

Homiletics Analysis: Mark 16

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Mark 16 is the resurrection chapter of the shortest and most kinetic of the four Gospels. It opens in grief and ends in commission. Three women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome — arrive at the tomb on the first day of the week to anoint Jesus' body, only to find the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, and a young man in white announcing that Jesus has risen and gone ahead to Galilee. The women flee in fear and say nothing to anyone (v. 8 — the original ending by nearly all text-critical consensus). The longer ending (vv. 9-20), whose manuscript attestation and stylistic profile differ markedly from the rest of Mark, records a series of resurrection appearances, the Great Commission in Markan form, and the ascension, culminating in the disciples preaching everywhere with signs following.

The tension at verse 8 is one of the most discussed textual and literary questions in the New Testament. If the original ending is v. 8, the Gospel closes on fear, silence, and an unfulfilled command — which is either a profound literary and theological device (the reader is now the one charged to complete the commission), or evidence that the original ending was lost. The longer ending (vv. 9-20) is present in the majority of later manuscripts but absent from the earliest and most reliable witnesses (Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus). Its vocabulary and style differ from Mark's characteristic patterns. This analysis will treat the text honestly in two layers: the original ending (vv. 1-8) as Mark's own theological statement, and the longer ending (vv. 9-20) as canonical material present in most traditions, noting both its secondary status and its genuine theological content. The preacher must make an honest decision about which portion to exposit and how to address the textual issue transparently with the congregation.

This Text — Intent

The intent of Mark 16 — even in its textual complexity — is singular: to confront the reader with the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as the hinge of all reality and the only adequate basis for obedient proclamation. The empty tomb, the angelic announcement, the commission to go and tell, and the women's fear and silence all function together to press a single question upon the reader: *Will you do what they did not?* God is seeking to transfer the commission to the reader — to break through fear, silence, and unbelief, and to send the reader out as a witness to the risen Christ. The longer ending, whatever its compositional origin, intensifies this intent: the disciples' initial disbelief (vv. 11, 13, 14) serves as a foil for genuine faith that results in proclamation.

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ overturns death and sends His people as witnesses despite fear and unbelief.

Primary Claim: The resurrection of Jesus is not information to be received passively but a commission to be obeyed urgently — and the only thing that stands between an empty tomb and a world that hears is whether the frightened, doubting people of God will speak.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Textual Question (vv. 9-20)

This is the most significant interpretive issue in Mark 16 and cannot be avoided. The honest expositor must address it. The earliest Greek manuscripts (Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, fourth century), the earliest Syriac and Coptic versions, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and Jerome all know of manuscripts ending at v. 8. The vocabulary of vv. 9-20 includes seventeen words not found elsewhere in Mark and stylistic patterns that depart from Mark's characteristic urgency and compression. Most evangelical text critics (including those within the Reformation tradition) acknowledge that vv. 9-20 were not written by Mark and were added by a later hand, likely in the early second century to complete what seemed like an abrupt ending.

Three positions among orthodox interpreters:

- **Canonical inclusion:** Some traditions (notably those following the Textus Receptus and a majority-text approach) regard vv. 9-20 as authentically Markan and fully canonical. This position is more difficult to defend text-critically but reflects a high view of the Spirit's providential preservation of Scripture.
- **Canonical but secondary:** The Reformed and broadly evangelical position is that vv. 9-20, while not composed by Mark, have been recognized by the church as canonical — they are part of the received text and contain nothing doctrinally incompatible with the rest of the New Testament. They may be expounded as canonical material with appropriate transparency about their compositional history. This position distinguishes between authorship and canonicity.
- **Non-canonical appendix:** Some critical scholars treat vv. 9-20 as a later ecclesiastical addition that should not be expounded as Scripture. This overreaches in the opposite direction and fails to account for the passage's long history within the canon of the church.

The Reformed verdict: Vv. 9-20 are best handled as canonical material of secondary compositional status — neither ignored nor treated as identically Markan to the rest of the Gospel. The preacher should expose the textual situation honestly and preach vv. 9-20 as

canonical summary material. What vv. 9-20 teach is fully consistent with Matthew 28, Luke 24, and Acts 1 — there is no doctrinal novelty. The passage's presence in the canon is the church's acknowledgment that the resurrection story requires a commission, however the original Markan ending was shaped.

The Ending at Verse 8 (Literary Interpretation)

Was v. 8 always the intended ending, or was the original ending lost? Some scholars (N.T. Wright, R.T. France) argue that the abrupt ending at v. 8 — “for they were afraid” — is a deliberate literary and theological move: Mark leaves the reader in the position of the women, charged with a message they have not yet delivered, invited to complete the commission in their own context. Others (William Lane) argue that the original ending was lost, probably before the Gospel's wide circulation. Both positions are held by orthodox scholars.

Evaluation: The literary interpretation of the ending at v. 8 as intentional has genuine exegetical merit and is not merely a critical expedient. Mark's Gospel throughout prizes incompleteness, urgency, and the reader's own response. The Messianic secret motif, the disciples' persistent incomprehension, and the pattern of commission given but not yet obeyed all prepare for a closing that implicates the reader. Whether or not the ending was lost, the theological effect of v. 8 as an ending is coherent and powerful — and the preacher may exposit it as such.

Snake-Handling and Poison-Drinking (vv. 17-18)

The reference to signs following believers — including taking up serpents and drinking deadly poison without harm — has been used to ground snake-handling practices in some Appalachian traditions. This reading must be qualified and in its normative application refuted. These signs are presented in vv. 9-20 as authenticating signs accompanying the apostolic proclamation, not as normative practices for all believers in all times. The broader New Testament does not support deliberate snake-handling as a mark of faith. Acts 28:3-6 records Paul surviving a snakebite — not deliberately reaching into a snake's nest as a test of faith. The Reformed tradition correctly reads vv. 17-18 as descriptive of the apostolic mission period, not prescriptive for ongoing ecclesial practice. The passage tests God when read as prescriptive; it glorifies God when read as descriptive of apostolic authentication.

Key Canonical Support

- **1 Corinthians 15:1-20** — Paul's foundational resurrection apologetic: “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile.” The factual, bodily, witnessed resurrection is the non-negotiable ground of everything Mark 16 commissions. The resurrection is not a spiritual metaphor — it is an event with named witnesses.

- **Matthew 28:16-20** — The Great Commission in fuller form provides the theological context for Mark’s commission (v. 15). Matthew shows the risen Christ himself giving the commission; Mark shows the angel giving it in Christ’s name. Together they establish that the commission is the resurrection’s direct implication.
- **Luke 24:36-49** — The Lukan account of the resurrection appearances and commission parallels the longer ending’s content and establishes canonical corroboration for what vv. 9-20 summarize.
- **Acts 1:8** — “You will be my witnesses...to the end of the earth.” The commission of Mark 16 finds its full elaboration and theological grounding in Acts 1. The disciples who initially doubted and fled become the Spirit-empowered witnesses of Acts — demonstrating that the failure of nerve at the tomb is not the last word.
- **Isaiah 53:10-12** — The Servant’s death and vindication in Isaiah anticipates the pattern: suffering followed by resurrection-like exaltation and a mission that reaches many. The empty tomb is the fulfillment of what the prophets saw only from a distance.

Aim: To confront the reader with the bodily resurrection of Jesus as the claim that dissolves every excuse for silence and sends frightened, doubting disciples into a world that needs to hear.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
16:1	Three women — Mary Magdalene, Mary (mother of James), Salome — buy spices to anoint Jesus’ body	The named women provide eyewitness specificity; their purpose is burial care, not resurrection expectation
16:2	They come to the tomb early on the first day of the week, at sunrise	“First day of the week” — the resurrection day; the new creation begins at dawn
16:3	They ask one another who will roll away the stone	Their practical problem: the stone is “very large”; they come with no expectation that it will already be removed
16:4	Looking up, they see the stone has been rolled back	The divine passive: God has acted; they did not — the resurrection is wholly God’s

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
		work
16:5	Entering the tomb, they see a young man in white sitting on the right side; they are alarmed	“Young man in white” — angelic figure; same language as Mark 14:51? More likely an angelic messenger; the posture (sitting) signals calm authority
16:6	He says: “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.”	Three-part announcement: identify the one sought; proclaim resurrection; offer evidence. “He is not here” — the tomb proves nothing by itself; the announcement interprets the emptiness
16:7	“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”	The commission: go, tell, specific addressees (“and Peter” — grace to the denier), specific location, and grounding in Jesus’ prior word (Mark 14:28). The risen Christ keeps His appointments
16:8	They fled from the tomb, trembling and astonished. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.	The original ending (by overwhelming text-critical consensus). Fear, silence, and non-compliance — the Gospel closes on an unfulfilled commission. The reader is left holding the message
16:9	[Longer ending begins] Jesus appears first to Mary Magdalene, from whom He had cast out seven demons	Vv. 9-20: canonical secondary material. Mary’s identity as former demoniac underscores grace — the first resurrection witness is one Jesus had radically delivered
16:10-11	Mary goes and tells the mourning, weeping disciples; they do not	The pattern of disbelief: the disciples’ grief has closed them to the report; unbelief

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	believe her	is not intellectual neutrality but affective closure
16:12-13	Jesus appears in different form to two disciples walking in the country; they also report back, and are not believed	Parallels Luke 24:13-35 (Emmaus); the persistence of disbelief among the Eleven is remarkable — it is not credulity but resistance that characterizes the first witnesses
16:14	Jesus appears to the Eleven themselves, rebukes them for their hardness of heart and unbelief	The risen Christ's first direct word to the Eleven is a rebuke: <i>stubbornness of heart</i> (σκληροκαρδία) — a severe word, used of Pharaoh and of Israel's divorce hardness in the OT
16:15	"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation"	The commission proper: universal scope ("all the world," "all creation"), singular content (the gospel), imperative mood
16:16	"Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; whoever does not believe will be condemned"	Salvation through faith; baptism as the sign of faith's confession; condemnation rests on unbelief, not unbaptism — the absence of baptism is not separately mentioned in the condemnation clause
16:17-18	Signs will follow those who believe: casting out demons, speaking in tongues, handling serpents, drinking poison without harm, healing the sick	Authenticating signs of apostolic mission; descriptive of the apostolic age, not prescriptive for all believers in all times
16:19	Jesus is taken up into heaven and sits at the right hand of God	The ascension and session: the risen Christ is also the reigning Christ; resurrection is not the end of the story — exaltation follows
16:20	The disciples go out and	The commission obeyed:

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	preach everywhere; the Lord works with them and confirms the word by accompanying signs	what the women failed to do at v. 8 the disciples eventually do. The Lord's co-working validates the mission

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	16:1-4	Arrival at the Empty Tomb: Grief Meets the Unexpected
2	16:5-7	The Angelic Announcement: He Has Risen — Now Go and Tell
3	16:8	The Unfulfilled Commission: Fear, Silence, and the Open Question
4	16:9-14	[Longer Ending] Appearances, Disbelief, and Rebuke
5	16:15-18	[Longer Ending] The Universal Commission and Its Signs
6	16:19-20	[Longer Ending] Ascension, Session, and Obedient Proclamation

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The risen Christ overturns death and sends His people as witnesses despite fear and unbelief.

Primary Claim: The resurrection of Jesus is not information to be received passively but a commission to be obeyed urgently — and the only thing that stands between an empty tomb and a world that hears is whether the frightened, doubting people of God will speak.

Applications (Five)

1. Receive the resurrection as an established, evidenced fact — and let it reorder everything you believe about death, judgment, and what is permanent. (*Mind/belief*)

The women came to anoint a corpse. They brought spices, not hope. The angel does not ask them to feel differently first — he points to the evidence: “See the place where they laid him.” The empty tomb is not an invitation to mystical encounter but to rational confrontation with an event. The resurrection of Jesus means that death is no longer the final word over any human life — not His, and by promise, not yours. The preacher who handles this text has the opportunity to press the congregation: *Do you actually believe Jesus rose bodily from the dead?* Not as a theological proposition or a statement of faith, but as a fact that has reorganized your relationship to mortality, possessions, comfort, and the future. If the resurrection is true, the entire field of what matters has shifted.

2. Let the resurrection break the power of accumulated grief and bring you back into the presence of the risen Christ. (*Affections/worship*)

The disciples in the longer ending are described as mourning and weeping (v. 10). Their grief was not wrong — it was real. But it had closed them. When Mary told them the news, they did not believe — not because the evidence was insufficient but because grief had built a wall. The risen Christ appears anyway. He does not wait for emotional readiness; He comes into the mourning. The application is not “stop grieving” but “grief is not the last word, and the risen Christ has not abandoned you in it.” This passage calls the congregation to active, expectant worship of the living Christ — not the memory of a good teacher but the presence of the one who sat at the right hand of God (v. 19) and still works with those who go (v. 20).

3. Identify the specific fear or excuse that is keeping you silent about the gospel, and name it for what it is: not a reason, but a failure of trust in the risen Christ. (*Will/behavior*)

The women at the tomb are given the most important message in human history, a specific destination, specific people to tell, and the assurance that Jesus is already ahead of them — and they say nothing to anyone, because they were afraid (v. 8). The risen Christ had already solved every problem they faced. The stone was rolled back. The message was given. The meeting place was set. All they had to do was open their mouths. The parallel for every believer is uncomfortably exact. The barriers to gospel witness in most people’s lives are not logistical — they are fear of rejection, fear of being thought strange, fear of conflict, fear of inadequacy. This passage calls the congregation to a concrete reckoning: *Who in your life needs to hear that Jesus is risen, and what specifically is keeping you from saying so?* Write the name. Identify the fear. Then go.

4. Repent of the hardness of heart that dismisses resurrection testimony because it is inconvenient or uncomfortable — and hold the disciples’ disbelief as a mirror. (*Affections/worship*)

The rebuke in v. 14 is startling in its severity. The risen Christ does not gently encourage the Eleven — He rebukes their *stubbornness* and *unbelief* in the face of multiple witnesses. These are not intellectually skeptical people doing careful epistemology; they are people who have heard multiple credible reports and have refused them, because believing would require something of them. The application is not primarily to unbelievers in the congregation but to believers who have settled into a domesticated Christianity — a faith that is held at arm's length from the resurrection's full implications. Where have comfort, familiarity, or self-protection built calluses around the heart that soften the resurrection's demand? The rebuke of v. 14 is not only history — it is a present possibility for every follower of Jesus who has grown comfortable with not going anywhere.

5. Engage in some specific, concrete act of gospel proclamation this week — not when conditions are perfect, but now, in the ordinary territory of your daily life.

(Will/behavior)

The commission of v. 15 — “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” — sounds large and far away. But for the women in vv. 1-8, it meant walking from the tomb back to Jerusalem and telling eleven specific men. For the disciples, it eventually meant going exactly where Jesus said to go, to exactly the people who were waiting. “All the world” begins with the next conversation. The longer ending closes (v. 20) not with a vision statement but with an action report: “they went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them.” The application is correspondingly concrete. Where is your Galilee — the ordinary relational territory where you have been given the message but have not yet spoken? The commission is not abstract mission but specific next steps in specific relationships, with the promise that the Lord will work with those who go.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Mark 16 establishes the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ as the hinge of all Christian theology and the ground of all Christian mission. The empty tomb is not interpreted by the women's experience of it but by the authoritative announcement of the angelic messenger — God interprets His own acts. The resurrection is presented as an event, not an experience: the stone is rolled back, the body is gone, the messenger points to where it had been. The ascension and session of the longer ending (v. 19) extend the resurrection's meaning: the risen Christ is also the reigning Christ, not merely restored to life but exalted to authority. This means the commission He issues is backed by all authority — universal in scope precisely because His resurrection has established His lordship over all creation. The pattern of disbelief followed by rebuke followed by obedient proclamation traces the theological movement from unbelief to faith to mission that the resurrection is designed to produce.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Mark 16 exhibits the Reformed insistence that God's saving action is entirely His own before it is the occasion for human response. The stone is rolled away by divine initiative — the women bring spices and find a commission instead of a corpse. The resurrection is not a cooperative event: it is God the Father vindicating the Son through the Spirit (Romans 1:4; 8:11), and the human role is to receive it, believe it, and proclaim it. The rebuke of v. 14 also carries deep Reformed anthropological weight: the natural response to resurrection testimony is not open-minded investigation but hardness of heart — the disciples are not neutral inquirers but resistant disciples who refuse to believe despite abundant witness. This confirms the Reformed understanding of unbelief as not primarily an intellectual failure but a moral and affective one — a *sklerokardia*, a hard heart, that resists what God has made evident. Grace overcomes this: the same disciples who refused to believe eventually went everywhere proclaiming (v. 20). Their faith is not the product of their own openness but of the risen Christ's persistent self-revelation.

Main Takeaway

Jesus is not in the tomb. He told you He would rise, He rose, and He is now ahead of you — waiting to be proclaimed wherever you are going. The only question Mark 16 leaves open is the one the women left unanswered: *Will you say something?* Every fear you carry to the tomb, He has already anticipated. Every excuse for silence is answered by an empty grave. Go and tell.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Avoiding the textual question about vv. 9-20 entirely.** This is the most common failure. Preachers either pretend the textual issue does not exist (preaching vv. 9-20 as unambiguously Markan) or avoid Mark 16 altogether because the textual issue feels too complicated for a Sunday sermon. Both responses fail the congregation. A congregation that is never taught to think about textual criticism is a congregation unprepared to encounter skeptics who know that the longest ending of Mark is disputed. The preacher should address it briefly, clearly, and without fear — the textual question does not threaten the resurrection, which is multiply attested. What is in question is who wrote vv. 9-20, not whether Jesus rose.
- **Treating the ending at v. 8 as a deficiency to be quickly moved past.** If the original ending is v. 8, it is one of the most powerful theological moves in the New Testament. Rushing to the longer ending to avoid the discomfort of an unfulfilled commission misses the point entirely. The silence of the women is not a problem to be solved — it is a mirror held up to the reader. Preach v. 8. Sit in it. Let the congregation feel the weight of a commission given and a world not yet told.

- **Preaching v. 16 as teaching baptismal regeneration.** The verse says “whoever believes and is baptized will be saved” — and this has been used to support the view that baptism is causally necessary for salvation. But the condemnation clause (“whoever does not believe will be condemned”) notably omits the failure to be baptized. The verse presents baptism as the normal expression of saving faith in the apostolic context — faith that confesses itself — not as an independent saving act. The Reformed reading correctly grounds salvation in faith, with baptism as its fitting sign, not its co-cause.
- **Using vv. 17-18 to prescribe snake-handling or poison-drinking as tests of faith.** The signs in vv. 17-18 are apostolic authentication signs — they function in the mission context of vv. 9-20 as confirmation of the proclaimed word (cf. v. 20: “confirming the word by the signs that accompanied it”). Acts 28:3-6 records Paul surviving a snakebite — providential, not performed as a test. To read these verses prescriptively for all believers is to confuse the apostolic authentication of the message with the ongoing life of the church, and to require God to authenticate what He has not been asked to authenticate.
- **Preaching the commission (v. 15) without engaging the disciples’ disbelief (vv. 11-14).** The commission lands with much greater force when the congregation has been allowed to see itself in the doubting, grief-closed, hardened disciples who refused multiple witnesses before they believed. Jumping straight to “go and preach” without expositing the *resistance* that precedes obedient proclamation produces exhortation without diagnosis — it tells people what to do without naming what is actually stopping them. The rebuke of v. 14 is grace: Jesus does not abandon hard-hearted disciples, He confronts them and then sends them.
- **Reducing the resurrection to a platform for moral exhortation.** This is the Clowney/anti-moralism warning applied directly. “The resurrection teaches us to live boldly” is not bad, but it is not the point. The resurrection is the vindication of Jesus Christ as Lord over death, sin, and all creation — and the commission flows from that lordship, not from a motivational principle. The congregation needs to be confronted with the risen Christ before they are exhorted to his mission. Preach the resurrection as event and fact; let the commission emerge from that, not the other way around.