



Trembling at the Empty Tomb

Mark 15:40-16:8

David Sunday April 12, 2020

This is an Easter Sunday none of us will ever forget. I know I won't. I got a text yesterday from someone in our congregation that had a picture of Tom Hanks with the caption: "And just like that, my pastor was a televangelist." Well, I never thought I'd be recording an Easter sermon from my basement. I do hope the days will come soon when we'll be gathering together face to face. That will be so sweet.

I do think this Easter could become one of the most meaningful Easters we've ever experienced in our lifetime, because all of us are more aware right now of our vulnerability. We're all feeling our frailty. We all sense need. I saw a post-it note that a woman wrote for her husband. It turned COVID—the word the world most fears at the moment—into an acronym of hope: **Christ Orchestrates Victories In our Distress.**

That's the message of hope I want to bring to you this Easter morning. **Christ orchestrates victories in our distress.** But we're not always quick to recognize what Jesus is doing. We can be like the Israelites in Moses' day who were being told that God was about to do a great victory for them in their distress, but they were not able to receive that good news. We read in Exodus 6:9, "*Moses told this to the Israelites, but they did not listen to him because of their broken spirit and hard labor.*"

Sometimes we can be like that. We can become inconsolable, discouraged and unable to hear the message of hope. In a sense, that's what was going on at the end of the Gospel of Mark, the passage we're looking at this morning. Mark focuses on three women who were the last at the cross and the first at the empty tomb. They were not able to recognize the glorious good news of what God was doing yet. They couldn't see, until they saw the risen Christ face to face.

I pray that's what the Holy Spirit will do for us as we open God's Word morning. I pray that He will show us **Christ, Who orchestrates victories for us in our distress.** I'm going to support that claim with two strong pillars that we'll draw out of this story this morning.

Pillar #1 – Christ is familiar with the depths of our distress, because He plumbed those depths and navigated their terrain.

Jesus plumbed the depths of our disgrace when He died upon the cross, bearing the awful weight of sin, with every bitter thought, every evil deed crowning His blood-stained brow. That's what these women witnessed as they saw Jesus die. They were standing there before His lifeless corpse and they were distressed.

Their names are Mary Magdalene, from whom Jesus cast out demons and who was transformed by His wondrous love. Also there was Mary the mother of Joses and James the younger, who Mark 6:3 makes clear was the same Mary who was Jesus' mother. And Salome, who was married to a man named Zebidee, whose sons were James and John. These are some of Jesus' dearest friends, including his closest relative—His own mom.

These women are not like the centurion in Mark 15:39 who is standing right in front of Jesus as He dies on that cross and now is able to see Who He really is: *“Truly this man was the Son of God!”* Instead, these women are watching from a distance. They're doing what the psalmist laments in Psalm 38:11, when he said, *“My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my nearest kin stand far off.”*

We've all seen the sad stories of people who have relatives and loved ones suffering from the coronavirus, yet they're not even able to visit them in the hospital. Some people are dying alone. Here's Jesus, dying for the sins of the world upon the cross and His nearest friends—and His own mother—are watching from a distance.

There is also a man who is willing to get close. He's not someone you'd expect: Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the Sanhedrin. This is the first time in Mark's Gospel that one of the Jewish leaders is on Jesus' side. We learn elsewhere in the Scriptures that Joseph of Arimathea was not in agreement with what the Sanhedrin were doing, but he was also not willing to stand up for Jesus. He wanted to remain an anonymous disciple.

Yet something's happening in Joseph's heart as he sees Jesus dying on the cross. He is moved and now realizes, “I can no longer remain a secret follower. I need to come out and let my loyalties be seen.” He sees that lifeless corpse of Jesus hanging on the cross. The sun is starting to set. As Sabbath comes at sunset, no work can be done—not even the burial of bodies. So if Joseph is going to do anything, he must act quickly—and that's what he does. He goes to Pilate and asks for the body of Jesus. Pilate is surprised that Jesus has died already, so he sends the centurion to confirm that death has occurred. When the centurion comes back and says, “Yes, Jesus is dead,” Pilate allows Joseph to take the body.

Joseph goes to the cross—probably with the help of friends—brings down the body of Jesus, washes off the stains of blood, wraps it in a linen shroud and carries it outside the gates of Jerusalem to a hillside, where cut into the limestone is a tomb—a rich man’s tomb, with shelves on either side. This fulfilled what Isaiah the prophet said in Isaiah 53:9, *“He was assigned a grave with the wicked, but he was with a rich man at his death, because he had done no violence and had not spoken deceitfully.”* Jesus’ body is placed on one of those shelves, then there’s a disc-like stone set in a groove on an incline, which would roll down to seal the tomb, guarding it from mauraders and wild animals. It was relatively easy to push that disc stone down that gulley, but to push it back up that incline would not be a one-man operation.

The point of all these details is to show us Jesus really did die. He entered fully into the depths of our disgrace. He didn’t just pass out into a state of unconsciousness. He didn’t just swoon on the cross. He fully died and there are witnesses to attest to this, including these three women. In that culture, the testimony of women was not admissable in Roman court. Women were considered inferior in this society. If Mark and the other Gospel writers were trying to make up a story, surely they would not have included the testimony of women as the first eye witnesses to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Mark is saying, “If you doubt what I’m telling you, here are their names. They’re still alive. You can ask them yourselves.”

Then there’s Pilate, the Roman governor. The Roman government had committed crucifixions of hundreds and thousands of people—and never once in history did a person survive a Roman crucifixion. There’s the centurion, also a witness, and Joseph of Arimathea, who carried the lifeless corpse of Jesus and placed Him in his own tomb. All these gave testimony to the fact that what the Apostles’ Creed says is true: “He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried. He descended to the dead.”

For those of us who know the rest of the story, even, that Jesus was buried and descended to the dead is a source of tremendous comfort. As one of the Puritans put it:

He sanctified the grave and prepared it for His people. They would have been afraid to go in, but He entered it before them. They can lie in this bed after Him. He has freed it from every horror. He has softened it and made it easy for them.

What rich comfort that brings us in our time of death. Because Jesus descended all the way into the depths of our disgrace, because He traversed the realm of the dead and harrowed its haunts, we can say amen to the beautiful words of Corrie ten Boom, “There is no pit so deep but Christ is deeper still.”

When we reach the end of Mark 15, we see that everything Jesus predicted would happen to Him has actually happened. The women watched where He was laid. They knew exactly where that place was. They weren't mistaken when they went back later on the morning after Sabbath and looked into that tomb. They knew where it was.

Everything Jesus predicted about His sufferings, about His crucifixion and about His death had been fulfilled—except for one thing. One thing that Mark records three times: Jesus said, “And on the third day I will rise.” Wouldn't you think that one of the disciples would be waking everyone up the morning after the Sabbath, saying, “Hey, remember what He told us? Do you think we should just go check at the tomb and see if maybe He has been raised?” No, not a single person is expecting the resurrection of Jesus.

At the beginning of Mark 16 we read that as soon as the Sabbath was over, on the first day of the week, the same three women who saw where Jesus' body was laid go to the tomb at sunrise. They are not going to that tomb expecting the Son of Righteousness to rise with healing in His wings, as Malachi the prophet had foretold. They aren't expecting the mighty Maker of the sun to have been raised from the dead. I like how someone put it: “They came to the tomb, not to witness Christ's resurrection, but to delay His decomposition.” They are bringing expensive spices to anoint His body, an act of love and devotion. They are grieving and distraught, probably after a sleepless night, for grief has a hard time getting to sleep and often rises early.

As they are making their way to the tomb, they have just got one concern on their minds. They are saying to one another, “Nuts. How are we going to move that stone? Who's going to roll the stone away?” They are hoping that maybe there will be some men there who can help them, because there's no way three women are going to be able to move that stone. But praise God, there's no way they're going to need to!

Mark 16:4 brings us to the turning point of the story and the turning point of the history of the world: “*Looking up, they noticed that the stone—which was very large—had been rolled away.*” There's only one hand strong enough to do that. The same hand that tore the curtain of the temple in two from top to bottom has rolled away the stone. Something has happened that changes everything.

In verse five they enter the tomb and sitting calmly on the right side is this young man in a white robe. When they see him, they are scared out of their wits—terrified and frantic. This young man carries a message for them from Jesus Himself. He speaks it in staccato fashion:

- “Don't be alarmed” —addressing their fear.
- “I know Who you're looking for—Jesus of Nazareth, Who was crucified” —addressing their hope.

- “He has risen,” or more literally, “He has been raised. He is not here. Look for yourselves. See the place where they laid Him.”
- “Now go, tell His disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see Him there, just as He told you.’” They’re going to witness the Kingdom of God coming in power. They’re going to see it today!

But their first response to this message is not excitement or ecstatic joy. Instead, look at verse eight: *“They went out and ran from the tomb, because trembling and astonishment overwhelmed them. And they said nothing to anyone, since they were afraid.”* It’s an abrupt ending, but the earliest manuscript evidence we have for the Gospel of Mark—and the testimony of the early church corresponds with this—is that this is exactly how Mark intended to end his Gospel: with trembling, with astonishment, with silence and with fear. The end.

These women are like the disciples with Jesus after He had calmed the storm. They were more terrified after He calmed the storm than they were in the middle of the storm when they thought they were going to drown. They realized, “We have come face to face with the awesome holiness of God.” Terror and fear is the response of everyone when they come face to face with God and His holiness.

These women believed God was going to resurrect the dead at the end of history, but they had no concept of a resurrection occurring in the middle of history. They had no concept of God’s glorious future breaking into the present the way it was with the resurrection of Christ. It was more than they could comprehend—until they saw Him face to face.

Friends, if there is no resurrection, there is no good news. Without the resurrection the story Mark began in Mark 1:1 as, *“The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God,”* that story—that good news—would just be a tragic story of false hope and broken promises. But because Jesus is not in the tomb, because Jesus has been raised, we can take heart and have hope that the One Who plumbed the depths of our disgrace is able to do something about our distress.

Pillar #2 – Christ is able to orchestrate victories in our distress because He conquered our darkest dread and is going ahead of us to create a whole new world.

I think one of the reasons these women run away from that tomb trembling and in fear is because the world around them still doesn’t look any different. It is hard for them to reconcile the brokenness, misery, despair and grief they were still feeling with the testimony of that young man in the tomb.

It’s the same way for us today. The world we live in is still a mess and Easter Sunday is not going to magically change all of that. We’re still in quarantine because there’s still a pandemic.

People are still sick and dying in our world every day. There are still going to be painful relationships, failed exams, financial hardships, lost jobs, unfulfilled longings. We're all going to carry baggage through this life—baggage of hurts, pains, disappointments, losses and failures.

I think one of the hardest things to deal with as you get older and go through life is what my friend Mike Bullmore calls “the mingling of irretrievable loss and unfulfilled longings.” It's what the poet Edgar Allan Poe was depicting in that chilling poem “The Raven.” This is a man all alone in his room, contemplating the loss of a relationship with a woman named Lenore with whom he will never be close again. The raven flies into that room with a cryptic, one-word, chilling message: “Quoth the raven, ‘Nevermore.’”

Nevermore. The longer we live in this life, the more we realize it is impossible to get through life without experiencing irretrievable loss. We will all stand at the graveside of loved ones and realize, “Nevermore will I hear their voice at the other end of the line. Nevermore will I see their presents underneath the Christmas tree.” And evermore we will feel their absence around the table.

Irretrievable loss mingles with unfulfilled longings. Maybe it's for the love of your life that has never appeared, or for children you would have loved to have had but that time has passed. Or maybe it's for your marriage not being anywhere near close to the dream of what you thought it would be. Or the memories we cannot forget of words we've spoken that we're unable to ever take back, of damage we've done that cannot be repaired, of failures that will never get a redo on. Unfulfilled longings.

This is the life we know. This is reality. We can try to suppress that reality, then something like the coronavirus comes and jolts us all into the awareness that this life is going to be filled with irretrievable loss and unfulfilled longings. In a few minutes we're going to sing, “Do you feel the world is broken?” We're all going to respond, “We do.” “Do you feel the shadows deepen?” “We do.”

It's precisely at this point that the risen Christ breaks through with life and light. But, “Do you know that all the dark won't stop the light from getting through?” “We do.” “Do you wish that you could see it all made new?” “We do.” By raising His Son Jesus from the dead, God is singing to everyone who trusts in Him, everyone who treasures His Son, “You will.” You will see it all made new. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, God Who made this beautiful world without a single flaw says to all of us who have vandalized His world through our sin, “I am making all things new.”

The resurrection of Jesus is God's blueprint for the glorious renovation and restoration of the whole universe. If you put your trust in the risen Christ, you too are going to share in that

glorious restoration and renewal of all things. Where do we see that in Mark's Gospel this morning? We see it in the beautiful words of grace that are spoken in Mark 16:7: *"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."*

You can imagine how distraught these disciples are. Their shades are drawn. They are remembering the death of their crucified Master. They're probably feeling the sting and shame of how they all abandoned Him and fled. They're experiencing the disappointment of the abrupt end of all their dreams and it's feeling like life is just sinking into an endless cycle of despair.

That's what death does to us. If Jesus is dead, it doesn't matter if He's plumbed the depths of our disgrace, because there's not a thing He can do about it. But if Jesus of Nazareth Who was crucified is now alive, then His death is the end of everything that destroys and the beginning of all things being made new. If Christ Jesus has risen from the dead, then He has the power to **orchestrate victories out of our distress.**

What that must have meant to Peter. Peter, who just a few days earlier had said to Jesus, "Even if all fall away, I will never fall away. Even if I have to die with You, I will never deny You," and who is now feeling most poignantly the sting of his denial of his Savior. To hear these women come and say to all the disciples, "Jesus has gone ahead of us. He wants to see us in Galilee. And Peter, He especially singled out you. He wants to see you, Peter. He's not done with you. There's a future and a hope for you."

That's what the resurrection of Jesus brings to everyone who trusts in Him. It brings the forgiveness of all our sins. It brings the restoration of all things, a new beginning for every tragic ending, the reversal of all that sin has destroyed. As Tim Keller puts it, "You don't just get your life back. You get the way it was supposed to be." The resurrection says that if you are joined by faith to the risen Christ, you will miss out on nothing. All the things you longed for but couldn't have, all the things you enjoyed for a time but had to let go of, all the joys you tasted but can't hold on to— they are all restored.

In the words of C.S. Lewis, "The scent of a flower I have not found, the echo of a tune I have not heard, news from a country I have not yet visited." The resurrection of Jesus is, "Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read, which goes on forever, in which every chapter is better than the one before."

That's the life Jesus is beckoning us into today. Just as the risen Jesus summoned the women, His disciples and Peter to meet Him in the place where He had gone on ahead of them, He's summoning you and me today. He's not just some great hero of history whose memory we are trying to preserve.

- He is the living One Who was dead and is alive forevermore.
- He is the One Who holds the keys of death and Hades.
- He is the Lord and giver of life.
- He is the object and satisfaction of our deepest desires.
- He is the Redeemer of our failures, the mender of our brokenness, the healer of our plagues.
- He is the source and satisfaction of our everlasting joy.

He's inviting you today, and He's inviting me today, with words of tender grace. "I've gone ahead of you to prepare a place for you in My Father's house. You know the way where I am going. I am the way. I am the truth. I am the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. But if you come through Me, I will show you the Father" (John 14:1-7).

Embrace Jesus today. Say to Him, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." You will not only get your life back, you'll get it the way it was supposed to be from the beginning before sin ravaged and destroyed. You will see that no matter how bleak the darkness, it cannot stop the light from getting through, because **Christ orchestrated victories in our distress**. He's plumbed the depths of our disgrace. He's conquered our darkest dread and He's gone ahead of us to make all things new.

Is He worthy? He is.

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