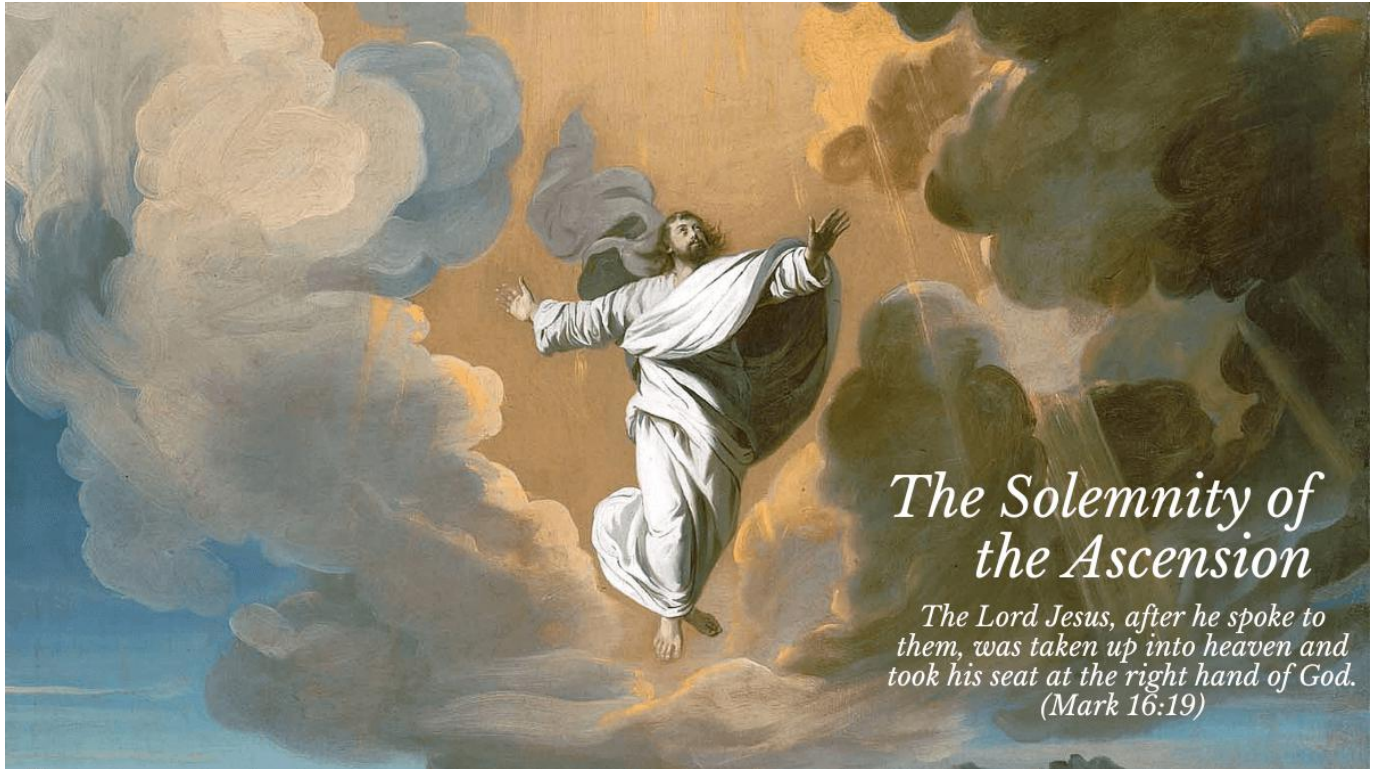


## The Solemnity of the Ascension - Gospel of Mark



### *The Solemnity of the Ascension*

*The Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. (Mark 16:19)*

*Detail from "The Ascension" (1775) by John Singleton Copley | Museum of Fine Arts, Boston | PD-US*

The Ascension of Jesus celebrates the Christian belief of the bodily Ascension of Jesus into Heaven. Based on the account of Acts 1:3 that the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples for 40 days after the Resurrection: “*He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*” After these days, we read that Jesus was taken up to heaven.

*“But you will receive power when the holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” When he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight.” (Acts 1:8-9) or*

*“As he blessed them he parted from them and was taken up to heaven.” (Luke 24:51)*

John's Gospel has three references to Ascension in Jesus' own words: “*No one has gone up to heaven except the one who has come down from heaven, the Son of Man.*” (John 3:13); *What if you [the disciples] were to see the Son of Man ascending where he was before?*” (John 6:62); and to Mary Magdalene after his resurrection, “*Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father...*” (John 20:17).

The Gospel of Matthew does not record the account of the Ascension. The Gospel of Mark mentions the Ascension in the “longer ending” ... we'll explain that later on.

The observance of this feast is of great antiquity. Eusebius seems to hint at the celebration of it in the 4th century. At the beginning of the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo says that it is of Apostolic origin, and he speaks of it in a way that shows it was the universal observance of the Catholic Church long before his

time. Frequent mention of it is made in the writings of John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nyssa, and in the Constitution of the Apostles.

The traditional celebration of the Solemnity of the Ascension, 40 days after Easter Sunday, falls on a Thursday, which for centuries was the celebrated feast throughout Christendom. Even as early as the 6th century there are annals that complain people were sometimes keeping the holy day of the Ascension but not Pentecost and vice-versa. In modern times more and more people were not celebrating the Solemnity of the Ascension. As allowed by Canon 1260 of the law of the Church, in 1992 the US Bishops petitioned the Vatican to move the Solemnity of the Ascension to the 7th Sunday of Easter to allow more people to celebrate it. The petition was granted, leaving the final decision to the local bishop. In the diocese of Arlington, the Bishop has transferred the Solemnity of the Ascension to the 7th Sunday after Easter. The Gospel reading for the Ascension in Lectionary Cycle B is taken from the end of the Gospel of Mark.

Now... what is the meaning of the “longer ending” in the Gospel of Mark?

### **The Ending of the Gospel of Mark**

That might strike you as an odd entry, but the gospel of Mark has several “endings.” That probably needs some explanation. In the paragraphs that follow we will briefly discuss the different endings.

- The original/early ending,
- The longer ending,
- The shorter ending,
- The Freer logion.

#### The original/early ending:

In the earliest known versions of the Markan text (Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, Old Latin MS k, Sinaitic Syriac, and other equally old versions), the gospel ends with v.8 - a rather abrupt ending.

*<sup>5</sup> On entering the tomb they [the women] saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, “Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him. <sup>7</sup> But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.’” <sup>8</sup> Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

We never find out the rest of the Easter Sunday story.

Writing in the 4th century the church historian Eusebius remarked that “accurate” copies of Mark ended with verse 8. St. Jerome, translator of the Bible into Latin, echoes this testimony when he says of the last twelve verses of Mark that “almost all the Greek codices do not have this concluding portion.” But then again not all copies of the Gospel of Mark were known to Jerome. Verses 9-20 are found in some less important manuscripts, has traditionally been accepted as a canonical part of the gospel and was defined as such by the Council of Trent. Early citations of those later verses by the early Church Fathers indicate that it was composed by the second century, although vocabulary and style indicate that it was likely written by someone other than Mark.

#### The longer ending: following v. 8 is found in almost all modern bibles:

*<sup>9</sup> When he had risen, 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 his companions*

*who were mourning and weeping. When they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. After this he appeared in another form to two of them walking along on their way to the country. They returned and told the others; but they did not believe them either. [But] later, as the eleven were at table, he appeared to them and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised. He said to them, "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. They will pick up serpents [with their hands], and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover. So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs." (Mark 16:9-20)*

The so-called "longer ending" is part of the Canon of Scripture which appears in a wide variety of ancient copies that date from the early to mid-second century. Scholars believe that the text was part of an early church kerygma text, taken in whole, from a liturgy and added to round out the ending of Mark's gospel. Such a theory does explain why in v.8 the subject of the verse is the women and suddenly in v.9 the subject is masculine and easily assumed to be Jesus.

#### The shorter ending

This ending is found after Mk 16:8 before the Longer Ending (vv. 9-20) in four seventh-to-ninth-century Greek manuscripts as well as in one Old Latin version, where it appears alone without the Longer Ending:

<sup>8</sup> *Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. [They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid...And they reported all the instructions briefly to the companions of Peter. Afterwards Jesus himself, through them, sent forth from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.]*  
<sup>9</sup> *When he had risen, early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene...*

Most modern bibles do not have these verses in the text, but might include them at the end of the Gospel with an amplifying note.

#### The Freer logion

Found after Mk 16:14 in a fourth-fifth century manuscript preserved in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, this ending was known to Jerome in the fourth century.

<sup>14</sup> *later, as the eleven were at table, he appeared to them and rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart because they had not believed those who saw him after he had been raised. [And they excused themselves, saying, 'This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over the unclean things dominated by the spirits [or, does not allow the unclean things dominated by the spirits to grasp the truth and power of God]. Therefore reveal your righteousness now.' They spoke to Christ. And Christ responded to them, 'The limit of the years of Satan's power is completed, but other terrible things draw near. And for those who sinned I was handed over to death, that they might return to the truth and no longer*

sin, in order that they might inherit the spirit] <sup>15</sup> *He said to them, “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature.*

I know of no modern Bible where this appears other than in technical notes

### Why there are three “other endings” of The Gospel

Although virtually all of today’s scholars of the Bible believe that Mark had a purpose in ending his Gospel abruptly at 16:8, this was not always the case. Some first- or second-century Christians tried to “complete” his Gospel drama by adding scenes that they thought Mark should have added himself.

The first extra ending, the so-called Longer Ending (vv. 9–20), includes appearances of the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene and to the disciples. These visions were meant to inspire the early missionary church to “go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (v. 15). The church’s missionaries had nothing to fear, because the ascended Lord (v. 19) was with them in their preaching (v. 20) and would confirm their message with special signs of his protection and power (vv. 17–18). Alert readers will notice some themes in these verses that are unlike anything they have seen before in Mark’s Gospel. They may also recognize in them echoes of familiar scenes from the other Gospels, gathered together to round off Mark’s abrupt ending (for example, Mary Magdalene meets with Jesus alone in John’s Gospel, 20:11–18; the appearance to the two disciples is reminiscent of Luke’s Emmaus appearance, 24:13–35; and the commission to “go into the whole world to preach” sounds like the ending of Matthew’s Gospel, 28:16–20).

The so-called Shorter Ending, when read immediately after 16:8, was another attempt of the early church to end Mark’s Gospel more smoothly. It reverses the fear and silence of the women at the tomb and shows how the message of the resurrection came to be proclaimed through “Peter’s companions.”

The Freer Ending, preserved in the Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C., is a fifth-century addition to the Longer Ending. Appearing between verses 14 and 15, it excuses the disbelief and stubbornness of the disciples found at 16:14. Although the church has noted these “added endings” one thing that can be said of the “original” is that Mark’s abrupt ending leaves it up to his readers to “complete” his Gospel in their lives.

### **The Gospel Reading for the Solemnity of the Ascension (Year B)**

*“<sup>15</sup> He said to them, ‘Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. <sup>16</sup> Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned. <sup>17</sup> These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will drive out demons, they will speak new languages. <sup>18</sup> They will pick up serpents [with their hands], and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them. They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.’ <sup>19</sup> So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. <sup>20</sup> But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.”*

Based on the previous discussion it is clear that this reading is taken from the so-called “longer ending” without the addition of the Freer Logion. While the verses are accepted as canonical, it is interesting that many scholarly and technical commentaries offer no insights or analysis. What commentaries do address these verses give them a fairly quick treatment. The context for their comments are as though explaining the source information for the “longer ending.” Such treatment is akin to the following:

- Verse 15 - adds content from the Matthean commission: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching

*them to observe all that I have commanded you” (cf. Mt 28:19-20). Notably the baptismal formula is absent from Mark.*

- Verse 16 is similar to *“Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.”* (John 3:18) or *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains upon him.”* (John 3:36)

In any case, the text indicates the importance of baptism in the early church.

The writer then moves to a number of items pertaining to miraculous signs: *“These miraculous signs will accompany those who believe: They will cast out demons in my name, and they will speak in new languages”* (Mark 16:17). The passage underscores the miraculous signs believers would employ in support of the gospel message. Source texts might include:

- *“Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes in me will do the works that I do, and will do greater ones than these, because I am going to the Father.”* (John 14:12)
- *“Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles.”* (Acts 5:12)
- Paul casting out a demon from a woman (Acts 16:18)
- *“And they were all filled with the holy Spirit and began to speak in different tongues, as the Spirit enabled them to proclaim.”* (Acts 2:3–4)
- *“The circumcised believers who had accompanied Peter were astounded that the gift of the holy Spirit should have been poured out on the Gentiles also, for they could hear them speaking in tongues and glorifying God.”* (Acts 10:45–46)

In other words, by the time of the writing of Mark’s gospel, the early life of the Church already had a vast collection of stories. It may well be safe to say that the longer ending is something to remember in one’s spiritual life: signs are to be given to those who believe, not primarily in order that they may believe. This has been a point of conflict between the Pharisees and Jesus, with the Pharisees reiterating their demands for a sign, and Jesus equally adamant that no sign would be given to unbelief (Mark 8:11–12).

It is verse 18 that gives modern day Christians pause - not the second half: *“They will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover”* Disciples healed in the course of their evangelism. First, Peter and John healed a lame beggar (Acts 3:1–10). Soon after, the Holy Spirit became so present that apparently even people who crossed Peter’s shadow were healed (Acts 5:12–16). Later, the Holy Spirit validated Paul’s ministry by healing those who touched an apron or handkerchief that Paul had touched (Acts 19:11–12).

The pause comes from the first half of the verse: *“They will pick up serpents (with their hands), and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not harm them.”* (16:18) This practice in some southern circles (especially in the Appalachians) of handling deadly snakes as part of a worship service is based on this verse. Interestingly, the practice of drinking any *“deadly thing”* did not seem to find a place in these same church circles. In case you are interested, The Chattanooga Times Free Press has a [thorough overview](#) of the practice among some churches in Appalachia.

Scripture is clear that Jesus promised the disciples that in the course of spreading the gospel, they would be able to *“tread on serpents and scorpions”* (Luke 10:19). It should be noted that this is within a passage in which metaphorically Jesus is speaking about seeing *“Satan fall like lightning from the sky.”* The New Testament doesn’t recall the literal appearance of snakes except for Paul’s run-in with a viper (Acts 28:1–6). While Paul was tending a fire, a viper, drawn by the heat, bit him on the hand. He shook the snake off into the flames and went about his business, surprising the locals who expected him to die.

The Greek term for snake used there, *ophis*, refers to a generic snake, not necessarily a poisonous one, unlike the term *echidna*, used in Acts 28 in the account of Paul miraculously surviving a poisonous serpent bite. Interestingly, *ophis* is also used in Genesis 3 (LXX) in the narrative of the temptation of Adam and Eve by the snake. This raises the possibility that the handling of snakes here could refer metaphorically to the overcoming of the curse of the serpent in the new age of salvation.

There was an interesting note in James R. Edwards' "*The Gospel According to Mark*" (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002 | pp.498–99) that regards the sign of drinking poison (Greek *thanasimos*), while there are no other references in the NT concerning Christians drinking poison without any harm. However, there is a reference to the same Greek term for poison used here, *thanasimos*, towards the end of the first century, by Ignatius in his letter to the Trallians, that might give some content for understanding 16:17-18.

As evidenced in Ignatius' letter to the Trallians, there seems to be a heretical cult related to "poison" that was affecting Christian groups. Ignatius cautions the Trallians against the food of the heretics, mixed like deadly poisons (*thanasimos*) with honeyed wine (Ign. Trall. 6), in this case referring either literally to poison or metaphorically to heresy. This raises the possibility of a similar understanding of deadly poison in Mark 16:17-18, which when combined with the prior understanding of *ophis* as referring to the curse of the serpent, suggests heresy to be the more likely reference.

After this somewhat cryptic verse, we do arrive at the verses pertaining to the Ascension.

### **The Ascension**

*<sup>19</sup> So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God. <sup>20</sup> But they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs."*

The writer of the longer ending then records the Ascension. This final verse of the long ending notes the fulfillment of the commission, in that the disciples obeyed the call of 16:15 by preaching the gospel. Furthermore, what Jesus predicted would happen (16:17–18) was now happening—the Lord was confirming the disciples' work with many miraculous signs.