

The Shock of the Resurrection

By Dr. J. Smith

Mark 16:6-7 "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. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

On Good Friday we remember an event that happened almost 2000 years ago. Our Saviour died on the cross and Joseph of Arimathea buried him, just before the Sabbath began. Mark 15 ends at sunset on Friday evening, with the women standing at the tomb. Mark 16 begins at sunrise on Sunday morning with the same women at the same tomb. They had come back after the Sabbath to add their fragrant spices to his body. But what they saw at the tomb changed their lives forever: an open tomb, the body is gone, and instead they see a nameless young man, in a long white robe, with a message for them that Jesus is alive.

Each of the gospels also gives its own perspective on how the women reacted to the news of the resurrection. In Matthew we read that the women left the tomb with great joy, in John we read of Mary's despair: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid in him." In Mark the reaction of the women is best described as shock: the women were alarmed at the sight of a young man sitting in the tomb where they expected to find the body of the Lord Jesus. And the words of the angel did nothing to put them at ease; they fled from the tomb shaking in fear, so overcome that they could not even talk about what they had seen.

It is precisely the emotional reactions of the women to the news of the resurrection that makes the story ring so true. This not a clever

story made up by Jesus' disciples; who would ever make up something like this? If they wanted to start a Christian movement they should not expect many people to believe a story like this. The shock and disbelief of the women and of Jesus' disciples is natural; it's exactly the sort of reaction you might expect. Indeed, without the power of the Holy Spirit, no one would believe the gospel of the resurrection of Christ.

The four gospels do not actually describe the resurrection of Christ. We do not get a first-hand account of how he opened his eyes and stood up. Hollywood would have done it differently. The camera would take you into the depths of a dimly-lit cave and zero in on a casket, and the background music would become ominous so that you just knew that something was about to happen, and your hands become clammy and your heart starts to pound, and there! the casket begins to shake, and suddenly there is a blaze of glory and a crescendo of angelic music.

Instead, the gospels tell us about the women. And that is because the gospels are eyewitness accounts; they tell us what Christ's followers saw and heard. Mark gives the perspective of three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. The same three women are mentioned in Mark 15:40 where it says that they had ministered to Jesus in Galilee and had followed him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They followed him to the cross and watched him die. And in verse 47 we read that the two Mary's watched as Joseph of Arimathea laid him in the grave. Then they went home and prepared spices to take to his tomb once the Sabbath was finished. They set out very early Sunday morning and came to the tomb just as the sun peeked over the horizon.

It might be tempting to criticize these women: had the Lord Jesus not told them that he would rise again from the dead? They should have believed that and looked forward to it. Indeed it is true that the women were not prepared for the resurrection. But in their actions you also sense love and devotion for their master. They had ministered to him in Galilee, caring for his daily needs. You can read about that in Luke 8.2: there it says that besides the 12 disciples, certain women followed Jesus, including Mary Magdalene, and Joanna whose husband was an official in Herod's palace, and Susanna, and many others; these women provided for Jesus at their own expense. They followed him everywhere from city to city, even to Jerusalem, to the cross and to the grave. They were determined to continue to minister to him even after his death. That had been their daily labour for three years already, ever since the ministry of Christ began. Now that Jesus had died, you might think that they would consider their task to be finished, but no, as soon as the day of rest was finished, they returned to their task of caring for their Lord. They prepared to do the only thing they could still do: anoint his body with spices.

They brought spices to help preserve his body for as long as possible. Why? Here I would like to point out that the word for tomb in Greek is the same as the word for memorial. The women were trying to keep the memory of Christ alive. And that sentiment is not so strange. We have memorials for soldiers who died in battle, to honour their memory. And closer to home, when we lose a loved one, our grief can paralyze us so that we feel unable to move on, and we almost resent it when others carry on with life as usual; it's almost easier to live in the past, because in the past at least there are memories, but in the future there is only emptiness and loneliness. There is something so very human in the actions of these

women as they stepped into the tomb with their spices.

As the women got close they began to discuss a nagging problem. They said to each other, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?" As they asked the question, they looked up and they could see the stone, for it was very large, says verse 4. They recognized it because they had been there when Joseph of Arimathea had rolled it against the opening of the tomb. But they also noticed that the stone was in a different place; it had been rolled away from the opening of the tomb. So they carried on and entered the tomb to fulfill the mission for which they came.

You can imagine their reaction when they saw the young man sitting there; they were shocked. Perhaps their first thought when they saw the open tomb and the man inside was that they had come upon a grave robber. But that explanation did not fit. The man was simply sitting there, as though he was waiting for them. Moreover he was wearing a long white robe, the kind of garment that symbolized honour and holiness, not at all the kind of person you would expect to find in a tomb, an unclean place for the dead. And so they were alarmed.

But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified." Or, more literally: "You are looking for Jesus the crucified Nazarene." In other words, you're looking for a dead man, but there is no dead man here. The person you are looking for has risen. And to prove the point, he added, "See the place where they laid him." In chapter 15:47 we read that the women had observed where Jesus was buried, and Luke says that they saw how his body was laid. So now the angel showed them that it was the same place, but the body was gone. And in another place we read that Peter saw the linen cloths lying there, folded neatly away. It all pointed to one conclusion: Christ had

risen. This was no place for spices; there was not a trace of death. This was not an unclean place but a place for holy angels.

It's hard to guess what impact the angel's words would have had on the women. With those three words—he has risen—the angel made their spices a waste of money, and their trip to the tomb a waste of time. The Lord did not need them to keep his memory alive; he did not even need them to keep him alive; he no longer required their care.

The young man had a new task for them: they had to pass on a message for the disciples. "Go tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you into Galilee." Go, tell, his disciples and Peter. Peter is mentioned separately. It sounds almost as if Peter is not included among the disciples anymore, that he had been excluded from the twelve. But is that so? It is true that Peter had denied the Lord Jesus, but nowhere do we read that the Lord Jesus had excluded Peter for doing so. In fact, the words of the angel show just the opposite: the Lord Jesus wants to make sure that Peter comes along. You could translate: "Go tell his disciples, also Peter"; in other words, don't leave him out.

Why does the angel make special mention of Peter? Because Peter needed to be reassured that the Lord Jesus still wanted him. Peter would have been filled with shame and guilt that he had denied his Lord. And if he were to hear that the Lord Jesus had come back from the dead he would have wanted to crawl away and hide. After all, the Lord Jesus had once said, "Whoever disowns me before men, I will also disown him before my Father in heaven." In Matthew 10, the Lord Jesus was in Galilee, and there he set apart 12 disciples, and he sent them out to preach and to heal in the cities of Israel. He warned them that their task would not be easy, the gospel would cause division and strife, and they would be

brought before governors and kings because of their faith in Jesus. But they need not be afraid, for the Holy Spirit would give them the words to say, and after all, those governors could only kill their body, not their soul. And in that context Jesus said, "Whoever disowns me before men, I will also disown him before my Father in heaven."

Now that is exactly what Peter had done. Peter, with all his bravado, claiming that He would never deny Jesus, buckled under pressure, succumbed to the fear that he would be arrested and condemned with Jesus, and so he denied his Lord. You might expect that the angel would say to the women, "Go tell the disciples, but don't bother with Peter." But instead, the angel insists that Peter has to come along: Go tell the disciples and Peter. Commentaries will tell you that Mark wrote his gospel on the basis of Peter's teachings, and so it is striking that only Mark includes these words of the angel in verse 7 of our text: go tell the disciples and Peter. Mark may well have heard this story from Peter himself, and if so, it shows that Peter never forgot the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ in his life. That should be a comfort to us when we feel that we have let our Saviour down. Yes, the Lord Jesus warns that he will disown those who disown him, but that does not mean that he abandons us the moment we do so. Instead he keeps calling us to follow him in faith, to come back, to pick up the cross that we have thrown down, and to follow him again.

The women had to pass on a message for the disciples: "he is going ahead of you into Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you." The Lord Jesus had already told his disciples to meet him in Galilee. You find that in Mark 14.28. Just after the Lord Jesus had celebrated the Passover with his disciples, and as he was on his way to the Garden of Gethsemane, he told them that he would be arrested that very night, and they would all scatter. "But," he added, "after I have risen, I will go before you into Galilee." There was no one else

around when Jesus said these words to his disciples. So now, if the women were to come to them and pass on the angel's message, the disciples would realize that the women were not making it up; Jesus must be alive. And so they would get ready to meet him in Galilee.

Why Galilee? Because Galilee is the place where Jesus had called his disciples in the first place. That is where he commissioned them the first time, in Matthew 10, to go into the towns, preaching and healing. The Lord Jesus was about to give his disciples the great commission, and that's why he was calling them back to Galilee, so that he could send them out again to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. In order to receive that commission, they had to follow Jesus. The resurrection gives a new purpose to life, namely to follow a risen Saviour.

Here we see the significance of the resurrection for the church. There are churches that pay more attention to the death of Christ than to his resurrection. They build cathedrals which are memorials to the past, with statues of saints and prophets, with crosses that have a dead Saviour hanging on them; they re-enact the sufferings of

Christ in great detail; they are pre-occupied with preserving memories and observing traditions. But the gospel tells us of a risen Saviour, who does not allow his disciples to get stuck in the past, but who calls them forward, who commissions them not to build memorials to a dead Saviour, but to proclaim the gospel that he's alive, just as alive as you and I, in fact, much more so, because he lives forever, free from death. He is real, not because the church keeps his memory alive, but because he has life in himself; he is not dependent on the church, but head of the church, and he calls people to a new life of obedience, to follow him in faith. If that is so, then the gospel is a very serious matter, because Jesus will not always have patience, he will not keep calling forever; there comes a time when those who do not follow will have to reckon with him, when he will disown those who disown him. That gives a sense of urgency to our work here at seminary, to equip ourselves and each other to proclaim the gospel that Jesus is alive.



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