

# He has Risen; He is Not Here

Mark 15:42-16:8

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on March 31, 2024

## Introduction

- ❖ Last weekend, we had the privilege of hosting Houston Christian University's Apologetics Day. Where the theme of the conference was on Defending Easter. **Now that involved lectures that provided historical facts that demand an explanation.** How do you explain the empty tomb? How do you explain the testimony of those who claimed to have seen Jesus alive after his death and burial? How do you explain the sudden, 180-degree flip in the belief system of his earliest disciples? So that they now believe in and boldly preach a Resurrection – where, prior to, it would've been inconceivable.
  - So what's the most plausible explanation? Many hypotheses were offered. The body was stolen. The eyewitnesses were merely hallucinating. The biblical accounts are legendary and not meant to be read literally. There were a number of hypotheses. **But it was argued that the Resurrection hypothesis offers the most plausible explanation.** The historic Christian truth claim that Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead and is alive today offers the most satisfactory account of all the evidence.
  
- ❖ Friends, on this Easter morning, my goal is not to revisit all of these arguments. Not because they're unimportant. Hosting a conference on these very arguments should communicate their importance. But this morning, I want to acknowledge that many of you are not so much wondering if there's enough reason for you to believe in the Resurrection. **But you might be wondering if there's enough relevance for you to care about the Resurrection.**
  - Maybe you haven't been to church in a while. So you haven't given much thought to these things. You can't honestly say that you've been looking forward to a resurrection. And even for those of you who are regular at church, it's probably the same for you. **Resurrection is not something you're actively anticipating or expecting.** So its present-day relevance to you is not all that apparent.
  
- ❖ But that's why this morning's text is so helpful. I think you'll find this passage to be relevant. Because I think you'll find it easy to put yourself in the shoes of these characters. Whether it's Joseph of Arimathea or the three women at the tomb. **Because, as we're going to see, none of them were actively anticipating or expecting a resurrection. None of them were thinking about it.**
  - So they come into this passage in the same place most of you are. **They're living life without a view towards the Resurrection. And let me tell you, it's depressing.** What these characters do in our text is courageous. It's noble. It's compassionate and caring. But ultimately, it's depressing. Until they're confronted with the Resurrection. Then it changes everything.
    - **As we walk through this passage, I want to focus your attention on these three women in particular and what they experienced.** First, we'll see them coping without the expectation of a resurrection. Second, we'll see them challenged by the evidence for a resurrection. Third, we'll see them called to evangelize the news of a resurrection.

## Coping Without the Expectation of a Resurrection

- ❖ Our passage begins with Jesus's disciples trying to move on after witnessing his crucifixion. **They're trying to cope without the expectation of a resurrection.** As we already said, none of the disciples were expecting and hoping for a resurrection. It didn't fit their categories for the Messiah. **The Messiah is not supposed to die. Much less to die a humiliating, shameful death on a cross.**
  - They weren't expecting this. Even though Jesus predicted as much. Back in Mark 9:31, he told them, "*when [the Son of Man] is killed, after three days, he will rise.*" But it goes on to read, "*they did not understand the saying, and were afraid to ask him.*" So they heard him say it, but they didn't get it. **Because a resurrection didn't fit their plausibility structure.** It wasn't in their realm of possibilities.
  
- ❖ It certainly wasn't for Joseph of Arimathea. We're told, in v43, that he's a respected member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. In Luke's Gospel, we're told that Joseph had opposed the council's decision to arrest Jesus (Lk 23:50-51). He was convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. It says in our text that he was "*looking for the kingdom of God.*" And he believed Jesus to be God's Anointed King.
  - **But now his hoped-for King is hanging naked and dead on a Roman cross.** So how did a true believer respond? Did he sit on the edge of his seat waiting for Jesus to come back to life and climb off that cross? No, he just did what he could to give Jesus a proper burial. **That showed the extent of his reverence for Jesus. But it also showed his resignation to the fact that his Messiah was dead.**
  
- ❖ It says, in v43, that Joseph "*took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.*" Had he not, the Romans would've just left the body on the cross to rot or to be eaten by scavenging birds. **But Jews buried their dead on the same day before sunset.** It's what the Law of Moses required. Jews would even bury their enemies who fell in battle. Because leaving a body unburied would defile their land. (Deut 21:22-23).
  - **So Joseph was motivated – by religious devotion and by personal affection – to make a bold request of Pilate to take down and bury Jesus's body.** Now the Romans allowed this if a family member were to make a request. But there was one exception. They would deny the request for anyone convicted of high treason. They were to be left on the cross to serve as a warning for any would-be insurrectionists.
    - **So it was rather courageous for Joseph to make this request of Pilate considering how Jesus was crucified for high treason and he wasn't even family.** And doing so would also out him as a follower of Jesus. And touching a dead body would make him ceremonially unclean right before the Sabbath.
  
- ❖ So there were plenty of good reasons for Joseph to back away and just move on. That's why his actions are commendable. **But it's important to note that his actions were *not* an expression of faith that Jesus will soon rise from the dead.** That's not what Joseph was expecting. All he could expect was to give Jesus a proper burial. He saw his Messiah die on a cross. **And all his hope died with him.**

- ❖ **And the text makes it clear that Jesus truly died.** In v44, Pilate is surprised to hear that he was already dead. It usually took about 2-3 days for a crucified person to die by asphyxiation. So he checked with one of his centurions to confirm this. **And understand that Roman centurions were experts in this cruel form of torture and execution.** They crucified hundreds of thousands of people during their centuries in power. And there's not one ancient record of anyone surviving a Roman crucifixion.
  
- ❖ So Pilate had no doubt that Jesus was dead, and he grants permission to Joseph. **Who takes down the body; wraps it in a linen shroud; and lays it inside a tomb (which belonged to him).** He did all of this in haste because the Sabbath was about to begin.
  - In the Jewish calendar, the Sabbath spans from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday. Jesus died, we're told in chapter 15:33, around 3:00pm Friday. So Joseph only had a few hours to make all these preparations before he had to stop working at sundown. At the end of v46, we see that he made it in time, and it says, "*he rolled a stone against the entrance of the tomb.*" Described in v4 as "*very large.*"
    - We're dealing with a large, disc-shaped stone (like a millstone), which would've been rolled down a slope that ended in front of the doorway. And the stone would fit into a wide slot cut into the rock and stay put. It was designed to make it easy to roll the stone into place, relying on gravity. But be difficult to move. Requiring the strength of several men.
  
- ❖ Now we're told, in v47, that Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses (and James; cf. 15:40) saw where Joseph laid Jesus's body. So they knew which tomb to go to after the Sabbath. Listen to Mark 16:1, "*When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.*"
  - **Now, like Joseph, these women were not expecting to see a resurrection. They were headed to the tomb that Sunday morning, expecting to tend to a corpse.** They had spices to anoint the body – to complete the customary burial process that Joseph didn't have time to finish. So when Sabbath ended that Saturday night, they bought the necessary spices, and they waited until sunrise on Sunday to find the tomb and finish the burial. But, by now, the stench of a decomposing body would've been too great to cover up no matter how much spice they brought along. But they went anyways. Not because it was an act of practical necessity. **It was an act of pure devotion.** It was a way to pay their last respects.
  
- ❖ **Just think of how hopeless they must have felt along the way.** The One in whom they placed their hope to be their Messiah was now decomposing in a tomb. His promises had come up short. The men who followed him faithfully as the Twelve were now in hiding, fearful for their lives. And only these three women had the courage to go to the tomb.
  - But along the way one of them realized, "*Oh no. Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?*" That did it. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. **Their plans come to a screeching halt as they realized that three women have no chance of moving that gravestone.**

- ❖ **Just think how hopeless, how demoralized, these women must have felt. Faced with this immovable stone crushing whatever little hope they had left.** I think many of you actually know what that's like. To be let down by someone you loved. To be disappointed by someone you looked up to – even God himself. You know what hopelessness feels like. **You have your own stories of dreams deflated and harsh realities confronted.**
  - Just think back to a season in life when you faced great disappointment. For some of you, that was a while ago. But for others that season is happening right now. **And isn't it just like life, in a Genesis 3 world, to kick you when you're down.** When you're at your wit's end something happens to tip the scale. You lose your job. Your friend betrays your trust. Your spouse breaks your heart. Your child falls gravely ill. Your loved one dies. **These events in life are like immovable stones.** They crush you at the worst time possible. And they squash whatever little hope you had left.
- ❖ **It shouldn't be a surprise if many of you are living in the dark despair that defines that Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.** You're living without a clear view of the Resurrection. Living as if death is the final chapter. Coping without an expectation of resurrection. And like the characters in our story, you might be able to scrape some meaning, some purpose or significance out of life. Your actions can be courageous and compassionate. They can be noble and honorable. But in the end, they're futile. They're depressing. Without any hope beyond the grave, then all of it ends there. Sealed in a tomb by an immovable stone.

### **Challenged By the Evidence for a Resurrection**

- ❖ But what if – what if that's not the end? What if those stones are not as immovable as we thought? What if there is hope beyond the grave? In other words, what if there is a resurrection? That's the new question that confronted these women. That leads to our second observation: **We see these women challenged by the evidence for a resurrection.**
  - The most apparent piece of evidence was the empty tomb. We're told, in v4, that when they arrived at the tomb, they were surprised to find that the gravestone had already been rolled back. And as they entered the tomb, they saw *“a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed.”* Based on all the other instances of angelic visitations in the Gospel accounts, this was certainly an angel. And he says in v6, *“Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.”*
- ❖ **So in Mark's account, what the women encounter is – not a Resurrection appearance of Christ – but an empty tomb.** That's the evidence they're given. Now I think there are solid reasons for us to trust their account. To believe them when they claim the tomb was empty.
  - Because if it wasn't empty – if his body was there and they were fabricating a story – it could've been easily refuted. **If the Christian movement that sprang up overnight was seen as a threat, the authorities could've shut down the rumors of a resurrection by producing the body.** Open the tomb and prove that Jesus is there. But they didn't. They couldn't. Because there was no body in that tomb.

- ❖ Now that fact alone doesn't prove the Resurrection. There are possible explanations. The Jews authorities offered one. **In Matthew 28:11-15, we're told that they paid off the guards to go along with the story that Jesus's disciples came by night and stole the body.** So that's their explanation: The tomb was empty because the body was stolen.
  - Okay, that's a *possible* explanation. But is it a *plausible* explanation? It assumes his disciples, in their grief, were in the right frame of mind to concoct and execute this brazen plan. But not only that, it assumes they were expecting a resurrection.
  
- ❖ **The real irony is that the only people expecting a resurrection – at least claims to a resurrection – were Jesus's opponents.** They took his prediction of being raised on the third day more seriously than his followers. Of course, they didn't actually believe he would be resurrected. But the chief priests thought his disciples were crazy enough to try and steal the body. So we read, in Matthew 27:62-66, that the chief priests and Pharisees asked Pilate for soldiers to secure the site by sealing the stone and posting guards.
  - Little did they know how little they had to worry about. They didn't realize how much his followers had resigned themselves to believing their Master was dead. But in another twist of irony, the authorities had no idea that their actions to seal the stone and secure a guard would only result in strengthening the case for the Resurrection. Because now it's that much more unlikely that the disciples could've outwitted or overpowered armed Roman centurions to steal the body. **Bottom line, the idea that the disciples stole the body is highly implausible.**
  
- ❖ But you still need an explanation for the empty tomb. Well, there is a plausible alternative. **It's the explanation given by all four Gospel accounts based on eyewitness testimony – Jesus has risen, just as he said.** There are multiple accounts in Matthew, Luke, John, Acts, and 1 Corinthians 15 of eyewitnesses claiming to have experienced postmortem appearances of Christ. Claiming to have seen Jesus, after his crucifixion, walking on the road with them, eating and drinking with them, allowing them to touch his nail-scarred hands.
  - **When you put these two facts together – the empty tomb and these resurrection sightings – it strengthens the case for the Resurrection.** If you only had an empty tomb – but no sightings – then you might conclude with the authorities that someone stole the body. And, on the flip side, if a rumor goes around of resurrection sightings – but no one said they saw an empty tomb – then you might conclude that the Resurrection is just a fabricated story. You'd be asking to check the tomb.
  
- ❖ But if people are claiming to have seen Jesus after his death (more than 500 claims according to 1 Corinthians 15:6), then the plausibility of a Resurrection increases and surpasses this theory that the body was stolen. **The more plausible explanation for the emptiness of the tomb would be the eyewitness claims of a Resurrection.**
  - But some of you might be thinking, "Sure, it's plausible – based on *this* account of events. But, of course, this narrative was written by one of Jesus's followers. So it's biased. It's a fabricated story. It's what they wished could've happened"

- ❖ But that claim makes little sense when you consider that resurrection – not only didn't fit the plausibility structure of Jesus's disciples – but it wouldn't have been plausible or desirable for any of the peoples they were trying to convince. **If you were concocting a narrative for a brand new religious movement in the first-century Greco-Roman world, it would be absurd to make a resurrection the central claim of your religion.**
  - Greeks considered the physical body to be a prison house for the soul. Their hope was to one day slough off this mortal body. So to be resurrected – reunited with your body – would've been highly undesirable. And for Jews, the idea of an individual resurrection taking place in the middle of history – not tied to an end times cataclysmic event – would've been unthinkable. Not theologically possible.
- ❖ **So if Mark was fabricating a story that he hoped would be believed by Jews and Gentiles – then why would he include, as a central claim, something that is philosophically undesirable for Gentiles and theologically unthinkable for Jews?** The most plausible explanation for why all four Gospels include a Resurrection – and why so many first-century Jews and Gentiles would begin worshipping a Resurrected Lord and putting their hope in his Resurrection – is because it actually happened.

### **Called to Evangelize the News of a Resurrection**

- ❖ So we saw these three women trying to cope and get by without expectation of a resurrection. Then, we saw them confronted with compelling evidence for a resurrection – defying and eventually transforming their expectations. And not only their *expectations*. **Resurrection transforms them – their core identity and calling.** Church history tells us that these three women became the first Christian evangelists. The first people to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.
- ❖ If you're familiar with the other Gospels, then you're probably notice that Mark's resurrection narrative is unique. It's unique in that it doesn't mention any of those resurrection sightings. It only presents the reader with an empty tomb. **And what Mark relies on heavily is the weight of proclamation.** He records the angel's proclamation that Jesus has risen. That he is not here.
  - I think that's an intentional choice of Mark's part. I'm certain he knew about the resurrection sightings because 1 Corinthians 15 was written by Paul years earlier. So they stories of seeing Jesus were well-known and well-established. **But I think Mark left them out so that readers, like us, can more easily identify with the followers of Jesus in his account.**
- ❖ It's just harder to identify with the experience of the disciples in the other Gospels when they get to immediately see the Risen Lord with their own eyes and touch him with their own hands. **If we're honest, we can be envious of the apostles and the privilege they had to see Jesus resurrected.** If only we had that privilege today. If the Risen Christ would appear to us today, that would solidify our faith. It would transform us into bold evangelists. Maybe even brave martyrs like the apostles.

- ❖ **But what you need to understand is that, for the apostles, the resurrection sightings weren't a privilege. They were a necessity to serve as apostles.** To be an apostle, you had to be an eyewitness to the Lord's resurrection (Acts 1:22). It was a necessity. But you and I don't need a sighting. Because none of us are called to be apostles. We're called to be disciples. **And you don't need to see the Risen Christ to become a disciple. You just need to hear the proclamation that "*He has risen.*"** That he has risen indeed.
  - I think that's why Mark's Gospel concludes without a sighting. He's reinforcing the point that, to become a disciple, you don't need to *see* Jesus resurrected. **You just need to hear the news of Jesus's resurrection and believe.** To believe that, when he died on Good Friday, he was dying in your place. For you and for your sins. And, when he rose on Easter Sunday, he was rising to give you newness of life. Life everlasting in his kingdom.
    - Do you believe this news? This news that the angel first proclaimed in v6. That's what you need to hear – and what you need to believe – if you want to become a disciple of Jesus.
  
- ❖ **And, friends, that's the same news that disciples of Jesus are called to evangelize.** To evangelize literally means to share good news. And that's what the angel tells the three women to do in v7. They are to go and tell. Tell his disciples. Tell Peter. Tell them that their Lord is alive and will meet them in Galilee. Share the good news.
  - But notice their response. Look at v8, "*And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*" Let's be honest. That's a strange way to end a Gospel. It ends so abruptly and with a rather unexpected tone. "*For they were afraid.*" The end.
  
- ❖ That's why there's a supposed **Longer Ending of Mark**. Because ancient Christians also felt like Mark's Gospel ends too abruptly and too strangely. So, at some point, someone tried to amend it with a longer ending (16:9-20). **But very few biblical scholars defend its authenticity.** That's why most English Bibles will bracket off that section and tell you that the following is not found in the oldest and most reliable of ancient manuscripts. So we shouldn't treat it as inspired Scripture, which is why I'm not bothering to preach it.
  
- ❖ **My whole point is to argue that Mark intentionally wanted to end his Gospel this way.** Because there's actually nothing strange about how these women responded to an angelic visit or to news of Jesus's miraculous works with trembling fear and astonishment. That's how everyone reacted when encountering those same things in Mark's Gospel.
  - Jesus casts out unclean spirits or heals a paralytic. "*They were all amazed.*" (1:27; 2:12) He calms the storm. "*They were filled with great fear.*" (4:41) He raises Jairus's daughter. "*They were immediately overcome with amazement.*" (5:42) He walks on water. "*They were terrified [and] utterly astounded.*" (6:50-51) He heals a deaf man. "*They were astounded beyond measure.*" (7:37) He's transfigured before Peter, James, and John. "*They were terrified.*" (9:6)

- ❖ So how do you expect these women to react? Their fear and astonishment is consistent with what has already occurred. That's everyone's initial reaction. **Now we know, from the other Gospel accounts, that they didn't stay afraid.** In Matthew 28:8, it says their fear quickly turned into "*great joy.*" And though our text says that they initially kept silent and "*said nothing to anyone,*" we know from Matthew and Luke's Gospels that the women did eventually share the good news with the disciples. They did obey the angel's call.
  
- ❖ **But I think Mark intentionally left it open-ended because he wants his readers to be left wondering.** Wondering how the story ends. Did those women obey the call? Did they end up sharing the good news of the Resurrection? How did their story end?
  - **Because once you go down that path of inquiry – the questions quickly turn towards you.** How about you? Will you obey the call to evangelize? Will you share the good news of the Resurrection to those whom God puts in your life? How is *your* story going to end?
  
- ❖ That's why Mark ended his Gospel the way he did. **It seems incomplete. Because you and I are called to complete the story.** To finish the task. To evangelize the good news that Christ has risen. He has risen indeed.