

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we love those who are close to us, and would do anything to help them, even though it may be hard. Help us to see in this our natural human response, something of Your love as a true Father, for us; and just as we seek to do what is right for others, may we always seek to do what is right for You, whose love has already guaranteed our eternal home. We praise You, heavenly Father, for Your love never fails: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Tell the Lord what is on your heart, and then sit still for five to ten minutes in order to listen to Him

On-going prayers

- **Pray this week** about agriculture. Pray for scientists and experts who seek to find ways of growing crops with a higher yield, to feed more.
- Pray for South Africa and its political institutions and governance
- Praise the Lord for the church and its testimony to the truth in our world

Meditation

In the midst of our deepest needs; You are with us, O Lord:
You are always close at hand in risen power and glory.

When we become upset or go our own way,
Your love sustains us and Your mercy covers us.

When we are oppressed by evil and succumb to sin,
Your love protects us and Your energy empowers us.

When we become exhausted and lose our way,
Your strength upholds us and Your vision guides us.

When we give up hope and need to be challenged,
Your future invites us and Your mission calls us.

May we never turn away from Your indwelling presence,
Or become selfishly wrapped up in our own experiences.

Bible Study - Mark 16:9-14

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. ¹¹ They would not believe when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her.

¹² 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. ¹³ And they went back and told the rest, but neither would they believe them. ¹⁴ 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.

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.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Why did the disciples take so long to accept the resurrection of Jesus, can their reactions be justified?
2. Does this passage help us understand why so many people doubt the resurrection today?
3. Why do people doubt the resurrection, and are their doubts realistic or not? What arguments can you use to counter such unbelief?

Discipleship

Discipleship issue in this text

- *Doubt and unbelief*
- *The importance of the fellowship meal*
- *The challenge of the truth*

Personal comment:

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, a story that unfolds in the life of Jesus and the disciples, yet the whole Gospel gradually focuses on the death of Jesus and ends abruptly after Jesus' resurrection. I am of the opinion that Mark intended his Gospel to focus on this story at the end and leave its readers with a straight challenge about whether to believe the story.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take this opportunity to write down a few thoughts about the Gospel of Mark as a whole, and your reactions to its ending.*
- *Think about how you would have reacted to the staggering news of the resurrection, and whether you would have been any different to the disciples.*

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 come to know the joy of Your resurrection and the power of God which set You free! Lead us into liberty, Lord Jesus, we pray: AMEN
