

## The Resurrection Is No Miracle-Worker

Mark 16:1-8

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**Proposition** Though the resurrection really happened, it doesn't automatically generate obedience.

**Fallen Condition Focus** We all wish for greater experiences of signs and wonders—yet the greatest wonder in history was insufficient to make the women into powerful witnesses.

**Translation** And when the Sabbath had passed, Mary Magdalene and James' Mary and Salome purchased spices, in order to go and anoint Him. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first of the week they went to the tomb; the sun had risen. <sup>3</sup> And they said to one another, "Who will roll away for us the stone from the door of the tomb?" <sup>4</sup> And looking up they see that the stone had been rolled away! (It was very large.) <sup>5</sup> They went into the tomb and saw a youth sitting on their right, one clothed in a white garment. And they were amazed. <sup>6</sup> This one said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus the Nazarene, the crucified; He is risen, is not here; behold, the place where they laid him! <sup>7</sup> But go, tell His disciples and Peter that He will go before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you." <sup>8</sup> And going out they fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had come upon them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

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- A. Don't Pray for Spectacle, but for Obedience!
- B. Don't Pursue a Fruit-driven Ministry
- C. Pray for Faithfulness in the Face of Fear, Like Joseph of Arimathea's
- D. Ask the Spirit to Apply the Resurrection's Benefits to You
- E. Be Encouraged: Jesus Initiates and Completes Reconciliation

**Purpose** To force people to apprehend the resurrection and thus rightly apply its power.

### **Body**

About this time last spring, Tim's son Elijah was taken to the hospital with a terrifying illness. The doctors were saying things about congenital defects, lifelong problems, very rare syndromes that will prevent the patient from ever living an ordinary life, and all of those other terrifying things that doctors talk about. My church gathered to pray for Elijah—and a couple of days later, he was fine. He walked out of the hospital under his own power, and other than the occasional normal snuffle, hasn't had a thing wrong with him since.

Now, as many of you know, my church has had its difficulties since that time. Yet I have never heard a single person in the congregation point out to us that God healed Elijah when we all thought he was going to be something of a vegetable for the remainder of his days. I have never heard anyone refer to this event, or thank God for it in public prayer. Yet for a day or two, it galvanized our congregational life.

It's a pattern with which we're all too familiar: see God do something amazing—some great answer to prayer, or some great providential work—and we're impressed for about ten minutes. Then we revert to our old unbelieving selves. Unfortunately, the size of the miracle seems to have nothing to do with it. God leads the Israelites through the Red Sea in Exodus 14. They praise Him in Exodus 15. Guess what happens at the beginning of Exodus 16? That's right. They grumble. And congregation of Christ, nearly the same event took place at the scene of the greatest miracle God ever wrought. In the text we just read, we see that the Resurrection really happened, but even firsthand knowledge of it doesn't automatically generate obedience. Again, the resurrection really happened in ordinary history, but even firsthand knowledge of it won't automatically generate obedience. We'll see this in two simple points: 1, the resurrection really happened; 2, the witnesses disobeyed; they failed to draw the right application.

#### I. The Resurrection Really Happened, vv. 1-7

All Mark's literary artistry is directed to this first point: the resurrection really happened. This section is the tail end of a classic Markan frame story. Notice how it begins.

##### A. The Witnesses, v. 1a

We have three witnesses here. First is Mary Magdalene, a woman from whom Christ had expelled seven demons. We also have Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Salome is the mother of the apostle John and his brother James. Now, this is not the first place these three women appear as a group. Here, at the beginning of our text, we see them coming to the tomb. But at the end of the previous chapter, we saw Mary Magdalene and the other Mary witnessing

Jesus' burial. However, all three, including Salome, make their appearance in Mark 15:40, hovering on the outskirts of the crowd. They are watching, but Mark uses a word that he has previously used to refer to the demons seeing Jesus's works (3:11), to the crowds who will drive Jesus away (5:15), to the crowd watching people put money in the treasury (12:41)—but not to looking with “perception and conviction.” What's important for purposes of our text, however, is to recognize that these three women were there at the cross. They saw the death of Christ. Two of them were at the burial of Jesus, so they knew exactly where the tomb was and that He had been put into it as a dead corpse. Now, as we pick up the narrative, all three of them are coming to the tomb.

#### B. The Plan, vv. 1b-3

Notice with me the sheer everyday character of their actions. These events do not and did not take place in some kind of “super-history.” Many theologians want to tell us that the events of Christ's life are merely symbolic, merely occurred in some higher ethical symbolic sphere, not in ordinary everyday history. But that's not what the text indicates. These women were confronting a practical problem in their everyday life in the same way any of us—or better, any of our wives and mothers—might confront the same problem today.

##### 1. Buy Spices Saturday Night, v. 1b

Notice that the women observe the Sabbath. In the midst of the most devastating event in history, they still took the time to go and worship God. Apparently Jesus did not teach His mother and His other followers that it's okay to stay home from church at a period of great grief. It appears that worship was still their first priority, even when their world was falling apart in every other way. Notice, too, how completely practical and this-worldly the narrative is. Where's superhistory? These are housewives observing the Sabbath and then going out Saturday night to buy some spices. The resurrection and grocery shopping rub shoulders in the pages of Scripture. These are the ordinary plans of ordinary people in ordinary history.

##### 2. Go to the Tomb, v. 2a

The next step in their plans is to go to the tomb. They get up early Sunday morning. According to the commentators, “early” means anytime between 3 and 5. Mark tells us that the sun had risen when they got there; John says it was still dark. Obviously, it was that moment when dawn has clearly come, but at the same time, it's not exactly light outside. If you're on your way somewhere, you'll probably call it daytime; if you're still in bed, you'll say, “Ah, it's still dark outside.” The important point, of course, is that it was light enough that they were sure of going to the right tomb. Two of them had just been there thirty-six hours previously, and Mark, who is normally quite sparing of words, assures us that “they saw the place where He was laid.” They knew where they were going, and they could see it when they got there.

##### 3. Anoint Him, v. 1c

Also, they had a purpose: to anoint Christ with spices. Once again, the realistic element of the text is highlighted. These are ordinary people pursuing what's all in a day's work. They were going about their business connected with the funeral of their Son or their teacher. They were not expecting something in the domain of superhistory, or in the domain of regular history for that

matter. They were expecting to do what they could for the corpse of their beloved Jesus.

#### 4. The Problem: Getting Into the Tomb, v. 3

Their plan was well-developed, except in one respect, and as they got closer to the tomb they realized that they had made a major error in their calculations. They didn't have anyone to roll away the stone. Now, the realism here is once again almost overpowering in its directness. We all know women, and we know how utterly realistic this is. Joseph rolled the stone into place. He was a high-class member of the Sanhedrin, but, like men in every age, he enjoyed a little physical challenge from time to time. Girls aren't like that. When I see a big rock, I think how fun it would be to take on the challenge of moving it. But notice their question. It's not "Which of us is going to roll away the stone?" It's not "who can be the strongest and muscle that dumb rock out of the way?" It's not "Okay, girls, look around for branches; we're going to have to pry on this thing ourselves." It's shrinking violet girl stuff: "Who's going to roll it away for us?" One thing is clear in this line of thinking: Mary, Mary, and Salome are proper Southern—I mean, Jewish—women, and they are not about to go strain their delicate arms by heaving on a giant rock.

Again, Mark doesn't just present the women, and name them three times—he strongly emphasizes their femininity, to the point that anyone who has ever known a woman will say, "I recognize that. Yes, that's absolutely classic." Of course, men can't get too impressed with themselves; notice that the men were all hiding, ashamed to have anything to do with the crucified Christ. At least the women were willing to come and anoint His body!

#### C. The Surprise, vv. 4-5

Mark suddenly switches into the present tense to indicate the shock.

##### 1. The Open Tomb, v. 4

They see the stone rolled away. And he adds that it was a big rock. It was huge. It didn't move by itself. It wasn't just blown away by the wind. The implication is that nothing less than the power of God removed the stone. Once again, the literal, actual nature of the events is emphasized. The rock was going to prevent the women from getting into the tomb, and now it has been moved. But why?

##### 2. The White-Clad Youth, v. 5

They came to get into the tomb; it's early morning, but bright enough that they're willing to walk right into the tomb. There they see a white-clad youth. Now, I don't know about you, but when I see someone buried Friday night, and then revisit the tomb Sunday morning, I don't expect to see the body gone and an obviously supernatural figure sitting there. "They were struck with terror." To enter a tomb and see there a supernatural figure clothed in white is a trying experience for anyone's nerves. But this ghostly figure doesn't moan or wail; he speaks to them. The everyday world of grocery shopping and burying loved ones has suddenly intersected with the power of the age to come, and the women are, understandably, not exactly ready.

#### D. The Explanation, v. 6

The explanation starts with a command: do not be struck with terror, "affrighted" as the King James has it. Then the figure in white goes on to make it clear that God has the situation

completely under control. He explains the entire situation to them.

Now, think about this technique in everyday life. If you run into someone you've never met before, and that person greets you by name, it's highly disconcerting. If the person goes on to explain accurately to you why you're there and what you're doing, you instinctively defer to him as having knowledge.

Let me make this concrete. Every time I go do pulpit supply, I attempt to sneak into the church and go incognito, as simply an ordinary visitor who happened to just walk in. My habit of going to Sunday School at these churches invariably torpedoes this plan; apparently we Presbyterians just don't get visitors in Adult Sunday School. Be that as it may, I have always been approached by someone who will say, "You're Caleb Nelson. You're here to fill the pulpit this morning. Let me introduce you to the elders."

At this point, I acquiesce. Clearly the man knows whereof he speaks. It's no good pretending to be an ignorant visitor anymore. And this white-clad youth was doing exactly the same thing. Clearly he knows who the women are and why they are entering an open tomb at dawn on the Sunday after Passover. So he establishes his credentials with them—and, don't you see, with us! This is a youth who knows his stuff. So when he moves past telling the women who they are and declares with power, "He is risen!" they knew, and we know, that he knew what he was talking about.

The worlds have fully intersected now, brothers. The power of the age to come has manifested itself in the world of grocery shopping and burying one's dead relatives. To confirm his words, the youth points to the shelf where thirty-six hours previously Mary and Salome had seen His body laid. Remember, the cloths were still there, just as they had been wrapped around Him—and the linen head wrap was laying wrapped up in a place by itself.

So here's the youth's evidence. "I know who you are. I know who you're looking for. And I know what happened to Him: He rose again. The emptiness of this tomb verifies the fact."

Again, then, the explanation witnesses to one key truth: Jesus actually rose from the dead!

#### E. The Command, v. 7

However young he may have looked, the youth didn't hesitate to issue an imperative to these three women who were, by human standards, all old enough to be his mother. The imperative wasn't very hard. It was simply the command to the women to tell what they had seen to the disciples and Peter. Now, conjecture has it that Peter is singled out because he had denied Christ before the crucifixion, and the message is clearly sent to him so that he will not go away and hide from Christ. This interpretation is the most plausible way to take it.

Remember, this is Jesus' mother and two of her friends—one of whom is the mother of the beloved disciple John. Clearly, there are some close relationships here. The women were not being commanded to go tell total strangers, the Romans, the Pharisees, or other potential threats. The call was, "Tell your sons and their friends what you have seen here this morning, and send them up to Galilee to meet Jesus there." What mother would be unwilling to pass on good news of this caliber to her sons? Again, this account is completely realistic. It breathes the realities of

everyday life, of friendship, of the mundane—and yet it shows that mundane intersected by the transcendent. It bears eloquent testimony to this: the resurrection of Jesus really happened, right here, in this same world in which you and I live today. It was a physical resurrection, and it meant all kinds of truth. Mark doesn't get directly into what it meant, not here; here, he emphasizes with every mark, with bold, italic, underlined, 25-point letters in red ink, that the resurrection was a genuine event in genuine this-worldly history. And yet he also presents us with the sobering fact that the realest thing that ever happened still, by itself, doesn't produce obedience and good works. The point of verse 8 is this:

## II. The Witnesses Didn't Draw the Right Application, v. 8

Notice verse 8 with me. These women apparently didn't find this angel, even in the non-threatening guise of a youth, to be a cute Precious Moments type of being. They booked it. These are the same girls who wouldn't roll away a big stone; this is Jesus' own mother and her friends, yet they are so consumed by trembling and astonishment that are unable even to tell their own sons.

What do we make of this, brothers? We find only this: that the resurrection is no miracle-worker. You can see up-close and personal, in living Technicolor, the greatest work God ever did and even speak with the supernatural being who interprets it all to you—and then run away and completely fail to do the simplest thing God asks.

My church is not abnormal in praying for healing, and then forgetting all about the bona fide miracle in our midst. The very mightiest works of God, unmingled with childlike faith and obedience, will produce in your life no spiritual benefit. You who partake of the ministry of the word week by week—who get to preach the word, to handle holy things, who will soon be given the awesome privilege (if you don't already have it) of breaking and distributing the bread which signifies the body of Christ—what effect does all this have on you? Does it soften your heart and make you more obedient? O, brothers, I know we don't hear a lot about Mary in this institution—but I think it's safe to say that she loved Christ on earth a great deal more than any of us do. Yet even she stood afar off at His crucifixion; even she succumbed to fear when she heard the announcement of His resurrection. Will you boldly proclaim His resurrection, not only to your own children, but to strangers, to enemies, to persecutors and mockers? Will you make full use of the ministry to which God has called you? Brothers, witnessing the mightiest work of God will never, in itself, make you a good servant of Jesus Christ. Don't beg in prayer that you might see results from your labor. Ask instead that God would make you a proper servant.

A fruit-driven ministry falls under Mark's condemnation in this eighth verse. Do you want to see God work in your church, your world, your life? Of course. We all do. But if our hope is fixed on that, we will find once again that the resurrection is no miracle-worker. Fruitfulness in ministry is not where we place our trust. Seeing the resurrection itself won't make you obedient. Joseph saw the crucifixion and looked beyond it, responding in faith and taking care of the body of Christ. The frame story presents him in deliberate contrast to these women, who saw the resurrection and refused to obey. How much less, then, will seeing any number of conversions, administering any number of baptisms, witnessing any amount of answered prayer

and seeing any amount of gospel prosperity among the kingdoms of the earth actually transform your heart and make you obedient? Of course, brothers, we must hope *for* these things—but we should never hope *in* them.

Beg Him for the grace to be faithful, to be strong in the love that casts out fear, no matter what. Fix your eyes on the resurrected Christ. He really came out of that grave under His own power, entering once again the world of grocery lists and mourning mothers.

That the resurrection really happened is your greatest encouragement. If you despair even of life in the ministry—and you will—then look to God, who raises the dead. Look again to Mark 16, which emphasizes in every imaginable way how real this resurrection was. Don't draw the wrong application from that. Don't have your heart hardened by God's mighty works, and don't put your hope in seeing them. By themselves, the mighty works will never change you. So don't look for them; look instead for the God who does them. Fix your faith not on the empty tomb, but on the risen Christ. Amen.

Do you know what He did there? Let the Westminster Divines answer the question: “he declared himself to be the Son of God, to have satisfied divine justice, to have vanquished death, and him that had the power of it, and to be Lord of quick and dead: all which he did as a public person, the head of his Church, for their justification, quickening in grace, support against enemies, and to assure them of their resurrection from the dead at the last day” (WLC 52). O, congregation of Christ, your resurrection is coming—but your Lord's has come, and you were spiritually raised with Him. Fix your confidence in that; ask the Spirit to apply the resurrection's benefits to you, and don't misapply them to yourself. Only then will you speak boldly of all God's mighty works.