

The Resurrection: Mark 16:1-7
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Sunday, November 20, 2011

It's Easter morning again for us. Resurrection Sunday! We are gathered, as we are every Lord's Day, to celebrate that our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, has been raised from the dead. He died on a Friday, and He rose again on Sunday morning. This is the miracle that means everything to us. This is the great hope we have for the future. This is the comfort we have and the assurance that our sins have been atoned for. For those who are repenting of sin and trusting in Jesus, we won't be punished forever in hell, because Jesus suffered that punishment for us and triumphed over it. And we have the inheritance of heaven to look forward to, all because Jesus died and rose again.

I want to start this morning by looking at some verses from 1 Corinthians 15. Last week we studied Romans 6 and saw the significance of Jesus' resurrection for us. He rose, and therefore all who are united to Him have also been resurrected. And I talked about how our resurrection involves a new set of desires. We are raised to walk in newness of life, and this new life is characterized by new wants, new passions, new desires. We have a new heart that delights in obeying and following our new Master. We studied last week some of the theological significance of the resurrection.

This morning we're going to look at the actual account of the empty tomb as Mark records it at the end of his Gospel. But I still want to begin by reading from the apostle Paul to see the importance of this historical event.

The whole chapter of 1 Corinthians 15 deals with the resurrection, and I would encourage you to reflect on all that is written here. Right now I'm just going to read verses 17-22.

Here Paul is arguing against those who don't believe that there will be a resurrection of the dead. He is showing how essential the doctrine of the resurrection is to the Gospel. If there is no resurrection, then Christ did not rise from the dead. And Christ's resurrection is everything! If Christ did not rise from the dead, then our Christianity is just a hoax. It's meaningless and worthless, and we're fools to be part of it.

Notice in verse 17 that we would still be in our sins if it wasn't for the resurrection. Christ had to rise again to defeat sin and death. If He did not rise from the dead, then sin and death would have the last word, and there would be no hope for anyone. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead (verse 20). And then in verses 21-22 we have this summary of redemptive history. There are two kinds of people in the world: those who are in

Adam, and those who are in Christ. All of us are born into Adam's family. We are sinners condemned to death. But for all who trust in Christ and are united to Him, these individuals will be made alive and will inherit the treasure of being resurrected unto eternal life.

The resurrection is everything! This is what we cling to. This is the hope of the Christian faith. You cannot be a true believer, a biblical Christian, without believing in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christianity stands or falls on the historical validity of this event. If Christ did not rise, we are fools to be here this morning. But Christ did rise, and therefore we can have peace that our sins are pardoned through His sacrifice, and we can have hope that our future holds glorious pleasures to be enjoyed forever and ever!

There are some who want to deny Jesus' resurrection but still hold Him up as an inspiring example. He didn't rise from the dead, many would say, but He was still a pretty amazing guy and we should try to be like Him. Albert Schweitzer was one who argued for this type of position concerning the historical Jesus. I've read this quote a couple other times in our study through Mark, and I'll read it again here. Consider this in light of what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15.

This is how Schweitzer tried to put a positive spin on Jesus' life while at the same time denying the resurrection. Schweitzer was a famous biblical scholar, medical doctor, humanitarian. He died in 1965. This is what he wrote in his book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*: "Jesus . . . in the knowledge that he is the coming Son of Man lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and he throws himself upon it. Then it does turn, and crushes him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, he has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great man, who was strong enough to think of himself as the supernatural ruler of mankind and to bend history to his purpose, is hanging upon it still. That is his victory and his reign."¹ In Schweitzer's assessment, Jesus died for a noble cause. And even though His cause failed, we should still seek to emulate the spirit of Jesus' life.

Friends, beware of so-called Christianity that denies the resurrection. There is not Christianity without the resurrection. Jesus' life and death are meaningless apart from the resurrection. We have no hope if He did not rise from the dead. What does Paul say in 1 Corinthians 15? He says, "if Christ has not been raised,

¹ *Quest*, page 370-1. Quoted in Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament: 1861-1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), page 214.

then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . [I]f Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. . . If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17, 19)

Our hope, brothers and sisters, is that Jesus not only died, but rose again, showing that His death served the purpose for which it was intended. He successfully bore our sins on the cross. He satisfied God's wrath against sin. And the fact that He rose again proves that. If we were gathered here today to honor and worship the Jesus of Albert Schweitzer, we would be fools. But we are here to praise and glorify the Jesus of Scripture, the true Son of God, a man attested by God, who died according to God's plan, and who was then raised from the dead. He is a living Savior. He is our risen Lord.

Let's look now at Mark's account of the empty tomb. Interestingly, we don't have any account of the resurrection itself. We don't know exactly what time it happened early on that Sunday morning. We don't know quite how it happened. But we have abundant evidence *that* it happened, and that's what Mark is interested in conveying to his readers.

Again, he refers very specifically to these eyewitnesses. These are clearly identified individuals who would be known among the early church. Therefore, what Mark is writing here is verifiable according to those witnesses.

This morning I want to consider four components of what is written in verses 1-7, and then next week we'll deal with the complex question of the ending of Mark. This morning let's look, first of all, at the significance of the first day of the week. Secondly, the women's expectations. Thirdly, the angel's testimony. And finally, the Lord's message.

The First Day of the Week

Mark is very clear to specify what day of the week he's talking about. In chapter 15:42 he tells us that the burial happened on Friday. That is, what we would call Friday. In the Jewish culture of that day, the Sabbath was the reference point for every day of the week. So Friday was referred to as the day of Preparation. Then Mark clarifies that in case any of his Gentile readers don't understand it. He writes, "that is, the day before the Sabbath." The Sabbath is Saturday, the seventh day of the week. God created everything in six days, and then He rested on the seventh day. Then God commanded His people in the Old Testament to do likewise—to work six days and then rest on the seventh day.

In many ways, their lives revolved around the Sabbath. And even their way of designating the days of the week reflects

this. Friday was “the day before the Sabbath.” Sunday was the day after the Sabbath, otherwise known as “the first day of the week.” Mark begins the resurrection account with the phrase, “when the Sabbath was past.”

We have to understand here, too, that the Sabbath goes from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday. For us, a day begins and ends at midnight. But for the Jewish way of referring to a day, sundown marks the transition from one day to the next. So the women, who had been there on Friday evening when Jesus died (and they watched Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus’ body), they are now out again on Saturday evening (after the sun sets) to buy spices. That’s probably what verse 1 is referring to. The sun has gone down, meaning that the Sabbath is over. So it’s now OK for them to go out and go to the marketplace to buy some things they need to anoint Jesus’ dead body. Their time had been cut short on Friday evening. As the sun went down and the Sabbath began, they were not able to get the things they needed in order to anoint Jesus’ body then. So this is their first chance. They get the spices on Saturday night, and then they’ll be up early on Sunday morning to go to the tomb.

What is the significance of Jesus rising from the dead on Sunday morning, the first day of the week? This shows a radical shift in salvation history. This shows a transition from promise to fulfillment. It shows how monumental Jesus’ death and resurrection is. When Jesus celebrated the Passover meal with His disciples, He showed them that the Passover is all about Him. It has always pointed to Him, and now it is fulfilled in Him and He institutes a covenant meal called the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20).

Similarly with the Lord’s Day. Jesus rises on a Sunday morning, showing that the Sabbath is fulfilled in Him. And the focus shifts to a different day, Sunday, the Lord’s Day. This is why the Christian church gathers on Sunday for corporate worship. It’s not the seventh day that has significance for us. It’s the first day. Verse 2 of our text says that it was on the first day of the week that the women went to the tomb and found it empty. And each of the other Gospels record this detail as well. Matthew 28:1, “Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week . . .” Luke 24:1, “But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb . . .” John 20:1, “Now on the first day of the week . . .” This is a huge shift. This is a drastic change. Everything had revolved around the seventh day, the Sabbath. But now, for Christians, it’s the first day of the week that means everything to us.

John MacArthur puts it succinctly like this: “Since that weekend, no Sabbath has been necessary. Since that weekend, no

Sabbath has been required. I'll go further. Since that weekend, no Sabbath is even legitimate. It's the same thing as the Passover. The last Passover happened at the end of that week and Jesus instituted the Lord's supper as the new memorial feast commemorating His death. And there has never been a legitimate Passover since then. And there has never been a legitimate Sabbath since that weekend either. Everything changed on the first day of that week."²

We see the ramifications of this right away in the New Testament church. We see them in Acts 20 gathering to break bread and hear Paul preach on a Sunday evening ("on the first day of the week," as it says). In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul instructs the church to put something aside as a collection for the saints "on the first day of every week." On the first day, Sunday, the Lord's Day. Then the apostle John, in Revelation 1:10, makes reference to the Lord's Day. He writes that he "was in the Spirit on the Lord's day," when his visions began. In the New Testament there is an emphasis on Sunday as the day for corporate worship and fellowship and giving. It's no longer Saturday that the people of God gather for these things. It's now Sunday, marking the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because that's what it's all about.

The Women's Expectations

Let's move on now in the narrative of Mark 16 and consider the women's expectations as they make their way to the tomb. This is the third time in this section that Mark gives the names of women who were present. In 15:40 he tells us that there were "women looking on from a distance, among whom were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome." Then in verse 47 we're told that "Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid." They had followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb and watched where Jesus' body was laid.

And now in chapter 16 Mark identifies three of these women again as those who bought spices and then went to the tomb early on Sunday morning. Now, it's interesting that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was first revealed to women. This is an interesting detail because in those days and in that culture, the testimony of women was not given much credence. Women were not considered to be reliable witnesses. Mary Magdalene would be all the more suspect because she had previously been possessed by demons. These women would not have had much credibility at all in the eyes of the world.

And so I see this as an evidence of the way God loves to reveal Himself. He comes to those who are lowly. He comes to those who are on the bottom rung of society. As Paul writes in 1

² Sermon on Mark 16:1-8, "Amazement at the Empty Tomb." www.gty.org

Corinthians 1:27-29, "But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." That's how God loves to do things, so that we cannot boast in ourselves. He does powerful things through very weak people. He turns things upside down according to our earthly way of looking at things. He reveals Himself in ways that are contrary to the way we would think is most effective.

And so these women, who would have had very little respect or privilege in their society, they are the ones to go down in history as the first witnesses of the empty tomb.

There's something else to consider along with this. The fact that Mark, and the other Gospel writers, record that these women were the first witnesses of the empty tomb—this shows us the reliability of what the Gospels record for us. Because if they were making up a story, if they were fabricating this, if they were making this up, then there's no way they would have written that women were the first witnesses. If they made up this story, they surely would have come up with some witnesses who were more highly esteemed in that society. They would have been shooting themselves in the foot to make up such an unbelievable story like this, and then say that these women were the first ones to discover what had happened.

This is not a made-up story. This is not something that the early church fabricated. Nobody could make up a story like this one. And even if they could, their attempts at proving it would be different than what we have in the Gospels. Another reason we know this isn't made-up is because the disciples and many others went to their death because of what they knew to be true. They knew that Jesus had died, and they knew that Jesus had risen from the dead, and they ended up being martyred because of their faith in these things. People don't go to their death for a made-up story. If it's made-up, they'll deny it before they'll die for it. But many of these individuals died for this. They could not deny what had happened. As bizarre as it was, as miraculous as it was, they knew that Jesus was dead, and then He was alive again.

That is what the disciples and these women came quickly to believe, but it is not what they were expecting. The question we can ask at this point in the narrative is, What were these women expecting to find when they got to the tomb? As they were travelling to the tomb, what did they anticipate? The answer is, they expected to find a dead body there, right where they saw the dead body laid on Friday evening. That's why they were coming with spices. The spices were intended to cover over the stench of

the decaying body. Typically that would be done at the time of the burial. But because they ran out of time of Friday evening (the sun was about to go down, and the Sabbath was beginning) they had to wait until Sunday morning.

So they're coming to anoint a dead body. That's their intention. That's what they're expecting. They are assuming that the tomb will be exactly the same as it was on Friday evening—Jesus' body inside, with the stone rolled in front of the entrance. And then it occurs to them, in verse 3, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" I guess they hadn't thought about that when they first set out. But now they're thinking about it, and they realize that there's no way they would be strong enough to roll away that stone. It was very large, as verse 4 says.

The simple point to be made here is that the women were not expecting a resurrection. That was the last thing on their minds. They simply wanted to honor their teacher, their hero, the One they had been following and serving. They were in the depths of despair because He had been killed. The only thing they knew to do was to try and give Him a proper burial. Therefore, what they ended up finding when they arrived at the tomb was a complete surprise!

The Angel's Testimony

Now consider the angel's testimony. This is what the women were confronted with, and startled by, when they arrived at the tomb. Quite contrary to their expectations, this is what they found. Verse 4, "And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large." They were wondering who would roll away the stone for them. Well, it's already been rolled away. That was the first shocking thing. And then the next shocking thing was to discover this angel there sitting in the tomb. Mark describes him simply as a young man. But we're also told that he was dressed in a white robe, and he speaks as a messenger of God. And we also have the record of the other Gospels, which make it clear that angels appeared to the women at the tomb.

Look at what the angel says to the women in verse 6, "Do not be alarmed." That's a typical first line when an angel speaks to someone. The person is understandably afraid, and the angel tries to calm their fears. When the angel spoke to Zechariah about the birth of John the Baptist, the angel said, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah . . ." (Luke 1:13). When the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary about the birth of Jesus, he said, "Do not be afraid, Mary . . ." (Luke 1:30). When the angel appeared to the shepherds in the field, he said, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy . . ." (Luke 2:10).

It's the same thing here. The women are terrified, and the angel tries to calm their fears. "Do not be alarmed." And then the angel speaks with a supernatural insight into their hearts. He knows them and knows their intentions. He knows their heartache. He says, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." This would have shocked the women even further. Not only was the stone rolled away, and Jesus' body was gone, and an angel was in the tomb, but also this angel knew their thoughts and intentions.

But then comes the Good News. The One who was crucified, He has risen; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. This is the angel's testimony. He tells them what has happened, and He gives them evidence. His body is not here. The women had been there on Friday evening to see where the body was laid. And now the angel can point to that same exact spot and tell them, Look, His body is gone. And the reason it's gone is because He's alive again.

The empty tomb. That's what this is all about. The women needed to see that the tomb was empty. That's why the stone had to be rolled away. Jesus didn't need the stone to be rolled away in order to get out of the tomb. At the end of John we read that Jesus showed up in the room with the disciples even though the doors were locked. Jesus wasn't constrained by doors or stones. But the stone was rolled away so that the women and the disciples could see with their own eyes the proof of the resurrection. And that's not *all* they saw, either. They eventually saw Jesus, Himself, in His resurrection body. But the first evidence was the empty tomb. That was the angel's testimony to the women.

The Lord's Message

We'll close this morning by looking at the Lord's message, which the angel conveys to the women in verse 7. To get the significance of this, we have to put it in the context of what Jesus told His disciples prior to His death. First, there were the passion predictions. Mark records three times when Jesus told them about His death and resurrection. In chapters 8, 9, and 10, Jesus told them that "the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise." (Mark 10:33-34)

The disciples were confused each time Jesus brought this up. They didn't get it. But Jesus said it nonetheless, and He said it plainly. He also predicted that they would all desert Him. In 14:27-28 Jesus told them, "You will all fall away, for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.' But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee." There's a sad

prediction there, but also a happy promise. The disciples are going to fail and flee, but then Jesus will re-gather them after He has been raised. Of course, the disciples didn't know what to make of this prediction either, except to try to assure Jesus that He must be wrong about them falling away. Peter tried to separate himself from the others and say, "Even though they all fall away, I will not." But Jesus became even more emphatic and even more specific in His prediction of what Peter would do. "Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times." And that's what happened. The disciples, and especially Peter, failed miserably. They deserted Jesus, and Peter blatantly denied even knowing Jesus.

And that's why Jesus' message to the women, via the angel, is so wonderful and so encouraging. The angel tells the women in verse 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." Implicit in that statement is a message of forgiveness and restoration. The disciples had not lived up to their promises they had made to Jesus. But Jesus will still live up to His promises to them.

We should find great hope in that this morning. Jesus restores frail and frightened disciples. That's how I feel so often—like a frail and frightened disciple who fails to serve my Lord as I ought. I get selfish or scared, and I feel so fickle and weak. But I find assurance in the fact that my union with Christ does not depend on my performance, and it is not jeopardized by my failures. Instead, my union with Christ is secure because it depends on Him. His allegiance to me will never fail. And because of His allegiance to me, because of His sovereign grace poured out on me, He forgives my failures and chooses to use me for His glory in spite of myself.

There is so much encouragement to be found in this passage. We serve a risen Lord. He was crucified and buried, and He rose again on the third day. And He gathers a group of disciples to Himself who are disciples, not because of their allegiance to Him but because of His allegiance to them. And He chooses to change the world through the lives of such individuals, folks like you and me.