

The Significance of Christ's Ascension
Sermon on Mark 16:15-20
Saint Mark's, Watertown, WI
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The Scriptures say: *God seated Christ at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age, but also in the one to come.* Amen.

God's special section of Scripture for us on this Festival of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ is the final six verses of the Gospel of Saint Mark: Mark chapter sixteen, verses fifteen through twenty:

Jesus said to the apostles, "Go into all the world and preach the good news 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.

This is God's Spirit-inspired Word from the lips of Jesus Christ.

Introduction: Jesus' Last Words Give Lasting Directions For Our Lives

Dear fellow followers of our ascended Lord:

People's last words are proverbially famous, aren't they?

When I typed "famous last words" into the search engine of our church's powerful computer, it came up with eight and a half million entries—in two one hundredths of a second!

So, it stands to reason: People's last words in the Bible deserve to be even more famous.

Take the three towering personages of the Old Testament. Abraham's last words arranged for a wife for his son Isaac, in large part to carry on the line of the Savior. Moses' last words prophesied what was to come for the twelve tribes of Israel; that was important. David's last words directed Solomon to do away with evildoers, and so to establish his throne—and finally that of the Savior.

The same is true in the New Testament. Peter's last words? *Grow in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.* Those are worthy words! Among Paul's last words? *The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely into his heavenly kingdom.* What worthy words! And John's last words? *Come, Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people.* Again, words to live by!

And then, of course, there are the last words of our Savior Jesus himself. How we ought to treasure them! How we ought to seek to carry out any directives he gives us in them. And in fact, each report of Jesus' last words does carry a similar theme for us to carry out. In Acts: *You will be my witnesses.* In John: *Feed my sheep.* In Luke: *You are witnesses of these things.* In Matthew: *Go and make disciples.*

Theme: The Significance of Christ's Ascension

So, it didn't surprise you to hear what we heard from the end of the Gospel of Mark. These last six verses of the Gospel of Mark carry – more than anything else – THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CHRIST'S ASCENSION in his own words. He says, first: (1) WHOEVER DOESN'T TRUST CHRIST WILL BE DAMNED. He says, secondly: (2) WHOEVER DOES TRUST CHRIST WILL BE SAVED. And then he says finally: (3) WE NEED TO PREACH THE GOOD NEWS TO EVERYONE.

Exposition: The Account of Christ's Ascension

Let's take a look, then, at the final six verses of the Gospel of Mark. Jesus has just risen from the dead, and he has begun to appear to his apostles and others. By the end of these verses: forty days have passed, and Jesus ascends into heaven. In between are his famous last words, the only words from him after his resurrection that Mark includes in his Gospel, words which were his marching orders for his apostles, and so: for his Church, and so: also for us.

He said to them – and from the previous verse, we know it's that – **Jesus said to the apostles, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.** Literally: "*Journey (once and for all) into the entire cosmos, and officially announce the good news to all of creation.*"

That's a very powerful statement—even a bit of an overstatement, when you think about it. We know from the rest of Scripture that earth is the abode of souls; so, we don't plan to go into the cosmos to Mars to announce salvation in Jesus. We know from the rest of Scripture that it is human beings who have souls; so, we don't announce salvation in Jesus to the rest of creation: to plants and trees and dogs and cats. Yet, Jesus says: "*Journey (once and for all) into the entire cosmos, and officially announce the good news to all of creation*" to emphasize to us he wants every soul everywhere to hear his story of salvation.

And here's why.... ***Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.***

Kind of literally: *The believer-and-baptized will be saved.* In the original language here, believing in Jesus and being baptized simply go hand in hand. If you believe in Jesus, you will be baptized. If you are baptized, you will believe in Jesus. And the result is that you are rescued: rescued from the sin that plagues your conscience, rescued from the death that plagues your body, rescued from the hell you have so richly deserved—rescued because Jesus underwent each of these evils for you.

And you will say: "But, but, but, Pastor, what about those who aren't baptized? I mean: If they believe in Jesus, won't they be saved?" And of course, I'll say: "Yes." Only *whoever does not believe will be condemned*—or better translated: *the not believing one will be damned.* So: yes, as all your pastors have always taught you: it's only unbelief that damns.

But now let me remind you of a few things.... If you believe, you're going to get baptized. *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.* And if you baptize your babies, they're going to believe. *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved.* This business in some Christian churches of not baptizing – far and wide, old and young – this business of not baptizing is an absolute abomination to God. We read it right here—and in lots of other places in the Scriptures!

Moving on, Jesus says: ***And these signs*** – basically: *these authenticating miracles – will accompany those who believe.* And there's a list of five.

First: ***In my name they will drive out demons.*** And sure enough: they did. For example, do you remember the Apostle Paul doing that for the Philippian slave girl?

The second sign Jesus mentions here: ***They will speak in new tongues.*** They will speak in *languages*; there's no reason not to translate that "languages". They will speak in languages *new to them*. There are two Greek words for new—one of them means "entirely new and different", but that's not the word used here; the other means "new, but only from the perspective of the hearer"; that's the one used here.

So, *they will speak in real languages which are new to them*. You remember that happened at Pentecost. The Bible tells us it also happened by the laying on of the apostles' hands in Samaria, Caesarea, Corinth, and Ephesus.

The third sign that will accompany those who believe: ***They will pick up snakes with their hands.*** You might recall that something like that happened when Paul was on the island of Malta on the way to Rome after his shipwreck. A poisonous snake fastened itself to his hand, but he shook it off and suffered no ill effects.

The fourth sign that will accompany those who believe: ***And when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all.*** Better translated: *Even if they drink something deadly, it certainly will not harm them.* Of this sort of thing, however, there is no New Testament record.

And finally, the fifth sign: ***They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well.*** Of course, the apostles often did that. Specifically, they used their hands as the conduit for Christ's healing when Peter raised Tabitha from the dead, when Ananias cured Saul / Paul of his blindness, and when Paul healed the Governor of Malta's father.

One last note here, by the way.... When Jesus spoke these words regarding his signs, he spoke them to the apostles. The Apostle Paul would later report, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit – Second Corinthians, twelve, twelve – *Signs, wonders, and miracles mark an apostle*. So, it doesn't surprise us to note: When the apostles disappeared, so did all these signs, wonders, and miracles.

And these signs didn't have to be there anymore, because the Lord had inspired through the apostles and their associates the entirety of the New Testament. Now we don't have to drive out demons, speak in tongues, or heal people to prove we're right when we reject the lies of the blasphemous Da Vinci code or the lies in some dumb Gospel of Judas. We just compare them to what we read in the Bible, and we find it nonsensical not to reject them.

And as for the Christians these days who publicly claim to drive out demons, speak in tongues, and heal people—they don't. God is not in the business of authenticating any falsehoods with his signs, and the Christians these days who publicly claim these signs do teach falsehoods (along with some mixture of the truth). So, they definitely don't have such signs.

Well, finally on this Ascension Day, we get to the Ascension itself. On the one hand: ***After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God.*** And you and I have been well and rightly taught that: although *Jesus was taken up into heaven*, his presence still extends everywhere because he is God—and he promises his special presence in and among hearts where his Word and Sacraments are heard and celebrated. Also, you and I have been well and rightly taught that: *the right hand of God*, at which Jesus sits, is in fact everywhere—and this makes God the Son God the Father's right hand man to accomplish his will in every place.

That's on the one hand. On the other hand: ***Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.*** And basically that says that: everything that Jesus said in his

famous last words—the apostles went out and did. And of course, it's recorded so that we might do exactly the same.

Whoa! I'm fifteen minutes into the sermon and I haven't gotten to applications yet! So, here goes—ever so briefly....

Application One: Whoever Doesn't Trust Christ Will Be Damned

The first application today: Jesus our Savior has ascended to heaven. Before he left, he said: "Anyone who does not believe in me will be damned."

Whoa! We've got to realize he was talking about us also. We need to get rid of our unbelief. We need to get rid of our sins—because when you think about it, every sin is an exercise in unbelief.

And we don't dare harbor hope for the unbelief of others either. "Anyone who does not believe in Jesus will be damned"—no matter how nice they seem, no matter how close to us they are.

Application Two: Whoever Does Trust Christ Will Be Saved

The second application from Jesus' words today: Jesus our Savior has ascended to heaven. Before he left, he said: "The believer-and-baptized will be saved."

Thank God! We've got to realize Jesus was talking about us also. So, we need to treasure our baptism—when Jesus himself scrubbed our souls clean from sin, when Jesus himself adopted us into his Father's family forever. We need to treasure our God-given faith—and nourish it: as we read his Word daily, hear his Word weekly, and receive his body and blood regularly.

And we rejoice in the others the Lord has drawn to join us. "Every believer-and-baptized will be saved"—even if they don't seem so nice, even if they don't seem so nice to us. And we will love them.

Application Three: We Need to Preach the Good News to Everyone

And the final application from Jesus' words today.... *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved. Whoever does not believe will be condemned.* So, Jesus earnestly commanded his apostles—and us, through them: "*Journey (once and for all) into the entire cosmos, and officially announce the good news to all of creation.*"

Those are now the marching orders for your life. You no longer live, in order to sleep in. You no longer live, in order to make money. You no longer live, in order to be happy. You no longer live, in order to entertain yourself. You live to: "*Journey (once and for all) into the entire cosmos, and officially announce the good news to all of creation.*"

Let me suggest to you that means two things for you.... First: it means that your loved ones and your acquaintances who don't know Christ—you personally are going to reach them for Christ. You don't want them damned. You want them saved.

But it also means that those you don't know that don't know Christ—you are going to reach them also for Christ. You don't want them damned either. You want them saved also.

But how are you going to reach others everywhere for Jesus? Well, if you spend hours every week working or relaxing or sleeping, can't you spend hours also knocking on the doors of our less-than-active members, or phoning them with an invitation to worship? Talk to me to do it! Again: if you spend hundreds of dollars every month on housing or food or entertainment, can't you send hundreds of dollars every month to

church: to shelter people with the Spirit's mercy, to feed them with Christ's forgiveness, to entertain them with God's love forever? Of course!

So finally, I guess that's the Significance of Christ's Ascension for you.... Amen.

The Scriptures say: *God placed all things under Christ's feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.* Amen.