

Jan. 29. 2023

Mark #16

Are you generally optimistic about the future or pessimistic? The women who came to the tomb of Jesus were only there to complete the burial process. The disciples were in hiding. All the great plans for the kingdom had ended with the death of Jesus. Both groups were pessimistic about the future.

But something transformed these sad and hopeless souls into people of joy, passion and courage. We don't talk much about people who died a hundred years ago. But people around the world, even today, sing new songs and write new books and present new material about this Jesus who died long ago, as if he is present and alive today.

We serve a risen Savior. Now one note before we jump in. Your Bible might say at the bottom of the page, "The earliest manuscripts do not include Mark 16:9-20." I am choosing to present this material today because it is in complete harmony with the other gospel writers. Smarter people than I chose to include this material in every Bible I own. Whoever wrote this believed Jesus had given his disciples a mission to accomplish and equipped them to get it done.

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.

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

Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.

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. (Mark 16:10-14)

Skepticism. Who could blame them? The last they saw Jesus he was dying on a cross. A few people came and helped put him in a tomb. The great plans were over. The dreams were gone.

The first believers were the biggest skeptics.

Jesus told them numerous times that he would rise from the dead but they didn't understand.

(Matt. 12:38-40, 16:21, 17:9, 17:22-23, 20:18, 26:32, 27:63)

(Mark 8:31, 9:10, 9:31, 14:28, 14:58, 10:32)

(Luke 9:27) (John 2:19-22, Chapter 14-16.)

Looks like at least 10 different times Jesus told them he would rise but his words seem like nonsense to them.

John MacArthur in his book 12 Ordinary Men (P. 24-27) said, the men Jesus choose lacked understanding. They lacked humility, faith, commitment and power. They weren't the academic elite of their day.

Like the guy who said, I got excited because I finished a jig saw puzzle in six months, the box said 2-4 years? Then he said he was trapped on an escalator or four hours, because the power went out. Early on this first Easter, with all the stress and fear, the story of the empty tomb did not register.

One of the greatest arguments for the resurrection of Jesus is the transformation of the skeptical witnesses. "They turned from a divided band of unreliable friends to fearless warriors. Eleven men who had deserted Jesus at his death were now

going to a martyr's grave defending their faith in the resurrected Christ. (Yancey. P. 216)

Those who saw Jesus alive were never the same. Each one was totally transformed into a portable radio station, broadcasting the news far and wide. Death has been conquered by Jesus Christ. I read through Acts this week. The gospel like spreading wild fire as the news of death's defeat leaps from town to town. The resurrection was the main topic of every public presentation of the good news.

You killed him but God raised him from the dead. (Acts 2)

You killed the author of life but God raised him from dead and we are witnesses of this. (Acts 3)

It is by the name of Jesus Christ whom you crucified but God raised from the dead that we stand here. (Acts 4)

The God who raised Jesus from the dead. (Acts 5)

They killed him but God raised him from the dead. (Acts 10)

They took him down from a tree. Laid him in the tomb but God raised him from the dead. (Acts 13)

In Matthew 16 Jesus said he would build his church so strong that the gates of hell could not prevail against it. John Foxe's wrote on the opening page of his famed book, Foxe's Book of Martyrs these three observations:

1. That Christ will have a church in this world.

2. That this church will be opposed not only by this world but by all the powers of hell.

3. That this church, despite severe opposition would continue and prevail. (Foxe, Book of Martyrs, P. 1)

On the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the gospel was unleashed. And in fulfillment of the promise, it has spread like wildfire. Today God's people meet in the church on Time's Square in NYC to the rural villages of North Burma. They gather under shade trees in Maasai Land Kenya to the beautiful Cathedrals in London. They gather in prisons, hospital chapels, in rented classrooms and houses. Village churches in Romania to those who gather in the dangerous slums of Nairobi to college campuses in Osaka to fishing towns on the Bearing Sea.

1. That Christ will have a church in this world.
2. That this church will be opposed not only by this world but by all the powers of hell.
3. That this church despite severe opposition would continue and prevail.

How did it happen?

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

And these signs will accompany those who believe: 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; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was **taken up into heaven and**

he sat at the right hand of God. Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:15-20)

The ascension was “get away day” for Jesus. The one who emptied himself and became obedient to death was now heading for home. He was like a soldier returning from war. He came to earth with the goal of leaving again after assigning his mission to others.

The disciples must’ve felt completely abandoned. They stood there looking into the sky, wondering what just happened. Jesus knew he was sending them out like sheep among the wolves.

Jesus left no journals. He left no property or valuables for a museum. He didn’t marry and have kids so there were no royal heirs. He left a rag tag, unreliable group of people. Then he filled them with his spirit. St. Augustine said it like this:

You ascended from before our eyes, and we turned back grieving, only to find you in our hearts. (Yancey, P. 228)

What began as a mustard seed. What was considered a Jewish sect in AD 30 had grown into a world religion by AD 60. (R. Winter, The Kingdom Strikes Back, Perspectives on the World Christian Movement, W. Carey Press, P. 150)

Killing Jesus was like trying to destroy a dandelion seed head by blowing on it. (Wink, quoted by Yancey, Jesus I Never Knew, P. 226)

PICTURE BLOW ON DANDELION SEED HEAD

Driven by the Holy Spirit, pushed by persecution the followers of Jesus spread out and took the good news with them. That was the plan. When Jesus departed, he left the keys of the kingdom in our fumbling hands. The future of the kingdom is

left in jars of clay. “To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. (Col. 1) It is truly incredible!

Here is the bottom line: He ascended so that we would take his place.

The Lord had already prepared the way. Along with the dreaded Roman occupation came the excellent Roman roads that allowed people to travel more easily. I have two friends currently in the country of Latvia. They will spend their lives working to translate the Bible into the language of a group in Central Asia. But first they must become fluent in the Russian language, which is why they’ve started in Latvia. The early missionaries didn’t need language study because Greek was the universal language of the Roman Empire. The hand of God made it so.

Another big factor was the system of Jewish synagogues in just about every town. Of course, that was the first place the believers went to share the message. If that didn’t work there was room for public debate in many towns. There was an openness to new ideas and people were craving a connection with the living God rather than the emptiness of pagan idols.

How would the mustard seed have any chance against the mighty Roman Empire and the world of pagan gods? Ruth Tucker, in her masterful book “explains how the Holy Spirit made it happen:

1. The bold preaching and teaching of the disciples.

2. The personal witness of believers.

3. Acts of kindness and charity.

4. Faith shown in persecution and death.

5. The intellectual reasoning of the defenders of the faith.

(Tucker, From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya, Zondervan, P. 26)

Read again the book of Acts and see the incredible transformation of the 12. On the morning of the resurrection, we find them in hiding for fear of the Jews. After the resurrection, after the coming of the Holy Spirit, we see them bold, daring and fearless. The once powerful authorities took note that these men had been with Jesus. They were eyewitnesses to the resurrection and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and they had a story to tell to the nations.

Back in the day when books were king, Christian families who could afford it had the top three. The Bible, Pilgrim's Progress and Foxe's Book of Martyrs. John Foxe wrote how the kingdom of God advanced in the early days:

The soldier tried to win his recruits for the heavenly Father. The prisoner tried to bring his jailer to Christ. the slave girl whispered the gospel in the ears of her mistress.; the young wife begged her husband to be baptized that they might not be parted after death; everyone who had experienced the joys of believing tried to bring others to the faith. (Foxe, Foxe's Book of Martyr's, Moody, P. 41)

The resurrected Jesus gave the 12 clear evidence he was indeed alive. He put them on a mission and equipped them with power and then he left. Mark's last verse tells the story and gives us the same mission:

And the disciples went everywhere and preached, and the Lord worked through them, confirming what they said by many miraculous signs. (NLT Mark 16:20)

The Bible doesn't say where they went but history and tradition fill in the gaps. Matthew is believed to have gone south to Egypt. Bartholomew north to Armenia. John eventually to Turkey. Andrew to Ethiopia.

PICTURE THOMAS CHRISTIANS

The one that seems to have the most historic evidence is that Thomas ended up in India. The story goes that Thomas, like Jonah rejected God's call to head east. That resulted in him being carted off as a slave to India where eventually his skills were recognized and he was placed in charge of building a palace for a king. But while in the king's service he spent more time preaching the gospel than building the palace that soon brought him a time in prison. In the end Thomas shared the good

news with the king who believed and was baptized. Is all this true. Who can say for sure? But even today there is a group in southwest India known as Thomas Christians that worships in an ancient church, and archaeologists have established that there was a king by that name in India in the first century. Go Thomas, Go!

Paul is the most effective missionary of the early church from what the Bible records. In a little more than 10 years he established churches in four major provinces in the Roman Empire: Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia. By country you could say, Syria, Cyprus, Turkey, Macedonia, Greece and points west. Before AD 47 there were no churches in most of these places and by AD 57 Paul spoke as if his work there was done and he as looking for fresh ground. Truly remarkable.

He was martyred along with Peter and many other Christians during the terrible persecution under Emperor Nero around AD 64. Remember the Promise of Jesus from Matthew 16.

Jesus promised He would build his church.

He promised the church would face strong opposition.

He promised His church would prevail.

Its decision time: He who believes and is baptized will be saved.
It's go time! The church is on mission locally and globally.