

Jesus' Ascension Guarantees Gospel Success

Mark 16:19–20
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How Mark used the Lord's name both in the sixteenth chapter of his gospel is fascinating. Here's what we have. The only occurrence of Jesus' name in this chapter is in verse 6. The angel who greeted the women in the sepulcher said, *Be not affrighted: ye seek Jesus of Nazareth*. Our KJV also has Jesus' name a second time in verse 9, but there it's in italics, which means the translators added it to make the sense clear. Otherwise, Mark simply identified Jesus with masculine pronouns. Verse 1 says that the women went to the grave to *anoint him*, verse 14 adds that *he appeared unto the eleven*, and in verse 15 he commissioned his disciples to go out into all the world to preach the gospel. But when we come to verse 19, it's no longer 'Jesus' or 'he', but *the Lord*. It's not even "the Lord Jesus," as most of the newer translations say, but simply *the Lord*.

Why is this important? It's because the last two verses of Mark's gospel emphasize Jesus' sovereign, heavenly reign, by which he governs the entire created universe and fulfills his redemptive purposes in and through the church.

Jesus' Ascension

Our text says that the Lord, after he had spoken to the eleven, *was received up into heaven*. Note that Mark wrote *was received*, not 'went.' The verb's passive. Jesus didn't just ascend into heaven, though it wouldn't be wrong to say so. It's just not what Mark wrote. According to Mark, he was taken there. His Father drew him to himself after he finished his work on earth.

Here we might be tempted to compare the story of Jesus' ascension to the prophet Elijah being taken to heaven in a whirlwind after he finished his prophetic ministry. But this wouldn't be enough. Why? Because, as the book of Hebrews argues, Jesus, being the incarnate Son of God, was so much better than all the Old Testament prophets, including Elijah. To find the right meaning of Jesus' ascension into heaven, we have to turn to the seventh chapter of Daniel. Daniel wrote, *I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed* (Dan. 7:13–14).

Jesus' ascension didn't involve a physical change to his body that allowed his human nature to assume divine characteristics and be everywhere present, as Lutherans claim. They say that this explains how his actual body and blood can be present in Communion all over the world. Nor was it merely a change of location, though it was at least that. Rather, the ascension was the Son of God, having received all power in heaven and on earth, going to his Father to be coronated in recognition of his completed sacrifice for our sins. He did this for us.

Jesus' Session

Closely connected to Jesus' ascension into heaven is his session or seating at the right hand of God. After his Father crowned him, Jesus exercised his rightful reign as the incarnate Savior and Mediator of his people.

Every Sunday, we confess our faith using either the Apostles' Creed or another similar confessional statement. Two of the twelve articles of the Apostles' Creed come from verse 19: "He ascended into heaven, and sitteth at the right hand of God the Father almighty." The fact that our text mentions both shows how important they are to our faith. Here's what our catechism says. Question 46 asks, "How dost thou understand the words: 'He ascended into heaven'?" Ans. That Christ, in the sight of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven; and continues there in our behalf until He shall come again to judge the living and the dead." And Question 50 asks what it means that Jesus now sits at his Father's right hand. The answer: "Because Christ ascended into heaven for this end, that He might there appear as the Head of His Church, by whom the Father governs all things." These two things encourage us by reminding us that our Savior, who died for our sins and rose again from the dead, assumed all authority in the universe for us so that there's not a single molecule anywhere in creation that fails to obey his will. This means that, when Jesus said, *I will build my church*, we can sleep peacefully at night knowing that he is building his church. And when he promised all things must work together for our good and that nothing can ever separate us from his love, we can know for certain that our salvation is forever secure. Our Savior reigns!

We can rejoice because Jesus reigns specifically in and for his church. He's its only head. The medieval church lost sight of this as the pope's power grew stronger and stronger. Sure, there were bright lights during this time that sought to refocus on Jesus Christ. Gottschalk (a ninth-century Saxon theologian) and the Waldensians (a group of itinerant preachers formed in the twelfth century) heralded God's triumphant grace. But by and large, the church was caught up in a formalism that hid the glory of the gospel behind man-made rites and ceremonies, effectively enslaving them to a powerful priestcraft. But when the time was ripe, Jesus raised up men like Wycliffe, Huss, Luther and Tyndale to restore the church to its proper mission and ministry.

There are many things in the modern church that obscure the light of the gospel in our day, but let's never forget that Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God. Not only does he refuse to let his church be destroyed, but by the power of his Spirit he sends it forth to grow.

One passage that asserts this confidence is Ephesians 1. There Paul prayed for the church, that its eyes might be open to the wonderful reality of salvation in Jesus Christ. He observed that the same power that enlightens our minds and raises us up to spiritual life also raised Jesus from the dead and seated him in the heavenly places. But what's really impressive in this passage is how Paul described our Savior's reign. He wrote, *Far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church* (vv. 21–22). Jesus' reign is greater than the reign of any earthly monarch. He's far above all power known to man. His reign is eternal, continuing beyond this world and into the next. And he governs in such a way that inevitably and inescapably furthers his purpose regarding his church. There's nothing more precious to Jesus than the body for which he died and now governs.

Jesus' Presence

The last verse of our text specifies how Jesus would accomplish his will for the church. It says, *And they went forth, and preached every where, the Lord working with them, and confirming the word with signs following. Amen.*

The apostles went forth, i.e., they penetrated the world just as Jesus told them to do. And wherever they went, they preached the unsearchable riches of the gospel. The book of Acts records a lot of their activity, but that was only the beginning. Jesus' story continues to unfold today. That's why we study church history and read Christian biographies.

But how was it possible for the church to do all this? Didn't Paul write in 2 Corinthians 4:7 that God hid his gospel treasures in frail, easily broken, earthen vessels, i.e., in people like you and me? And we know how frail we are. Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Henry VIII, recanted his Protestant beliefs when threatened with death by Henry's Roman Catholic daughter, Mary. Later, he recanted his recantation and died for Jesus. And Ulrich Zwingli, before he came to reformed views, committed fornication with a certain barber's daughter. Even after his conversion, he tried to excuse his behavior by claiming that just about every man in town had enjoyed the company of the same woman. And Martin Luther once recommended that Philip of Hesse, who was infatuated with a woman not his wife, commit bigamy rather than adultery. I could go on and on. Church history is about weak men doing Jesus' work. Every one of them was weak.

Like them, we have our own faults, which we're often blind to and, even when we're aware of them, they're bigger than we imagine. So, the best we can do most of the time is wonder how the Lord ever accomplishes anything in the church.

But what does our text say? That the apostles went forth and preached and were successful because they were so smart and so good that the Lord couldn't help blessing them, right? No, Mark wrote nothing of the kind. On the contrary, he said that the apostles would accomplish their mission because the Lord worked with them and confirmed their word by the identifiable signs Jesus gave them in verses 17 and 18. This is how he displays his glory and power.

Now, who was the Lord who worked through the apostles? Verse 19 says that *the Lord* spoke to his disciples. This was Jesus, the same Lord who was taken up into heaven and seated at God's right hand, the same Lord who governs every molecule in the universe for his people's good.

One undeniable fact that we can rely on is that Jesus continues to be with his church today, just as he was then. He promised to be with us in Hebrews 13:5–6, which says, *Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.* This is the same promise God gave to his people of old — to Jacob (Gen. 28:15), the Israelites when he redeemed them out of Egypt (Deut. 31:6, 8), Joshua (Josh. 1:5), and many others. But in Hebrews, Jesus gave this promise to you and me. As we work diligently in his service, we can do it courageously because of our Savior's abiding presence with his people. With him at our side, there's no reason to fear.

Why don't we step out more and serve the Lord with greater zeal? Why do we recoil when others suggest we should do this or that? Is it because we doubt the Lord will be with us? Is it because we imagine that he'll abandon us to the whims of his adversary and ours?

Brothers and sisters, this isn't faith. It's fear — the opposite of faith. The apostles went forth to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. Did they go out thinking everything in their lives would be caviar and champagne, that no one would ever resist them? Judas' betrayal should have killed this weed before it ever took root. Jesus told them, *Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves* (Matt. 10:16); and, *And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake* (Luke 21:17). He warned them that brother would turn against brother, and father against son, and our worst enemies would be the members of our household (Matt. 10:34–36). Yet, they went out. Why? Because they knew that Jesus, the King and Head of his church, would be with them every step of the way. His presence meant not only that they had nothing to fear, but also that they would accomplish their mission. They would lay a foundation for the nations of the world to come under our Savior's righteous and glorious reign.

The last two verses of Mark's gospel assure us that Jesus Christ sits on his throne in heaven and continues to build his church. Having taught the people for three and a half years and having worked countless wonders among them, he gave his life to save his people and rose again to make us alive in him. But his work didn't stop there. He now governs all things, bringing them into submission to his will. By the power of his Spirit, he applies the benefits of his death and resurrection to everyone his Father gave him. Not one person for whom Jesus died will be lost.

Mark was so confident of this that he concluded his gospel with the word *amen*. Amen means "so shall it truly and surely be." Everything that precedes *amen*, from the first verse of chapter 1 to the last verse of chapter 16, is beyond dispute. It's Jesus' promise to bring his people to himself by his shed blood as his disciples evangelize mankind.

But are you doing your part? Do you tell others to flee to Jesus for the full forgiveness of all their sins, righteousness before God and everlasting life? Have you searched your own heart to make sure that you've taken refuge in him, a strong and safe tower for everyone who trusts him? If not, Mark's gospel encourages you to do so without delay. Amen.