

Mark 15:40 – 16:8
Jesus Is Alive (Easter Day, All Age)

Sermonette 1 – Jesus was truly dead

Today we're going to look at Jesus' resurrection as Mark records it, in our penultimate talk in our series. But before we do, slightly unusually for Easter Day, I want to briefly look at Mark 15:40 – 16:1, for reasons that I hope will become clear by the end of the service. A reminder, we're asking ourselves two important questions through this series: Jesus's personal question, "Who do you say I am?"; and the natural follow-on question, "What difference does who he is make to your life today?" Let's read first, then, from Mark 15:40 – 16:1.

[Read Mark 15:40 – 16:1]

15:40 Some women were watching from a distance [that is watching Jesus' crucifixion]. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, and Salome. 41 In Galilee these women had followed him and cared for his needs. Many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem were also there.

42 It was Preparation Day (that is, the day before the Sabbath). So as evening approached, 43 Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Council [the Jewish ruling council], who was himself waiting for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for Jesus' body. 44 Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead. Summoning the centurion, he asked him if Jesus had already died. 45 When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph. 46 So Joseph bought some linen cloth, took down the body, wrapped it in the linen, and placed it in a tomb cut out of rock. Then he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.

16:1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body.

I don't want to spend long on this section, but you might well ask, why I am reading about Jesus' *burial* on Easter Sunday at all? Well, there are two reasons. Firstly, it has always bothered me when Christians celebrate Jesus' *resurrection* without *any* reference to his *crucifixion*. Easter is meaningless without Good Friday, just as Good Friday is incomplete without Easter Sunday. They are *one* event. If Jesus had just died a natural death and then risen back to life on the third day, it would have been an amazing, even miraculous occurrence, but it would *not* have saved us from sins – our wrongdoing and rejection of God. We would still be unforgiven and unreconciled to God. Only Jesus' shed blood could sufficiently satisfy God's holy love such that he could be both merciful *and just* in forgiving our sins. As Hebrews 9:22 states, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

Secondly, if we claim that Jesus truly rose from the dead, we have to be able to demonstrate that he truly died first. For, in the last couple of centuries, a counter-theory has gained a degree of popularity that claims that Jesus did not actually die on the cross, but merely swooned, whereupon he somehow revived in the cold tomb and then either escaped or was rescued. This theory is particularly gaining popularity amongst Ahmadiyya Muslims, though most Muslims still believe the official Islamic teaching that another person died on the cross in place of Jesus. Both claims are without foundation, and both deny the vital truth that Jesus died in our place.

And the eyewitness accounts in the Bible make it clear both that it was truly Jesus on the cross, and that he truly died there. It is inconceivable that women like the two Mary-s and Salome, who had known Jesus personally and closely followed him for three years, should mistake him for someone else on the cross, and

John tells us that his own *mother* stood beneath his cross too (John 19:25). Plus, the Jewish leaders, after making such efforts to orchestrate his crucifixion, would have made sure that the Romans executed the right person.

But could Jesus have just *appeared* to die? In a word, “No!” The Romans were experts at crucifixion, and it was more than their life was worth for a Roman soldier to shirk their assigned duties. Pilate was surprised by the speed of Jesus’ death – it was unusually quick for crucifixion. So, he took the pains to check with the centurion in charge that Jesus had truly died (v.44). Again, John adds the detail that when the centurion checked, he pierced Jesus’ side with a spear, which brought a sudden flow of “blood and water” separated from each other (John 19:34). Our modern scientific knowledge confirms that this is a process that happens *after* death, when the heavier red blood cells separate from the more watery plasma. Joseph of Arimathea also knew that Jesus was dead, or he wouldn’t have wrapped him in burial clothes and placed him in a sealed tomb. Again, John adds the detail that he was wrapped with spices between the linen, “in accordance with Jewish burial customs” (John 19:40). And the women who went to the tomb on the Sunday morning certainly expected to find Jesus dead inside it, or they wouldn’t have bought expensive spices to further embalm his body.

Jesus truly *died* on the cross. And it must have felt terribly final to the disciples. We can only wonder and marvel at how his death may have been received in heaven, or how the universe was sustained while the Word of God lay dead in that tomb on Easter Saturday. That’s why I love Robin Mark’s song that we sung earlier, and particularly the question in the third verse, “Were heaven’s praises silent in those hours of darkness? Your Holy Spirit brooding round that empty throne?” It’s a beautiful mystery that is worth pausing to appreciate. But then came the declaration, “He is risen!” And that mystery fades into a more glorious and transformative mystery – a mystery that changes, literally, everything, which we shall explore more later!

Sermonette 2 – Jesus is truly alive

We continue with the story from Mark.

[Read Mark 16:2-8]

16:2Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3and they asked each other, ‘Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’

4But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

6‘Don’t be alarmed,’ he said. ‘You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7But go, tell his disciples and Peter, “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”’

8Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Before we look at that passage, we’re going to do an Easter Egg hunt. Hidden around the room are some Easter Eggs. You just have to find them. Parents can help their children, but please only find one each. There are also some packets of Haribo for those who have an allergy to chocolate or any of its contents.

Easter Egg Hunt

Now, some of those eggs might have been easier to find than others. But how would you have felt if I had told you to look for Easter eggs, and I actually hadn't hidden any?

[Take answers]

The two Mary-s and Salome had clear expectations of what they would see and do on that first Easter Sunday morning. They were going the rock tomb, in which Jesus had been hastily laid, to anoint his body properly, so as to give him a fitting burial – one last act of devotion for the man they loved. They knew which tomb he was in because they had seen where he was laid (Mark 15:47). They knew there would be a large rock across the entrance, and they wondered how they were going to be able to move it so they could get inside (Mark 16:3), perhaps because the tomb was designed so it was easy to seal, but hard to re-open to discourage grave robbers.

But the women knew exactly what they would find, just like you knew when I said to find Easter eggs that there were going to *be* Easter eggs to find. Only, when these women arrived, the scene wasn't at all what they expected to see. No doubt from some distance away they could see that the tomb looked open. As they neared, they would see the entrance more and more clearly. And Matthew tells us that there were also armed guards who had become like dead men (Matthew 28:4). I wonder what went through the women's minds as they approached the tomb. I don't know about you, but I don't know if I would have approached it at all. If grave robbers were so strong as to kill a whole load of soldiers, what if they were still there? I know that's not what happened, but they could easily have assumed it *was* what had happened until they discovered the truth.

Then again, maybe their love for Jesus and their need to know what had happened to his tomb overrode any fear they felt. Whatever drove them on, they entered the tomb. And then they must have had the shock of their lives: to see, in place of his dead body, a man dressed in white sitting there! Mark is again economical with his detail. Matthew describes this figure as “an *angel* of the Lord ... [whose] appearance was like lightning, and [whose] clothes were white as snow” (Matthew 28:2), while Luke says there were “two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning” (Luke 24:3). It's hardly surprising that the eyewitness accounts of such a traumatic experience might contain minor differences, although it is not at all unusual in Scripture for angels to be confused with men either! So *my* take is that this was an *angel*, who had the *form* of a man.

But given that this angel had terrified the *guards* into temporary paralysis, it's hardly surprising that his first words to the *women* were, “Don't be alarmed” (v.6)! Presumably, his knowledge of their purpose (“You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified”) was also meant to reassure them. Only God could know such information, so if he sent this angel, it must be ok.

But then came an even more startling statement: “He has risen!” We can easily miss how confusing, unintelligible, exciting, but also terrifying that news must have been to these women. Not in their wildest dreams had they imagined this turn of events! Despite Jesus' prior predictions that he would rise from the dead, and despite the hints at his resurrection in the Old Testament Scriptures, the Gospels are very clear that none of his disciples remotely expected him to rise back to life.

I'm convinced that this was why the angel invited the women to come and see where Jesus had been laid – to help them take in the truth that he truly was resurrected. Again, John's Gospel describes the arrangement of the grave clothes, still in their place as when they had been wrapped around Jesus, with the head wrapping still folded separately by itself (John 20:7). This sight by itself was enough for John to believe in Jesus' resurrection

(John 20:8). For, if Jesus had revived in the tomb after swooning on the cross, or if grave robbers had attacked the tomb, then the wrappings of linen would certainly have been disturbed, if not taken away in the case of grave robbers. Instead, it seems that as Jesus rose, he simply passed through his grave clothes, much as he later passed into a locked room. The resurrection body clearly has some properties that our current bodies do not have.

How much seeing these empty grave clothes helped the women in the days and years to come is impossible to say, but it didn't seem to immediately relieve their fears and bewilderment. The angel instructed them to come and see where Jesus had lain and then to go and *tell* his disciples, and specifically Peter what had happened. They were to urge them to go to Galilee, where they would see Jesus. But what did they do – at least at first (v.8)? “Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

In the earliest surviving manuscripts of Mark's Gospel this is the last sentence, and most scholars agree that what we number as Mark 16:9-20 is a later addition by someone else, probably added to tidy up what was seen as a somewhat incomplete resurrection account. We don't know exactly *why* Mark's original Gospel ended so abruptly. Some speculate that he had to finish quickly or leave it unfinished to avoid persecution or to avoid his Gospel being seized and destroyed. That is more satisfactory than the more recent suggestion that Mark *intended* to finish in this ambiguous way to encourage and challenge his readers, who were facing persecution, to have the courage to obey Jesus' command to share his Good News, regardless.

But, whatever the reason for the abrupt end, there is something authentic in it. The sight of the angel would have been so startling, and the news of Jesus' resurrection so beyond their imagination, that it would hardly be surprising if their initial reaction *was* to flee in fear and bewilderment, and to tell no-one. Of course, we know from the addition to Mark's Gospel as well as from the other Gospels that all that changed when they actually met the risen Jesus himself. Then they had not only the courage but the unstoppable drive to share this great news of Jesus' resurrection far and wide. And it is significant, in a male-dominated society where a woman's testimony was questioned and doubted, that Jesus chose to elevate women by making them the first witnesses of his resurrection. Also, the fact that they were so scared, and yet became so bold should encourage us to take risks to share our own faith.

So, in the light of the overwhelming evidence that Jesus truly died on the cross and truly rose from the dead on the third day, who do you say he is? My prayer is that every one of us will encounter him in a new way, discover who he is in a deeper way, and so be emboldened to own and share our faith wherever we go. For there is no better, nor more necessary, news for the world at this time than the victory of God over evil through Jesus' death and resurrection. Amen?