior who lived for us, and died for us, and was raised again from the dead for our eternal salvation.

In the four gospel accounts we see Jesus most clearly. If you walk away from what you've learned from this second book in the New Testament and you won't submit yourself to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, you among all people are most foolish. You will have 60 sermons worth of hot coals sitting in your lap in this present life, and your eternity will only get worse. Turn to Jesus, dear one – or come back to Him, if you've wandered away. Renew your desire to live and serve the Son of Man Who "came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." **(Mark 10:45)**