

Christ Is Risen!

Our second Scripture reading is Mark 16:1-8. Every Communion Sunday we recite together the Apostles' Creed, which includes this phrase: "I believe that on the third day Jesus Christ rose again from the dead." And on this Easter Sunday we especially celebrate this glorious truth.

Even though Jesus had foretold to his disciples his resurrection in the same breath with which he told about his looming passion and death, the harsh reality of Jesus' crucifixion and the end of his life by a brutal death, plus the fear of a similar fate that might await them, drove the disciples to despair and into hiding. A group of devoted women followers, also thinking their Lord to be dead, came to the tomb that first Easter morning, armed with the spices they intended for the anointing of his assumed emaciated body. As they worriedly talked about how they could possibly find help to roll away the 1 to 2-ton stone from the entrance to the tomb, they arrived to discover it had been rolled away. And also, they encountered a young man, whom we know from another gospel to be an angel, who had rolled the stone away (Matt. 28:2).

Mark 16:1-8:

16 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." ⁸ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a doctrine that grew up within the church. Rather, the church grew up around the truth of the resurrection of Jesus (CH Dodd). There are many signs, and as Luke says, "convincing proofs" that Jesus is alive (Acts 1:3), besides the many accounts in the New Testament. We've all heard of the missing body of Jesus, which his enemies would have been eager to produce; the undisturbed grave clothes that Jesus' body left behind in the tomb like a butterfly's chrysalis; the empty tomb itself; the obviously uncorroborated accounts in the four gospels that ring of authenticity; the 500 plus witnesses of his resurrection appearances; and the existence today of an ever-growing church, that has survived and thrived during generations of suffering and martyrdom.

The group that launched the church in its worldwide missionary movement through the period of Roman Empire-led persecution was the band of disciples that had followed and then failed Jesus miserably. Mark's gospel portrays the first disciples as negative more than as positive examples. One of their leaders, Simon Peter, failed Jesus miserably in his three-fold denial, about which Jesus had warned him. But what transformed these disciples was the discovery of the risen Lord Jesus. Because of his resurrection, these previously defeated disciples became Holy Spirit-empowered witnesses of the gospel and indomitable leaders of the church triumphant.

Mark chooses as his featured witnesses of Jesus' resurrection a group of women followers. If he were concocting a fabricated account to impress his readers, Mark would have described the discovery by a highly regarded man, perhaps a leader in society, religion or government. But Mark describes the experience of women, the weak and the "lowly, weak and despised nobodies in the eyes of the world," as Paul describes those God tends to choose as his witnesses (1 Cor. 1:27&28). And these women who came to anoint Jesus' body knew they were powerless to

remove the stone from the entrance to the tomb. They knew that the stone for them would be insurmountable.

The stone was rolled away, not for Jesus' benefit, but for the women and for all who would discover the resurrection. Unknown to the women, the risen Jesus had left the tomb even before the stone had been rolled away. We know that in his resurrection body Jesus was able to pass through his grave clothes, and then enter the barred Upper Room simply by appearing. The stone was rolled away, not to remove the body of Jesus, but to allow for the women, these witnesses, to enter the tomb. An angel, whom the women thought was a young man, told them what had happened to Jesus.

These women had followed Jesus and already their lives had been touched by him. But because they didn't understand the promise of Jesus about his resurrection, their hopes were trashed nearby on Golgotha's hill where Jesus was crucified. They didn't expect to find anything but a mangled corpse, and were prepared only to give a gesture of loving devotion to their Lord's lifeless body. But nevertheless, they were willing to look inside the tomb and consider the evidence for Jesus' resurrection.

In our Western culture it is virtually impossible to not know something about Jesus, and that he was the Son of God who was crucified and raised from the dead. Even the secular cinema-going crowd has probably seen movies about Jesus Christ. But then there must be more than a superficial awareness of the facts about Jesus. There must be a serious consideration of his claims and of the significance of his resurrection to us personally.

A pastor was approached by a young attorney who had been attending his church worship services as a seeker. The lawyer told his pastor that if he could supply him substantial evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus he just might be willing to become a believer. The pastor, wishing to encourage this young man to faith in Christ, immediately combed through his library, pulling off the shelves every book and article that might speak to the verity of the resurrection of Jesus. He included ancient histories and books on the reliability of the New Testament manuscripts, and all of the arguments based on the witness of Scripture, and since then, evidence such as the growth of the church. He even included successful refutations of such arguments against the historicity of the resurrection.

The pastor reported that the young man spent hours poring over and considering the material provided for him. Finally he confessed to the pastor, "I am convinced that the evidence is conclusive that Jesus did rise from the grave, but still I am not a Christian. My problem is not with my head, but with my heart. I know that if I believe, I must let him be the Lord of my life and let him change my life."

The women stood in the empty tomb where Jesus had been raised (vv. 5ff). The angel invited them to survey the evidence of the abandoned and yet unraveled grave clothes that had been wound around Jesus' body and head (Jn. 20:6-7). So with everyone, the looking and considering may lead to faith. And faith is a work and gift of God's grace. This separates the women, and Simon Peter and John, who also believed at the empty tomb (John 20:8) from the unbelieving lawyer. By God's initiated grace we're able to respond in faith to the evidence God gives us. The word, applied by the Holy Spirit, is able to penetrate the darkness of our sin-hardened and obstinate hearts. Right there in that vacated tomb, the Spirit of the Lord, now risen, came heart to heart with those women in a divine encounter.

This encounter is not a casual one, but rather a frightening one. As NT Wright says, the women were "afraid, of course, because empty tombs and explanatory angels are enough to scare anyone." The angel, knowing how frightened these women were, said, "Don't be alarmed!" They

no doubt feared that the body of the Lord had been taken away. But they were also aware that they were in the presence of holy God and surrounded by mystery.

We can't know all that might have happened in those brief moments in the abandoned tomb. But these women after that experience were to never be the same again. This is what we mean by the experience and terminology of rebirth, conversion, regeneration and transformation. Somehow, all that transpired in Jesus' suffering and death was made efficacious by his resurrection. When Jesus was brought forth from the dead, God announced that what he had in mind for the crucifixion of the eternal Son of God was accomplished. Now his Son was vindicated by God's raising him from the dead. Now there can be forgiveness of sin, a right relationship with God and the gift of eternal life. We who've been seekers are now believers and followers.

We must never lose sight of or take for granted the great mystery of our salvation, made possible "because he lives." When the risen Jesus touches and takes over our lives, the process of becoming more like him is set in motion. We do indeed become new creations (2 Cor. 5:17). And the mystery of transformation, even in slow times when we think there's no progress, is always taking place. The change is not always instantaneous *but it is* supernatural. Just like the women would never be the same again, so we, once we meet Jesus through faith, are never the same again.

The women inside the tomb couldn't remain there. The angel gave them a clear mandate to go and tell Jesus' other disciples where they were to meet him. The women came into the tomb as seekers. Now they leave as believers and messengers. They're not yet fully clear on what they believe, and their hearts are still trembling over the encounter and probably also over the unanswered questions and unresolved issues, but they'll never be the same again.

These considered-to-be-insignificant women followers of Jesus were commissioned to tell great news. They were to tell the other disciples that Jesus was alive and was planning to meet them in Galilee. They became the first to announce the greatest fact in history, that the crucified Son of God is alive! The cross was God's victory snatched from the jaws of Satan's intended defeat. Now there's salvation for humankind, forgiveness from sin and hope for life and eternity. We too have something to tell if indeed Jesus has touched our lives. Our testimony is not just about what has happened to us, but it begins with what Jesus has done for all who receive him as Lord.

These women fled the tomb "trembling and bewildered." They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (v.8). *The Message* paraphrases the reaction of the women this way: "They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone." But we know that after a short while, they were able to excitedly report this great news to the other disciples (Matt. 28:8ff; Lk. 24:9ff; Jn. 20:18). Eventually the women begin to talk, and as one has said, a group of near-terrified and bewildered women would soon have the entire neighborhood awake in these early morning hours (NT Wright).

But wait; let's put ourselves in the place of these women. They had just encountered the totally unexpected, and had seen an angel in an empty tomb, having seen the grave clothes and realizing their Lord, who was brutally crucified and whose lifeless body was laid in the tomb, was now alive and moving about their neighborhood somewhere. Perhaps to criticize their trembling, fear and bewilderment is to expose our own casual approach to our faith. Salvation faith deals with mystery and wonder. Our conversion experience may not have been dramatic, nor has our Christian pilgrimage been anything to write home about, yet for all who believe the living Christ is in us and working through us.

When Jesus is powerfully present, he cannot be ignored, as often he is in our casual attitude, when worship attendance is mostly a cultural obligation. The living Jesus simply will not be ignored. We must give a verdict and decide about him. His powerful presence either brings faith

and humble submission and God-fearing worship, as with the women in the empty tomb, or it brings fearful rejection of his presence and claim upon our lives.

And so, the mystery that seizes us is complacency-shattering but also transforming and leads us to true peace and joy and delighting in God. When we have this holy-love fear of a holy and loving God we need fear no one or nothing else. And he gives us joy that we've never known before. As the women exit and run in fear their fear gives way to faith, which is always the way the story goes in Mark's gospel. Whether it's the disciples' fear in the storm, which Jesus turns to faith by his command, or the fear of grieving parents of the death of a child, Jesus commands that we turn from fear to faith. He says, "Don't be afraid. Just believe" (Mark 5:36, 36; 6:50).

We know that these women eventually did what the angel commanded, and the good news of Jesus' resurrection spread like wildfire. This possibly unfinished, abrupt ending to this gospel is a way of saying that you and I are to finish the story. By our living a transformed life and by spreading the amazing news that Jesus lives we're writing our own conclusion to Mark 16.

Join me in entering the tomb of the risen Lord that we might recover more of the sense, the awe-inspiring awareness that Jesus lives here today through the Holy Spirit. If your need is for renewed joy, he's the Jesus who gives the joy of his living presence. If it's for peace, he says, don't be afraid, only believe. May we say with conviction, "I believe that on the third day Jesus Christ rose again from the dead!"