

What's wrong with the disciples? we might ask. Why didn't they believe? Wasn't it obvious? Why were they so slow to see what was right in front of them? Mary Magdalene said that Jesus was alive. Why didn't they believe her? Two of the disciples said that Jesus was alive. Why didn't they believe them? Why did it finally take Jesus to convince them that he was alive? Why did they not just listen to what was being said to them?

But then Jesus says an interesting thing in our reading for today. Verses 17 and 18, where he says: "These signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons. They will speak in new tongues. They will pick up serpents with their hands, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them. They will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." And suddenly it may not be so easy to listen to what Jesus has to say. What does Jesus mean by this? we might ask. This all seems pretty strange, maybe even a little bit crazy. It brings up pictures in our minds of all of those snake handling churches in various parts of the country. Is that what Jesus is talking about here? Is what he says only meant for crazy people? Is this something that we can just skip over, that we can just ignore? We're tempted to move on, because it seems just a little bit too strange for us to deal with.

But Christians, everything that the Bible says is meant for our good, even the stuff that seems a little bit strange to us. And even if there are people who abuse these verses, that doesn't mean that we should just skip over them. They also have something to teach us. And Jesus wants to teach us through these verses, through what he says here, that the Gospel is more than just words. As if we were just talking about what happened long ago, and we just hope that somebody might believe it. No, the Gospel is more than just words, because it is also power. It is the power of God at work in the world. In 1 Corinthians chapter 4, Paul says: "The kingdom of God does not consist in talk, but in power." And we heard in our reading from the Epistle in Acts that Jesus would clothe them with power from on high. This is the power of God at work in the world, so that wherever the Gospel is, God is there also, moving it along, changing hearts, working powerfully in everything that is happening. God is working through his people. This is what Jesus wants to show us in our reading for today.

And this power shows itself not only in the words of the Gospel itself, but also in signs. These signs are not just meant for their own sake. It's not like they're just showing off to show how much power we have through God. That's not their purpose. Rather, the signs point to the truth of what is being said. Think about what Jesus says in John chapter 10: "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me. But if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." So in other words, the works that Jesus was doing, the signs that he did, the miracles he performed pointed to the fact that he had come from the Father. Even if the Jews didn't want to believe in Jesus--and they certainly didn't--they couldn't deny the fact that this came from God, that he had been sent by the Father. In the same way with these signs performed in Jesus's Church, they show that this message is not just a message here on earth. It is a message from the Father, a message that has come down from God himself. And it is God at work in the world. In fact, at the very end of our Gospel reading, we're told that "they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs." So the signs confirm the message. They show the truth of what is being said. I know we still get kind of nervous with it. People abuse these things. We know of all kinds of people who use them in the wrong way. But that doesn't mean that they don't still have a good purpose.

Through the signs, we see the power of God. And all those around us also see the power of God in the world. And by seeing this power at work, they listen to what is being said, and they come to believe in it because of it. That's what Jesus wants to show us in our verses.

I think the easiest way to see this is actually to compare what Jesus says here with the book of Acts, because many of the signs which Jesus lists here in the Gospel of Mark actually occur at least once in that book. So the first sign, for example, Jesus says will be the casting out of demons, just as he had done during his earthly ministry. And we see an example of this in Acts chapter 8. Philip, who was one of the seven chosen to help the apostles, is preaching the Gospel in Samaria. And we are told in Acts chapter 8 that "the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip, when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed." So the main thing that Philip is doing is preaching the Gospel. They are hearing the good news of Jesus Christ. But along with that message came signs from God: in this case, the casting out of demons. And we see the result of all of this a little bit later when it says that "when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women." So the sign went along with the message, the sign confirmed the message, and many believed the message because of it. That's what we see happening here in Acts.

The next sign that we hear about, though, is the speaking in new tongues, which we see happening clearly at Pentecost. In Acts chapter 2, we are told that "they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance." The apostles were speaking in languages that they didn't know, that they had never studied. They had never learned them in their life. And they were doing so fluently so that others could understand what they were saying. They were declaring the mighty works of God. It'd be just like if I were to stand up here and start speaking in Chinese or Swahili or Afrikaans or whatever language it may be, languages that I have no idea what they are. I've never studied them. I wouldn't know the first thing in them. But if I were to start speaking them fluently, you would know that God was at work. That's exactly what happened at Pentecost. And when those who were at Pentecost listened to what was being said, they also listened to what Peter said. And the result was that "those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls." So the sign went with the message, the sign confirmed the message, and they believed it because of it.

The third sign that Jesus mentions here is probably the one that gives us the most trouble, if we're being honest: the picking up of serpents so that they will not hurt believers. But it is also still a sign. And what Jesus means is that things like serpents will not hurt those who believe. Because in Luke chapter 10, Jesus says: "Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you." So not just physical dangers, but also spiritual ones. The powers of evil will have no power over those who believe. They will not be able to harm them. But that also includes physical dangers, as we see in the book of Acts. Because at the very end of the book of Acts, Paul gets into a shipwreck on his way to Rome, and he ends up on the island of Malta. And while he was there, the people of the island build a fire to take care of him and the sailors who were shipwrecked with him. But we're told in Acts chapter 28 that "when Paul had gathered a bundle of sticks and put them on the fire, a viper came out because of the heat and fastened on his hand." The heat woke up this snake, apparently,

which came out and latched itself on to Paul's hand. It was a deadly snake, one they fully expected to kill him. And in fact, when the people of the island saw this happen to him, they figured he was just getting what he deserved. They figured he was running away from the law, and justice was finally catching up to him. He was just getting what he had coming to him. But Paul shook the thing off. It didn't bother him at all. And we are also told that "they were waiting for him to swell up or suddenly fall down dead, but when they had waited a long time and saw no misfortune come to him, they changed their minds and said that he was a god." Now, they misunderstood what happened here, because Paul had not yet proclaimed the Gospel to them. But even with that, they can still see that there is a power at work here that is more than human. Even if they think Paul is God, they still recognize that God is at work. Now, Paul will proclaim the Gospel to them later and also perform other signs among them, and then they will believe. The sign would go along with the message, the sign would confirm the message, and they would believe because of it. We see that happening here as well.

Now, there is no example in the New Testament of people drinking poison and surviving. There just isn't. We do hear stories of this kind of thing happening from outside of the Bible from the time of the early Church. But that last sign of healing the sick by laying on hands does happen. There's an example of it with Philip in Acts chapter 8, which we already heard. There's an example of it with Paul on Malta in Acts chapter 28. But the same thing is true. The sign confirms the message. Those who hear it believe because of it. And so all of these examples, then, that we see show us that the Gospel is not just words. It's not just talk. It is the power of God at work in the world. That's what Jesus wants to teach us in this passage.

But what about us? we might say. We don't see these kinds of signs anymore. We don't see people being healed by laying on hands, at least not genuinely. We don't want to pick up serpents lest we get bitten by them. Does that mean that the power of God is no longer at work in the world? Is the Gospel now just a message in our day? Not at all, Christians. The Gospel is still the power of God in the world. Paul says, Romans chapter 1, that: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." And even if these particular signs that Jesus is talking about are no longer with us, that doesn't mean that there aren't still signs. We still see signs. They might not be as flashy. They might not be as impressive as they were back then, but they are still there. Because do we not see his power in everyone who comes to faith? When someone turns away from their sin, when they put behind their former lives, repent and believe in God, and live a new life because of it? Is that not the power of God at work among us? Do we not see his power in every Christian who overcomes some sin in their lives? Who finally breaks the power of some sin that has been holding them and gains the victory through Jesus Christ? Is that not the power of God at work among us? Do we not see his power in answered prayers? When God does things for his people who ask him in faith that the world considers impossible? Is that not the power of God at work among us? Yes, God is still at work, Christians. He is still with his Church. And when we see these signs, not only we are strengthened by them, but also those around us who see them hear and come to faith because of them. Others see and believe in the Lord because of the signs of his power in the world today. That is what Jesus wants to teach us in this passage.

So yes, Christians this is also written for our benefit. It shows us the power of God. And therefore, knowing that power, we can listen to what Jesus has to say and go out into the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation, knowing that he is with us, that he is working

through us, that he will be with us always. And we know this because of what he says. So let us listen to him and follow after him, because he is at work among us today.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, who has ascended on high far above all things, strengthen us through your Word as you send us out into the creation, so that we may proclaim your Gospel powerfully and fearlessly; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.