

With Signs Following

I've chosen for our text this morning one of the most troublesome, problematic texts in all the Bible, the last half of the so-called "Longer Ending" of the Gospel according to Mark. As I've mentioned before, the majority opinion among Biblical scholars is that the book originally ended with verse 8 of this chapter, as the two most complete and reliable ancient manuscripts of Mark show. Nevertheless, the Longer Ending of Mark is printed in nearly every Bible made today, even if only as a footnote, and it has been seen as an integral part of the Scriptures by most believers for nearly two thousand years. So, I want to talk today about why we should bother with difficult texts in general and about the history of this text in particular, especially with reference to the well-known Snake Handlers of Appalachia. I also want us to think about how this text reflects on the story of the Ascension, a peculiar story across the Gospels for our modern mindset, and how we can find, in that implausible story and in the off-putting details of this passage, spiritual truths that will enrich our ongoing journey in the way of Jesus.

Now, as some of you all have probably realized, I have a real interest in obscure and difficult to interpret passages of Scripture. It's probably a manifestation of the "fools rush in where wise men fear to tread" syndrome. Given the opportunity to dig into an unusual set of verses, I feel rather like Scotty, as portrayed by Simon Pegg in the new "Star Trek" movie, who, upon watching the acting Captain of the Enterprise attempt to throttle the man who will become the ship's greatest Captain, exclaims, "I LIKE this ship! This is EXCITING!" But my own peculiar predilections notwithstanding, there really is a reason why we should take interest in such passages in the Bible. It has to do with a way of interpreting the Bible called "Canonical Hermeneutics."

Now, if Charlie Scalise were here this morning, he could do a much better job at explaining this than I can – he's written two books on the subject and I'm going to quote from one of them, which I recommend to you all, called From Scripture to Theology: A Canonical Journey into Hermeneutics. Before your eyes roll back into your heads and you settle in for a nap, let me define a couple of those twenty-five cent words. First of all, hermeneutics, as Charlie writes, "is the theory of the interpretation of texts." Everyone who picks up the Bible comes to it with a certain slant on how they are going to read it. Some are going to take every word as literally as they can, some will be reading it for the beauty of the literary style, and so on. That is their personal hermeneutic. Canon, as the folks at Princeton University tell us, is "a collection of books accepted as holy scripture especially the books of the Bible recognized by any Christian church as genuine and inspired." A canonical hermeneutic, then, as Dr. Scalise would tell us, "emphasizes that the Christian community has recognized this particular collection of books as canon – the rule which guides us and tests our beliefs and actions. Christians read the Bible as *Scripture*, God's written word to the people of God." Dr. Scalise credits the full development of this theory to Brevard Childs, named by Yale University as "one of the most influential Old Testament scholars of the 20th century," and says that Childs' approach was strongly influenced by the great Swiss Reformed theologian of the last century, Karl Barth, who was described even by a Catholic Pope, Pius XII, as the most important theologian since Thomas Aquinas. Charlie writes, "Barth rejects the idea that some parts of the Bible are more inspired or more of a part of the Word of God than others... For Barth, the entire canon is the written Word of God. Even though the biblical text is uncertain in places and disagreement exists over the exact boundaries of the canon, Barth claims that all of this simply reflects the divine-and-human nature of Scripture as "the Word of God in the words of men.'" I won't take more time to further unpack

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this idea this morning but listen to these two sentences from Dr. Scalise's book as a kind of summation: "As canon these texts have been shaped, under God's guidance, to serve as authoritative Scripture for the people of God. Their authority lies in what God has used them to do – speak the Word of God to communities of believers."

The practical impact on all of this for our purposes this morning is that we cannot in good conscience simply walk away from a passage of Scripture because its origins are fuzzy or because we don't like how it's been used by other communities of believers or because we've not yet discovered its teaching and power for our community. To return to my own fascination with this and other difficult passages, it's when I can't figure out or am left disturbed by a piece of Scripture that I realize I need to dig harder, explore further and work out how I can appropriate the truth of the passage for my own life. I hope you feel the same way, or at least will be patient with me as I drag the rest of you into my Quixotic wrestling with Mark 16.

So, back to the Scripture at hand. Although, these verses are missing from many manuscripts dating from the Fifth Century, there is evidence that they were known and used by the mid-Second Century. There is some thought that even if these verses were added to Mark by a later author that they still represent an earlier form of the story than the more developed tradition at the end of Matthew and in Luke/Acts. The Church Fathers, the great scholars and theologians of the Early Church, had no difficulty in interpreting these verses, even verse 18, which has caused modern readers such consternation and led to some truly bizarre practices: "they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." The aforementioned Thomas Aquinas quotes two of his predecessors in his Catena Aurea or Golden Chain commentary on Mark. For Theophylactus, the truth of verses 17 & 18 was to be found both in the actual experience of Paul and in the spiritual experience of all believers. Paul had written in I Corinthians that "I speak in tongues more than all of you." In Acts 16, we find that the Apostle got himself into trouble by casting a demon out of a slave girl who had made her master a good deal of money by fortune-telling. Acts 28 tells the story of how Paul was shipwrecked on the island of Malta on his way to Rome: "Paul had gathered a bundle of brushwood and was putting it on the fire, when a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand. When the natives saw the creature hanging from his hand, they said to one another, "This man must be a murderer; though he has escaped from the sea, justice has not allowed him to live." He, however, shook off the creature into the fire and suffered no harm. They were expecting him to swell up or drop dead, but after they had waited a long time and saw that nothing unusual had happened to him, they changed their minds and began to say that he was a god. Now in the neighborhood of that place were lands belonging to the leading man of the island, named Publius, who received us and entertained us hospitably for three days. It so happened that the father of Publius lay sick in bed with fever and dysentery. Paul visited him and cured him by praying and putting his hands on him." For Theophylactus, as for other ancient commentators, this was sufficient fulfillment of the verses in Mark. But these same writers also saw that there was a spiritual truth here for all Christians. "They shall scatter before them serpents, whether intellectual or sensible, as it is said (in Luke 10:19), 'Ye shall tread upon serpents and scorpions,' which is understood spiritually."

The Seventeenth Century commentator Matthew Henry pointed his readers to the same mix of ancient physical truth and ongoing spiritual truth: "They shall take up serpents. This was fulfilled

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in Paul, who was not hurt by the viper that fastened on his hand, which was acknowledged a great miracle by the barbarous people. They shall be kept unhurt by that generation of vipers among whom they live, and by the malice of the old serpent (Satan). If they be compelled by their persecutors to drink any deadly poisonous thing, it shall not hurt them: of which very thing some instances are found in ecclesiastical history.” For generation upon generation, the power of these promises in the Longer Ending of Mark was understood to lodge in the realm of the spirit. Those who believe in the Good News of Jesus would not be brought down by the poisonous influence of evil, present in the culture that surrounded them or in any manifestation of that which stands opposed to the Creator. The signs that followed to confirm the message of Good News that they brought to others were the signs that the Spirit always brings to show that God has changed a life, those fruits of the Spirit we know so well -- love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. As to why these promises no longer seemed to have a physical manifestation, considered opinion agreed with Gregory, as also quoted in Aquinas’ Catena Aurea: “Are we then without faith because we cannot do these signs? Nay, but these things were necessary in the beginning of the Church, for the faith of believers was to be nourished by miracles, that it might increase. Thus we also, when we plant groves, strong in the earth; but when once they have firmly fixed their roots, we leave off irrigating them.”

Unfortunately, as the modern concept of truth became limited to empirical truth, that is, what could be physically observed, such spiritual or metaphysical interpretations were cast aside by some in favor of literalism. It is not surprising, then, that approximately 100 years ago, George Hensley of Tennessee and James Miller of Alabama began teaching their Church of God congregations that the handling of serpents, poisonous snakes, was a physical sign of grace that a corrupted Church had abandoned. In order to truly get back to the will of Jesus, they taught, believers must fulfill all of his teachings, including this one. And so began the Snake Handling movement that continues to this day, mostly in Appalachia but in pockets across the U.S. and even, as of 2004, in Canada, mostly under the name of the Church of God With Signs Following, after the wording of Mark 16:20 in the King James Version.

While I cannot agree with the literal hermeneutic that has brought these brothers and sisters to their distinctive practice and although I consider that practice unwise in the extreme, I am not willing to dismiss them as lunatics or fools. All of us, after all, see through a glass, darkly. One of the most holy moments I’ve ever experienced outside a worship service came about on my first viewing of Romulus Linney’s play “Holy Ghosts.” I saw it in 1983 at the Alley Theatre in Houston in a production directed by the playwright and it was first produced here in Seattle at ACT in 1979. The play is set in a snake handling church and is so movingly and clearly written and, at least in the performance I saw, so authentically acted and powerfully directed, that I was able for the first time to understand what might drive people to this extreme form of worship. I can’t agree with it, I don’t condone it, but I understand it. “Some folks,” one of the characters says in the play, “just need their religion in stronger doses.” Linney, in an interview with the *New York Times* shortly before the 1987 off-Broadway premiere of the play, described the characters as “people who are themselves at the bottom of American life. You can’t get much further down, as far as rural American is concerned, than a lot of these folks. And yet they feel, through the extreme cathartic experience that they go through in these services, they feel recognized by some great power... I think the people doing it believe that some great huge

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power looks down and sees them personally, these people at the bottom of the economic world in the South, and this power says that if you believe in me, in this case Jesus Christ, the natural order of the world is reversed - a snake will not bite you, a snake cannot bite you.” In his review, Frank Rich noted, “The setting for Romulus Linney's "Holy Ghosts," a makeshift church, rises from a pit of dirt, and, in the American pecking order, its inhabitants are dirt, too. Mr. Linney's characters in this 1971 work are the largely white trash of the contemporary rural South: the uneducated, the unemployed, the foolish, the cruel, the humiliated. They have nothing but their religion, and their religion is a despised minority creed of the dispossessed.”

Rich's characterization of the Serpent Handlers and their religion as “a despised minority creed of the dispossessed” puts me in mind of the early days of Christianity, of Jesus' disciples and the generations that immediately followed them. Until Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313, which established the official toleration of Christianity, our spiritual forebears were all members of a despised minority creed of the dispossessed. 400 years ago, so were our more direct antecedents, the Baptists. These verses in Mark, it seems to me, belong to that strain of Scripture that will always appeal to the humiliated, the underdog, the people at the bottom. There is much akin between these verses and the apocalyptic literature in our Bible: the books of Daniel and Revelation and passages in the Gospels. As Theophylactus and Matthew Henry wrote, centuries apart, these verses are to be understood as containing a spiritual truth, not necessarily an empirical one. That truth is this: that God, the Creator of the Universe, the One Jesus called Father, has the final say in that Creation and all its aspects, including our lives. Come death or disease or disaster, those who believe in God and in God's Christ need not lose hope, for God is the final victor. And through the love and victory of God, so are God's people raised up, even to their place as joint heirs with Christ in the Kingdom of God.

This last is part of the abiding truth of the Ascension of Jesus for us who may dismiss that odd story as what Debra Dean Murphy calls ““beam me up, Scotty” science fiction.” The story of the Ascension reminds us again that Jesus, who was both fully God and fully human, has been granted the place of honor beside the Creator and that in this act, all humankind has been re-elevated, washing away our fallenness, to our true place as those created in the image of God. Leo the Great, who was elected Pope in 440 and was the author of the Christological work recognized as orthodox belief by the Council of Chalcedon in 451, had this to say about the Ascension: “And so while at Easter it was the Lord's resurrection which was the cause of our joy, our present rejoicing is on account of his ascension into heaven. With all due solemnity we are commemorating that day on which our poor human nature was carried up in Christ above all the hosts of heaven, above all the ranks of angels, beyond the highest heavenly powers to the very throne of God the Father.” This is remarkably Good News to those who have been previously branded as the lowest of the low.

For those of us living in peace and comfort here in beautiful Puget Sound in 2009, the physical danger of those persecuted by Rome or the grinding poverty of early 20th Century Appalachia seem far away indeed. We may feel that we don't need our religion in such strong doses. We may feel that we are in good enough shape that we don't need the promise of the Ascension or the assurance that we can defeat even spiritual serpents. Or we may shy away from claiming such promises out of a sense of spiritual humility – concerned that an overemphasis on spiritual victory may lead us into the sin of triumphalism. If you don't know that word, you'll likely

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know its ugly symptoms. Webster's New World College Dictionary calls triumphalism "a proud, often arrogant confidence in the validity and success of a set of beliefs, often, specifically, religious beliefs." In his book, When Religion Becomes Evil, Charles Kimball lists these dangers of triumphalism:

- Impaired ability to judge the value or morality of the group's actions;
- Cessation of creativity and innovation within the group;
- Blindness to other groups' strengths and innovations;
- A tendency to over-reach against the group's competitors, based on an inflated sense of the likelihood of triumph in conflict.

Triumphalism is a political form of self-congratulation and many Christians have and do fall into its trap. But it is possible to celebrate the victory of God over evil and our part in it without succumbing to triumphalism. First, we must remember that it is not through our own special merit that we are to be raised to sit with Jesus at the right hand of God. Not through our merit, nor through our works, even if we can take up physical or metaphorical serpents without injury – "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast." Victory is God's through Christ and we are participants in it by God's grace. Second, as Debra Dean Murphy points out, God's victory is anti-triumphal because of its nature. "We know that the politics of the risen and ascended Jesus, and necessarily the politics of his Church," she writes, "are not the politics of this world—they are not the politics of division, of one-upmanship, of scarcity and despair, of fear and death." Finally, we can claim the victory of God without fear of self-aggrandizement because of the charge to us which it carries. For when Jesus "was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God," we became the Body of Christ upon the Earth and with that reality comes our mission which was previously that of Jesus: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." We have too much to do to spend time congratulating ourselves over a victory that we share but did not win and what we have to do requires that we focus upon others and not ourselves.

You may have noticed that I chose a bunch of very up-tempo, joyous, victorious songs for us today. They are all hymns of my childhood, hymns that I enjoyed during my Southern Baptist upbringing. I chose them today to accompany these verses because of their tone and because the heritage of Baptists, particularly in the South, is not so far removed from the Church of God With Signs Following. I wanted us to sing these songs today to remind us that we don't have to be snake-handlers, or Pentecostals, or poor to claim our role in the victory of God in Christ. It's perfectly ok for Good Shepherd Baptist to raise voices in praise of Jesus our Blessed Redeemer, to give God the glory for the great things God has done. The thing is, we must remember that we *serve* the Risen Savior and he has a job for us to do – to spread the gladness all around; to bear the news to every land; remembering that we, too, are sinners, to tell to sinners far and wide that there is release for the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to proclaim that this is the time of God's favor for all humankind. So, my sisters and brothers, let us go forth, to proclaim the good news everywhere, while the Lord works with us and confirms the message by signs following. Amen.