

Jesus Rose from the Grave! Mark 16:1-8
Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
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This month we're doing a short sermon series entitled, "The Joy of Following Jesus." We've talked about who Jesus is, first of all. He is divine. He is God. And He speaks and acts with divine authority. Secondly, we've looked at the death of Jesus. Why did Jesus die? He died to bear the penalty for sin which we deserve. And this morning we come to the resurrection. Jesus rose from the grave! And these three realities are so significant, so central, to the Christian faith. Who Jesus is, and what He has accomplished in His death and resurrection. Think of a three-legged stool. If one leg is missing, you're going to have a really tough time sitting on that thing. Each leg of the stool is essential. Similarly, these three biblical truths are fundamental to the Christian faith. For a person to be a believer, to be saved, he or she must come to see these three wonderful realities.

To joyfully submit to Jesus' divine authority. To find such comfort and peace in the fact that Jesus, the God-Man, died on the cross for my sins. And to celebrate that He rose from the grave!

It's our hope, this month, that we can rejoice together in these things, and that we can invite others to rejoice in these Gospel truths.

If you're not yet a believer, we want you to understand that this is what Christianity is all about. Jesus, the God-Man, who came to this earth to live a perfect life on our behalf, who died a sacrificial death on the cross in our place, and who then rose from the grave on the third day showing that He is who He says He is and showing that He really did accomplish what He said He was accomplishing.

He could have said all those things. He could have done all those miracles, even. But if He died and then stayed in the grave, then His mission failed. But He didn't stay in the grave. He rose again!

There's such joy in following Jesus, and that joy is connected in such a foundational way to the resurrection. What if Jesus was not raised? The Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthian church, in 1 Corinthians 15:17, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." That would be the absence of joy. To have our faith in a mere man who died and then rotted in the grave. How foolish and depressing that would be.

But that's not the case. We have a Savior who preached the best news in the world, that our sins can be forgiven through Him, through His atoning death. And then He did suffer on that cross, on a Friday. He died and was buried. And then on Sunday

morning that tomb was empty, and He appeared to many. He demonstrated His authority over death. He demonstrated his triumph over sin. He showed that His death really did pay the penalty for our sin, completely.

Let me ask you, friend, what are your thoughts about death and the afterlife? That might be a question some of you try to ignore. But it's a question you cannot ignore forever.

Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, put the question very pointedly like this, in his book, *A Confession*: "My question—that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide—was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man . . . a question without an answer to which one cannot live. It was: 'What will come of what I am doing today or tomorrow? What will come of my whole life? Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?' It can also be expressed thus: Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?"

In other words, in light of the fact that I am going to die someday, what is my hope beyond the grave? Have you thought about that? Have you wondered where you will go after you die? Do you fear death?

Our perception of the future has a powerful impact on us in the present. If you are fearing death, uncertain of what will happen when you die, you may live with an immense amount of anxiety and worry. But if you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that when you die you will go to be with the Lord, in paradise, then you can experience a great amount of joy, even in very tough times.

There's that song, "Because He Lives I can face tomorrow; Because He lives, all fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future, and life is worth the living just because He lives." This is what we want to celebrate this morning. The joy of following Jesus, because we follow a risen Savior. Jesus rose from the grave!

We're going to study the passage in Mark 16 today.

Read Mark 16:1-8

Scared and Surprised

We'll start by considering the women's expectations as they make their way to the tomb, and the range of emotions they experience. The sadness, the loss, thinking of Jesus' death. And then being scared when they encounter the angel. And then the surprise of realizing that Jesus is alive!

The question we can ask 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 on Friday evening (the sun was about to go down, and the Sabbath was beginning, they couldn't finish that task) 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 are 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! They were scared at the sight of the angel, and the surprised by the angel's message.

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.

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.

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 is the stone rolled away, and Jesus' body is gone, and an angel is in the tomb, but also this angel knows their thoughts and intentions.

But now 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 surprising and wonderful news. 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 points to that same exact spot and tells them, Look, His body is gone. And the reason it's gone is because He's alive again.

The Empty 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. I mention these details because I want us to notice the care that is taken here to identify these eyewitnesses.

Richard Bauckham, a New Testament scholar, has published a book that is very helpful in realizing this feature of the Gospel accounts. The book is called “Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony.” Listen to what he writes about the women who were at the cross and at the tomb. “In the synoptic Gospels the role of the women as eyewitnesses is crucial: they see Jesus die, they see his body being laid in the tomb, they find the tomb empty. The fact that some of the women were at all three events means that they can testify that Jesus was dead when laid in the tomb and that it was the tomb in which he was buried that they subsequently found empty. All three Synoptic Gospels repeatedly make the women the subjects of verbs of seeing: they ‘saw’ the events as Jesus died, they ‘saw’ where he was laid in the tomb, they went on the first day of the week to ‘see’ the tomb, they ‘saw’ the stone rolled away, they ‘saw’ the young man sitting on the right side, and the angel invited them to ‘see’ the empty place where Jesus' body had lain. It could hardly be clearer that the Gospels are appealing to their role as eyewitnesses.” (page 48)

This is really a fascinating thing to consider. If you find yourself skeptical about the Bible, skeptical about the resurrection of Jesus, I encourage you to look into this further, with an open mind. Mark is giving an historically credible account of what happened. It may sound incredible, but he's giving the names of people who were there, who saw these things with their own eyes . . . and for the first readers of Mark's Gospel, it would be possible for them to go and find those eyewitnesses to verify what Mark wrote. And it wasn't just these women who were eyewitnesses to

the resurrection. There were many, many more who saw Jesus over the following 40 days leading up to His ascension.

Paul makes reference to these eyewitnesses in 1 Corinthians 15, which I already quoted from. Earlier in that chapter he writes this, “that he appeared to Cephas [that’s Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” (1 Corinthians 15:5–8, ESV)

Now, it’s interesting, as we learn in Mark 16, that the resurrection of Jesus Christ was first revealed to women. They were the first ones to see the empty tomb. 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. It was part of the sexism of that day. 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.

Rebecca McGlaughlin makes this observation. She published a book this year that is really helpful. Stacy have been reading some of it over the summer, and discussing it with our teenage kids, Milaina and Noah. The book is called, “Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World’s Largest Religion.” In her chapter addressing the question, “How can you take the Bible literally?” she says, “There is no way the Gospel writers would have chosen women as key witnesses in a fabricated story. That would be like resting a vital legal claim today on the testimony of a few kids.” (page 107)

Do you get the point? This actually shows us the reliability of the Gospels. It shows us the authenticity of these accounts. Because if they were making up a story, if they were fabricating this, 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 the empty tomb.

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 Jesus Christ and their confidence that these historical events really occurred. People don't go to their death for a made-up story, something they know to be false. If it's made-up, they'll deny it before they'll die for it. But many of these individuals (eyewitnesses) 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. Blaise Pascal said, "I believe those witnesses who get their throats cut." Indeed, the fact that they laid down their lives for this truth, is a huge indicator (along with much other proof) that what they affirmed is really true.

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, His resurrection body. But the first evidence was the empty tomb. That was the angel's testimony to the women. He has risen; he's not here . . . the tomb is empty.

Disciples Who Had Deserted

As I've mentioned, this sermon series is "The Joy of Following Jesus." There's something profound and precious here to realize about these disciples who had deserted Jesus, and then to see how Jesus restores them. These are the next 2 points. Disciples who had deserted. And then, a Savior who restores.

First of all, we have to remember that Jesus clearly foretold His death and resurrection. 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 that 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.

To quote again from Rebecca McGlaughlin, her book *Confronting Christianity*, she makes this point related to the truthfulness of these Gospel accounts. "The authenticity of the Gospels is further attested by just how embarrassing they are to the first church leaders. . . . the Gospels are extremely bad PR for the apostles. These details would surely have been airbrushed out if the Gospel writers were not keen to record what actually happened. Such particulars would certainly not have been made up! Who wants to be known for perpetuity as 'doubting Thomas,' or as the disciple who swore he would follow Jesus to death and a few hours later was swearing he did not know him?" (page 107)

And related to that, it's really interesting to think about the Gospel of Mark and its connection with Peter, in particular. Peter and Mark knew each other well. Their friendship and partnership in the Gospel apparently began very early on when the Jerusalem church was meeting in Mark's mother's house (Acts 12:12). In 1 Peter 5:13 Peter refers to Mark affectionately as "my son." Mark was with Peter, mentored by Peter, serving in ministry with Peter. And there's good reason to believe that Peter is one of the main eyewitness sources for Mark's writing of this Gospel. Papias, who was a church leader in the late first-century and early second-century, said that Mark wrote according to Peter's eyewitness accounts of Jesus' life.

So what we have in the Gospel of Mark is a faithful record of Peter's knowledge and experience with Jesus. And that is particularly insightful when we come to passages that give us a very vivid description of Peter blowing it. I think Peter learned his lesson, and he wants others to learn these lessons too. He wants to warn others by sharing about his own failings.

This shows humility, too—that Peter would be willing to share all of these painful and embarrassing details. How would you be inclined to retell this story, if it were you? "Oh, I was really brave to follow Jesus as far as I did. But then things got a little dicey and I had to tell a white lie in order to get out of there." That's not the story that Peter tells. He's not trying to make

himself look good. He's not trying to minimize the ugliness of what happened.

And this is what helps us see how wonderful and joyful it is that Jesus rose from the grave and restored to Himself these disciples who had deserted Him.

A Savior Who Restores

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.

I remember an old song by a musician my parents liked to listen to when I was young, and I enjoyed listening as well. Don Francisco. We had records, remember those things, almost the size of a frisbee that you would put on a record player, put the needle down, and that's how you played the music. Well, Don Francisco had a great song called, "He's Alive." It tells the story, from Peter's perspective, of the fear and uncertainty, and guilt and shame, that Peter felt following Jesus' death. But then the shock and wonder of seeing Jesus alive again.

The gates and doors were barred
 And all the windows fastened down
 I spent the night in sleeplessness
 And rose at every sound
 Half in hopeless sorrow
 And half in fear the day
 Would find the soldiers breakin' through
 To drag us all away

And just before the sunrise
 I heard something at the wall

The gate began to rattle
And a voice began to call
I hurried to the window
Looked down into the street
Expecting swords and torches
And the sound of soldiers' feet

But there was no one there but Mary
So I went down to let her in
John stood there beside me
As she told me where she'd been
She said they might have moved Him in the night
And none of us knows where
The stone's been rolled away
And now His body isn't there

Back inside the house again
The guilt and anguish came
Everything I'd promised Him
Just added to my shame
When at last it came to choices
I denied I knew His name

But suddenly the air was filled
With a strange and sweet perfume
Light that came from everywhere
Drove the shadows from the room
And Jesus stood before me
With his arms held open wide
And I fell down on my knees
And I just clung to Him and cried

Then He raised me to my feet
And as I looked into His eyes
The love was shining out from Him
Like sunlight from the skies
Guilt in my confusion
Disappeared in sweet release
And every fear I'd ever had
Just melted into peace

He's alive yes He's alive
He's alive and I'm forgiven
Heaven's gates are open wide

I think those lyrics, trying to express Peter's emotions in those moments, I think that does a good job of capturing the joy of following Jesus. Here we are, disciples who have deserted Him and disappointed Him in so many ways. But Jesus is our risen Savior who restores us to Himself.

Resurrection and Regeneration

I want to close with a very brief point about resurrection and regeneration. Think of Jesus' power to raise the dead, to resurrect a person from death to life. In Mark 5 He raises Jairus's daughter from the dead. He says to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I saw to you, arise." And immediately the girl got up and began walking . . . , and they were immediately overcome with amazement."

That's the divine power and authority of Jesus Christ, to raise the dead. And He, Himself, rose from the grave. This is resurrection power. And because of His death and resurrection, sinners like you and me can be spiritually raised from the dead. This spiritual resurrection is also referred to in the Bible as regeneration, or being born again.

Part of this new life we have in Jesus Christ, part of this new birth, is that we're given new desires. What we used to crave, we don't crave anymore, or at least we begin to crave less. And things we used to never crave, like the Bible and prayer and fellowship with other believers, those are things we now desire. We're new creatures, raised from spiritual death to spiritual life. Now we find such joy in our Savior, and in following Him. There is joy in following Jesus, our risen Savior.

Discussion Questions

- 1) What were the women expecting to find when they arrived at the tomb?
- 2) What's the significance of Mark recording the names of the women who went to the tomb?
- 3) How would you respond to a skeptic who scoffs at the idea that Jesus rose from the grave?
- 4) Why did the stone need to be rolled away?
- 5) Peter is named in verse 7. How do you think that impacted Peter? How should this impact us?
- 6) What's the connection between Jesus' resurrection and our joy? Consider 1 Corinthians 15:17