

“Believing Beforehand”

by Pastor Steve Hammond on 4/26/2020
Text: Mark 16:12-18 at FBC of Newport, NH

//12 Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. 13 These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either.

//14 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.

//15 He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all 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 drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 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.” //

—Mark 16:12-18 (NIV)

Here now are two of those ‘snapshots’ added to the ending of the Gospel of Mark. From the other Gospels, especially Luke, we recognize the first one as Jesus appearance on the road to Emmaus. (I heard this pronounced as “e-mouse” by our guide in Israel, btw, but I still can’t bring myself to pronounce it that way.) But here in the long ending of Mark all those wonderful, descriptive details are missing. We do get the detail that Jesus somehow looked different, but the main thrust is that the report of this encounter with Jesus was not immediately believed.

Then we have a snapshot of Jesus appearing to the Eleven. Again most all the details are absent, except the slowness, even refusal, to believe the report of those who’ve seen the risen Jesus, is highlighted.

But then comes a summary of what Jesus said to his disciples: to go everywhere and preach the gospel, with the understanding of its importance hinging on whether it is believed or not believed, accompanied with signs, such as driving out demons, speaking in tongues, picking up snakes and drinking deadly poison, and healing the sick.

Because these verses 9-20 are not original to Mark (they first show up over a hundred years later than Revelation), we could go off on a tangent and argue whether all these signs will accompany all who believe this Good News about Jesus. But that would be a waste of the little time I have for you today. Instead, let’s focus on what is clearly in keeping with the whole New Testament message: It is vital to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ—because it is vital for people to believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Imagine someone finding a vaccine for the Coronavirus, but not being believed. Just imagine a man conquering sin and death and the news of it not being believed, or even told!

Notice, though, that even the apostles and other disciples of Jesus had a hard time believing the most important part of the Gospel—the resurrection. They had already lived through 9/10th of it, so you might think this last part would come to them easily. But no, of course not. They had their own share of struggles. So long as they actually *saw* the risen Jesus, they believed. A few tears here, some doubts there, but basically they’d come around to believe after the fact has been shown.

The trouble is, though, at first no one seemed able to tell anyone about it. No one

could meet the risen Jesus and then go to someone else who didn't know he was alive and be told about it. Oh, they could hear the words of Mary, but they couldn't believe her. Then the other women joined in seeing Jesus. But then *they* couldn't get the men to believe them. Then some of the men saw Jesus, but they couldn't get the others to believe. Until finally, *all* the apostles, other men and women saw Jesus—except for Thomas. Thomas was the odd man out. But did he believe when virtually all his friends around him claimed to have seen Jesus alive? No. He refused to believe before seeing.

This long ending of Mark brings this out in a general way regarding all the disciples. But we also see this taught more explicitly in the Gospel of John as it focuses on Thomas and his refusal to believe until he sees Jesus with his own eyes. Our generation commends Thomas for his doubt, skepticism and insistence on physical evidence, as if he's a scientist conducting an experiment.

But Jesus has other ideas. When Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!", Jesus didn't say to Thomas, "Wow, I'm so proud of you for holding out against all your previously trusted friends." Instead he implied such belief was unexceptional. In just a few weeks they would find a greater faith. Jesus said to Thomas, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Jesus identified the greater blessing was to be found through the eyes of those who had *not* seen and yet believed when they were told the Gospel of truth.

Now, part of being an Apostle meant that you were an eye witness of Jesus' resurrection. So how could having faith through sight be *unexceptional*? Well, it is exceptional historically. For, short of having the Apocalypse, only a unique generation in time and place would have the opportunity to see Jesus risen from the dead. And only the 12 Apostles were in a position to see this in its proper context over the course of living with Jesus for three years. This is foundational to the Church, with Jesus as the cornerstone. But if it were not for the ability of people to believe these eye witnesses—what good would any of it be? There would be no value, no benefit. All you'd have is a foundation, a slab of cement, but there would be no building upon it.

Even though the Apostles did have to see Jesus with their own eyes in order to complete the establishing of the Gospel, you'll notice he did give them more than one opportunity to initially believe without seeing. This was important to Jesus. He doesn't simply want people to generically believe in promises, miracles and resurrections. His ultimate goal is for people to believe—in *him* and in God—person to Person. For such a believing relationship will bless a person with the truths of the promise, the miracle and the resurrection even beforehand. Before your experience of it, you can have its truth!

This is why the unseen belief is greater: because its focus is on the person being believed. And what better way to start than for the Good News to be accompanied not only with signs and wonders, but by people filled with the Holy Spirit of Jesus himself?

This would not come for a few more weeks yet. But He would come as promised. And he would make all the difference. These disciples, who couldn't even believe themselves when telling each other about the resurrection, would in one day (Pentecost) bring five times as many people to believe than Jesus did over his three year ministry (3000 compared to ~650)—without these people even having seen him raised. These people, and those to follow, would believe in the person of Jesus. And so we know the blessing of the Gospel truth beforehand.