

“TO BE CONTINUED ... (Mark 57)”
Mark 16:1-20

“And so, the end is near ...” as Paul Anka wrote and Frank Sinatra sang. This journey through the story that Mark wrote about Jesus is nearly at an end. Since July 2002 we’ve been considering on and off the life and ministry of the man who has had more influence on this world than anyone has ever had before or since. We’ve been trying our hardest to read this as if it’s for the first time and have tried to stick to what’s here without looking for explanation or embellishment elsewhere in the New Testament – which is so difficult for us as we pretty well all know the ending.

Jesus strode onto the scene at the beginning of the book – fully mature, with no stories of his birth or early life. He arrived as John the Baptist, the last of the great Hebrew prophets, was actually preparing people to meet him. He came offering a radically new approach to life, a new agenda for living, which he invited everyone to adopt as their own, having first given up their old agenda as bankrupt and unproductive. He came to make real the things that the Hebrew prophets had preached about the coming Kingdom of God.

As he taught and preached about the things that they had spoken about in what is now our Old Testament, he also demonstrated in his own life the reality of what he was saying. He brought wholeness to those who were ill and disabled. He brought hope to the marginalised and the outcast. He confronted the forces of evil as he dismissed demons and demolished powers. He showed his mastery over the created order as he calmed storms and provided food from nowhere. He exposed the vested interests of the earthly power brokers – lawyers, priests, politicians, bankers. He offered glimpses of this coming Kingdom and said to anyone who would listen, “Come and join me. It’s all free and it’s open to all because of the astonishing grace of God.”

And to those who showed interest and really wanted to take it seriously, he went on to say that the entry to this Kingdom was free, but the commitment required to remain a part of it was enormous. If you want to take Jesus seriously and get the very best out of life, then you have to be prepared to give up anything and everything that could possibly get in the way. It’s a life of sacrifice, a path of potential suffering. There’s no place for divided loyalty or part-time commitment. The way of the Kingdom is going to be very difficult in the short-term, but the long-term benefits are beyond imagining.

And as he spoke of the suffering and sacrifice, he started to drop hints that he was going to be the trailblazer, he was going to have to tread that way first. His little group of followers couldn’t quite get their heads around what he was saying. His references were so obtuse that they didn’t realise what was going to happen. And then it did happen. Suddenly, this great teacher, this mighty healer, this astonishing miracle worker was trussed up, beaten almost to death and nailed up on a cross to finish the job. They had thought he was the Messiah. They had begun to trust him. They almost thought they’d begun to understand him. But obviously they hadn’t. Their hopes and dreams, their vision of God’s new Kingdom had been nailed up on the cross with their defeated teacher. It was all over. Finished. It had been a strange three years with the wandering rabbi, but now he was gone and they’d just have to put it all down to experience and start all over again.

A few of the women who were part of the group – Mary Magdalene, Salome and another Mary: three of the people who had watched him die and had seen his body laid to rest in the garden tomb of Joseph of Arimathea – went to pay their last respects, to weep their tears of sadness, frustration and humiliation as they said goodbye to the man they’d loved and the man who had so comprehensively deceived them with his talk of a great future. As they approached the tomb, worrying about how they were going to get inside to put the spices and things on his corpse, they noticed it was open. Someone had already been there.

But not only is the tomb open: it is empty. Empty, that is, apart from a young man who tells them to calm down and gives them the news that Jesus is risen. He’s alive. He’s not there. “Off you go! He’ll meet

you back where you first met him – up in the north, near Galilee.” Not surprisingly, the women are “bewildered” and “afraid”. What’s going on? They’re still recovering from the huge shock of Friday, still a mess of emotions and hurts and questions. Just when they thought it couldn’t get any stranger, they’re told he’s not dead after all.

But, as writer after writer, scholar after scholar, preacher after preacher has said down through the centuries, “*He is risen!*” is the only adequate explanation for the empty tomb. There is nothing else that fits the evidence, nothing else that completes the story. Many, many people have tried to explain it away and dismiss the resurrection, but their own attempts at explanation usually strain our credulity even further than a belief in the resurrection itself. Just two examples, from relatively respected Bible scholars. K Lake says that the women went to the wrong tomb. The young man who happened to be there told them he wasn’t there and pointed them to right tomb. What happened after that, Lake does not make clear. Barbara Thiering, a rather batty Australian theologian, suggests in *The Book That Jesus Wrote* that the two people crucified with Jesus were Simon Magus and Judas. The wine vinegar that was offered to Jesus was a pre-arranged plan with John and contained poison. The three men were buried together, but Simon wasn’t really dead and he had an antidote to the poison which allowed Jesus to recover and the three left the tomb. (Tom Wright demolishes that theory rather entertainingly in *Who Was Jesus?*)

There’s no other rational explanation. And there are countless books that confirm that view. The best known is probably Frank Morison’s *Who Moved The Stone?* But you might also like to try *I Believe In The Resurrection* by George Ladd or *Your Verdict* by Val Grieve. Jesus is alive. He is risen. We’ve had plenty of time to take that in. Those three women who arrived at the tomb found it all a bit much to take in at once, so they hurried away in their fear and confusion. Which is where Mark’s gospel seems to finish – rather abruptly. Because, as you’ll see from the note in your Bible (in most versions, anyway) vv9-20 are not considered to be by Mark.

Let me just say a few words about that before we go on. The earliest manuscripts we have finish at the end of v8. The very first preachers and theologians don’t mention anything after v8. The style and vocabulary of vv9-20 are very different from the rest of the book. In the Greek, the transition from v8 to v9 is very awkward. There are all kinds of theories about this, but the one which seems to have the most credence is that the last bit of Mark’s gospel somehow got lost – the end of the scroll was damaged in some way – and the early Christians, who didn’t like the idea of the story finishing as it did, added the last few verses to finish it off properly, drawing on the eyewitness accounts of their contemporaries and other accounts that were already circulating at the time. There’s no doubt at all that it’s part of the Bible, part of what we call “The Canon of Scripture”. It’s just as authentic and just as inspired as the rest of the Bible and we can have confidence in it as God’s word to us. We can still hear the Holy Spirit speaking to us through these verses.

And what it says to start with is that the disciples just couldn’t believe their ears. The women were afraid as they ran from the tomb. When Mary Magdalene told them that she’d actually met the risen Jesus, the disciples didn’t believe her (v11). When the two people who’d met Jesus out on the road to Emmaus told the others, they didn’t believe them (v13). When Jesus himself turned up unannounced at one of their meals, he “rebuked them for their lack of faith” (v14). But although they didn’t believe their ears, they believed their eyes. That encounter with Jesus changed their lives – and changed their world. And the world has never been quite the same since.

After he’s had a word with them about their lack of faith, he tells them what’s going to happen next. He is off back to heaven – his work is done – and they are to continue what he has started. He commissions them to go out and share this good news, this gospel, this proclamation of God’s new Kingdom. This amazing offer, as he himself has already made very clear in his own ministry, is not just for the people of Galilee, not just for the people of Israel, not just for the Jewish people – it’s for everyone. So they’re to go out into the whole world to “preach the good news to every creature”. Let the whole world know what has happened – and what can happen as the Kingdom begins to spread. They have got so much to tell: not only what Jesus himself has said, but what they have seen him do.

But just as they themselves have experienced, there's a strong possibility that people will not believe their ears. Give them something to believe with their eyes, too, he says. Offer them real glimpses of the Kingdom. Show people what it might actually be like in practice. They are to confront the forces of evil as they drive out demons. They are to show what it's like to offer authentic worship as they speak in new languages. They are to demonstrate a powerful confidence in the protection of their God – even handling snakes and coping with attempts on their lives are to be met with a joyful confidence. They are to bring wholeness to those who need it as they reach out to heal and restore the broken and damaged in society. They are all glimpses of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom in which all worship, all enjoy wholeness, all know God's unending protection, all are filled with the Holy Spirit rather than the powers of the demonic. And we are told that that's exactly what they did (v20), and as they did it "*the Lord worked with them*" through the power of his own Holy Spirit.

That's still our commission today. I don't believe it's changed. And I believe the pattern is still the same, too. It all begins with that personal encounter with Jesus. We need to meet with him, to sense his presence, to experience the activity of his Holy Spirit within us. Those first followers were all at sea until they actually encountered Jesus themselves, until they heard his voice and felt his touch. If you've never, ever felt that touch, if you've never encountered Jesus for yourself, then pray that you will. And if you don't quite know what to pray, have a word with me or one of the elders afterwards and we'd be happy to pray with you.

With that encounter comes the commission to pass on the good news to everyone. The Greek word is a word meaning "to announce". Let other people know about the Kingdom of God. Let other people know that Jesus is alive. Let other people know that there is an alternative to the life that they're leading. Don't be afraid to share with others what you know about Jesus, about the effect he has had on your life. They talk to you about their lives, about their ideas, about their beliefs – their horoscopes, their idolising of celebrities, their devotion to sport or music or television. Tell them about yours.

And if they don't believe their ears, then let's give them something to see as well. Let us be prepared to confront the forces of evil in our world. It may actually be the demonic in individual lives. It may be that we are called to confront the evil in the oppressive structures and systems of our world, to speak out and denounce those things are not consistent with the values of the Kingdom of God. But unless we are people who stand up for justice and righteousness, our mere words about Jesus will have a hollow and insincere ring to them.

Let us model authentic worship as we allow the Holy Spirit to lead us. We need to move beyond the mouthing of words and the grunting of "Amen's" to an engagement with the heart of God. Think about what you're saying and singing as we worship together. Expect God to affect you in some way whenever you speak with him. Come along to church – or wherever you worship – anticipating that God will change you in some way through the encounter. Those who won't believe what you say, may well start to take seriously what you are as you allow God to transform you in worship.

Let's be confident in our belief, whatever might happen to try and knock us off course. I'm not saying that we should actually go and look for snakes to handle – like the Appalachian snake-handlers in the United States – nor that we should tempt God by drinking poison. These words are addressed to those who find they are put in dangerous situations by their instance on the truth of the gospel, they're not the programme for some kind of spiritual cabaret.

And let's be prepared to allow God to work through us as we make his offer of wholeness to those who are in need of help and hope and healing. The ministry of healing has a definite place within our proclamation of the gospel, but I believe the work of the Kingdom goes beyond the confines of physical healing to emotional and spiritual healing. It involves helping people to get the most out of life, drawing the marginalised and the disadvantaged into the life of the Kingdom, showing that God has a place for everyone within the orbit of his love. Show it – don't just talk about it.

And I believe, too, on this Pentecost Sunday, that *“the Lord will work with us”*. He sends his Holy Spirit to enable us to continue the work that he began. We need to be open to that, to pray for that, eagerly to desire that (as Paul says in his letters to the Corinthian Christians). We have read the story of Jesus over these past three years. It hasn't been intended as an academic exercise. It hasn't been intended as entertainment. This story that Mark has given us is the blueprint for a community of people who show in their own lives that they have encountered Jesus and who want to follow his example of giving glimpses of the Kingdom to everyone who they meet. It will mean giving up your own agenda and trusting him for his. It will mean being empowered by the Holy Spirit. It will mean sacrifice and even suffering. But it will mean that we are being obedient to Jesus and that we can look forward to enjoying the benefits of that fulfilled Kingdom for all eternity.

This isn't the end of Mark's gospel (whether you finish at the end of v8 or v20). It should finish with the words “To be continued ...” And you and I have a part to play in that continuing.

(House group notes follow on next page)

"TO BE CONTINUED ... (Mark 57)"

Mark 16:1-20

Jesus' life has ended. His ministry – offering hope and a future in the Kingdom of God – has finished in the disarray and disappointment of his humiliating death. The women who watched him die go to complete the burial ritual, but find the tomb empty. They are told by the young man inside the tomb (an angel) that Jesus is risen. The only possible explanation for the empty tomb is that he is risen – other attempts to rationalise away the resurrection strain our credulity even further. The women leave, bewildered and afraid (which is where Mark's version appears to end).

In the last section (*v9-20*), the disciples do not believe that Jesus is alive until they encounter him personally. When Jesus does turn up and they believe with their eyes rather than their ears, he commissions them to continue his mission –

- Preach the gospel to everyone (*v15*)
- Confront the powers of evil (*v17*)
- Offer real worship (*v17*)
- Be confident of God's protection (*v18*)
- Bring wholeness to others (*v18*)

As they begin to do that, so they enjoy the help of Jesus through his Holy Spirit (*v20*).

Our commission from Jesus follows that pattern. We are to announce the good news of the Kingdom of God, but because many people do not believe with their ears, we are to live out what Jesus commands in practice, so that people can believe with their eyes. It is only as we live authentic Christian lives with real integrity that we can hope to make an impact on the world. And we, too, need Jesus to work with us through the power of his Holy Spirit.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you respond to people who question the truth of the resurrection? Can you think of any other credible explanation?
2. Do you think it matters who wrote the last part of this chapter? If Mark intended it to end at *v8* why do you think it would have ended so abruptly?
3. Why didn't the disciples believe at first (and why do we single out Thomas for criticism!)?
4. What do you think it means in *v12* that Jesus "*appeared in a different form*"?
5. *Vv15-18* seem to imply that the preaching of the gospel will always be accompanied by miraculous signs. How do you respond to that? Should we be more expectant?
6. To what extent are we fulfilling the commission today in our own context?
7. Is there anything in this passage that has struck you for the first time?
8. What is your opinion of Mark's gospel now that we have worked right through it? Is there anything that has particularly affected you about it?