

proclamation of the Gospel by the disciples with confidence and joy, accompanied by miracles (16:20).

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Why did the disciples prove so stubborn in accepting the resurrection of Jesus?
2. Does the church today do what Jesus commanded His disciples to do? And if not, why not?
3. How can the church begin to live up to its calling today? How many of signs mentioned by Jesus cause difficulty to people today, and why?

## Discipleship

As we reach the end of Mark's Gospel, there is much for us to think about. The Gospel begins with the announcement of the Messiah and His ministry which unfolds in the story of Jesus and the disciples. The whole Gospel gradually focuses on the death of Jesus, and ends abruptly after Jesus' resurrection. Take the opportunity to write down a few thoughts on why the Gospel has this format, and what it means.

## Final Prayer

All praise be to You Lord Jesus Christ. You are our Saviour, You are the Risen Christ. Take us back in spirit to the garden tomb from which You were raised, so that we too may feel the joy of Your resurrection and know the power of God which set You free! Lead us into liberty, Lord Jesus, we pray: AMEN

## Prayer

Hold me firmly with Your abiding love, heavenly Father, and show me how to live a life which honours the sacrifice that was made for my redemption and salvation. Give me the courage to live for the One who gave His life so that I might live, Jesus Christ my Lord; and enable me to fulfil my commission as His disciple, for ever; AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Gospel

Pray today for the Gospel to penetrate those churches where Satan has prevented people from finding their true liberty in Christ. I use strong language because this is a serious matter. Where God's people are bound and feel no need to be active disciples and yet think they are 'Christians', the Gospel is compromised. Pray for the Holy Spirit to set people free!

## Meditation

Lord Jesus, This new day  
Is a confirmation of Your Goodness.  
You give new life to us each morning  
As we awake and face the challenges of the day.

Out of this amazing, vibrant and beautiful day  
We can make a beautiful offering to You,  
Of work, of devotion, of love, of honesty;  
Or we can choose to follow our own way,  
And corrupt everything precious  
You have either given or done for us.

Why, O Lord, do we turn what is good  
Into such a horrendous mess, so often?  
Why do we take what is wonderful  
And make it into trouble for us and for You?  
Why do we do this evil and return to wallow in it,  
Accepting Satan's bondage, almost gratefully?

We turn again, in need of Your gracious love  
Which turns us all around again, so perfectly;  
Forgiving us and granting us Your greatest gift  
Of peace with God; commenced on Easter Day.

## Bible Study - Mark 16:9-20

<sup>9</sup> When He had risen, early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons. <sup>10</sup> She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. <sup>11</sup> They would not believe when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her.

<sup>12</sup> After this two of them were on a journey and He appeared to them in a different form as they were walking in the country. <sup>13</sup> And they went back and told the rest, but neither would they believe them.

<sup>14</sup> Later He appeared to the eleven themselves as they sat at the table; and He rebuked them for their unbelief and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw Him when He was risen. <sup>15</sup> And He said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to all creation. <sup>16</sup> Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be condemned. <sup>17</sup> These signs will accompany those who believe: they will cast out demons in my name; they will speak in new tongues; <sup>18</sup> they will pick

up snakes in their hands, and if they drink anything deadly, it will not harm them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.'

<sup>19</sup> After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, He was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. <sup>20</sup> They went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed their message by the signs that accompanied it.

## Review

What happened after the initial shock of the resurrection? It is clear from all the Gospels that Jesus wanted to meet His disciples, and you can imagine the reunion! Jesus was undoubtedly keen to meet His friends again, but it may well have been that the disciples were scared of meeting Jesus, deeply conscious of their own failure as well as their inability to stand by Him at the end. Something of the feel of what happened when the meeting took place is preserved in John's account of a conversation between Jesus and Peter (John 21:15-19); these are five of the most poignant verses in scripture, in which Jesus both forgives Peter and also challenges him to demonstrate his commitment by deeds of love. But whatever we make of the many different things that happened, the result of Jesus' resurrection was this. The power of God was let loose in the world in the form of the Gospel, the 'good news' of God found in Jesus Christ!

The four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, each record different endings to their Gospels giving us different pictures of what happened after Jesus rose from the dead. Luke tells us the famous story of the Emmaus road, but after this, his Gospel ends quickly and his narrative continues in the Acts of the Apostles with the unleashing of the power of the Holy Spirit. John famously describes the experiences of the disciples in the 'upper room' (including the famous story of Thomas), the meeting by the shores of Lake Galilee, and Jesus' challenge to Peter. Matthew concludes with a very brief ending, but includes the important commission of the disciples, sending them to the very ends of the earth to preach the Gospel. Mark, however, presents us with a quandary, because the ancient Greek texts of the book that are available to us are divided about how it ends!

We have a choice. Either we must accept the testimony of the most ancient texts available to us, which finish the Gospel at verse 8, or we can accept the evidence of later texts, which include verses 9-20! Scholars have agonised over this for centuries, and may have done so even in the fourth century from when our earliest copies of the Gospels originate. In my opinion, these verses should be read and valued as they are, and people should be told the facts about the uncertainty over the ending of Mark which has existed since the New Testament was compiled in the form we have it today. The most controversial part of the ending is found in verses 15 to 20, which we will study tomorrow.

We must now look at our reading for today. After the uncertainty and panic with which the three women (Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome – 16:1) received the news of Jesus' resurrection, their initial response was not to tell anyone (16:8). However, Mary Magdalene who took courage, and was the first to tell the mourning and grieving disciples the news of what had happened (16:10). We do not know whether Mary did this a few minutes later, or hours later, and we have to accept that the story she told is somewhat different from what is found in the other Gospels. Mark has told his story, however, in order to inform us that unfortunately, the disciples she told 'did not believe when they heard that He was alive ...' (16:11). This does tie in with what Matthew says ('... but they doubted' - 28:17), and we also know from John's Gospel that one disciple in particular (Thomas) found it hard to deal with his disbelief (John 20:24,25); so we should not be surprised at this response to the resurrection. Mark also tells us that a little later, two disciples reported seeing Jesus alive (16:12), and this appears to parallel Luke's story of the Road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13f.), though it is with noting that even this story begins with the disciples in a state of deep gloom after the resurrection (as in 16:13)!

According to Mark, it was only when Jesus appeared to them all when together for a meal (16:14) that Jesus 'rebuked' the disciples for being so unbelieving and the picture changed; this is not very different, in general, from what is said by Luke and John. It seems hard that Jesus should rebuke the disciples for their gloom, but perhaps this was the best way for them to be shifted the out of the paralysis of unbelief. The act of rebuking depends entirely upon the

manner in which it is done, and we are entitled to believe that Jesus spoke with love and care, and it is also worth noting that in all the Gospels, Jesus challenged the disciples after the resurrection. His intention was to give them a clear set of instructions about what they should do to begin proclaiming the Gospel (16:15-18, see tomorrow), not to condemn them.

Now, we might expect people to be happy and delighted that Jesus was alive, but the Gospels all record that the disciples were rather uncertain about what to make of it all! It is obvious to us now, and we know that Jesus Himself had told them all about the resurrection, but they did not know how to respond to it when it happened and they were confused about what to do!

Now speaking in resurrection power, Jesus' words (16:15-18) sound rather different from the humble Jesus we have come to know in the rest of Mark's Gospel. However, although it is rather uncertain how these words came to be in Mark's Gospel (see above), surely we should expect the risen Lord to speak and act with a power and authority which He did not have whilst alive in an earthly sense. It seems right, therefore, that when Jesus called on the disciples to preach and baptise (16:15,16), He spoke to them very strongly and with great authority. He told them about the consequences of accepting or rejecting the offer of salvation, and indicated stridently and absolutely that those who rejected salvation would be 'condemned' (16:16). We should be careful to remember, however, that Jesus does not condemn those who have not even heard the Gospel in the first place; his point is that those who refuse to accept God's way of salvation effectively choose their own damnation (16:16)!

Jesus then promised that the proclamation of the Gospel would be accompanied by 'signs' (16:17), and what He said next has proved very contentious. The first and last 'signs' are those of casting out demons and healing. These are relatively obvious because Jesus did these, and so by doing them, the disciples would simply be continuing Jesus' work. The second 'sign' mentioned is new and more significant; 'they will speak in new tongues' (16:17). This links together with the description in Luke's book of Acts of the coming of the Holy Spirit, enabling the Apostles to preach 'in tongues' to a large number of people on the day of Pentecost. The next sign mentioned by Mark is far more difficult for us to understand; 'they will pick up snakes ... and if they drink anything deadly, it will not harm them.' (16:18). We are entitled to ask whether this is a formula for the general protection of Christians; but many people regard this as highly implausible, and others regard the 'snakes' as symbolic (see Matthew's report of Jesus calling the Pharisees 'snakes' – Matt 23:33).

Now, instead of questioning the plausibility of these gifts, or being overzealous about expecting all of them to be demonstrated literally, I suggest that we think of the signs Jesus mentioned as examples of the work of God in His Kingdom. In general, everything Jesus mentioned can be seen happening all around us in the life of the church even now, if not literally, then certainly metaphorically. Demons are indeed cast out and people healed, people do speak in tongues, and incredible events do occur by which people are saved from near death experiences (such as the snakes and poison Jesus spoke about). In addition, whatever symbolism we read into 'snakes', such as the unbelieving Pharisees (see above), then we can find parallels within the life of the church as well. We only have to ask for open testimony in church and remove the brake of clerical control from church services, and stories of such things come flooding out of people. We should rejoice at such testimonies and see them as evidence of the Kingdom rather than trying to suggest that special events such as surviving the bites of snakes or drinking poison are some kind of sign to the church. They may be signs for unbelievers, but God's people, warned by scripture as in this text, should know how to interpret them. Jesus made many promises in scripture, and these should be placed alongside them, with a cautionary word that picking up snakes to try and prove to others that you have faith is hardly what Jesus had in mind.

Mark's Gospel concludes with a brief comment, agreeing in general with Acts 1, that Jesus 'was taken into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God' (16:19). This is Mark's version of the 'Ascension', and it is followed by a concluding comment that the disciples were by now convinced of Jesus' resurrection and His authority, and they went and did what He told them! (16:20) the work of salvation begun by God with the announcement of the coming of the Messiah (Mark 1:1,2,3) was completed by the ascension of Jesus as Christ the Lord, and the