

Sermon Easter Sunday 2017

Mark 16

Let's consider the resurrection morning.

It was the women coming very early in the morning to anoint Jesus' body with the burial spices as was their custom who were the first to discover that Jesus had risen from the dead.

They had come to minister to a dead Jesus, instead they found an empty tomb.

The interesting thing here is that these were women, who had very little standing in those days. If this story was made up it would certainly not be women who found the empty tomb. People of the time who have chosen an important man or men to make this claim not a bunch of histrionic women!

We can criticise them but we have to remember they had witnessed his last moments on the cross. They had seen him die. They were in no doubt that he was dead. They were grief stricken. They had seen all that Jesus had said and done while he was on earth and how alive he was, but the brutality of his arrest, trial and crucifixion was out of the blue for them. Within 12 hours or so of the last supper he was crucified. Within 18 hours he was dead.

The only thing I can liken this to for you to understand what the disciples and women felt was what happens when a person is killed in a car accident. Imagine a person whom you know (*some of you may have experienced this for real and I am sorry if it brings up bad memories for you, please bear with me*). They are going about their normal business when their life is tragically cut short. Think of the surprise and the shock of their passing. All the things you wanted to tell them but never had the chance. The disbelief that you had previously been talking to them but now they were gone in a tragic way. The feeling that they just can't be dead.

All of these emotions and more were racing through the disciple's heads on the first Good Friday. Men and women alike would be reeling with the injustice, the speed of the arrest and execution, the potential threat to their own lives as part of Jesus' friends and disciples. What if the Jewish authorities decided to round them all up and have them executed as well? The disappointment. They thought Jesus was going to save them from these Roman invaders and here he is a victim of their cruelty. Where was Jesus when you really needed him? He was a great one in a crisis, when your boat is sinking or you don't have enough food to feed five thousand people or when you are really sick or dying. Where was He now and why had this happened?

Many of us can have sympathy with these early disciples. When we are going through difficult patches in our lives one of the common things we cry out to God is "Where are you?" we can feel alone and abandoned too. God can feel a long way off and that we are on our own.

What the early disciples didn't know was that Easter Sunday was coming, when their lives would be forever changed.

We have the benefit of knowing when we are in the dark times that Easter Sunday is coming. We have a Hope that is different from the world. When we believe in the resurrection nothing is impossible for God any more.

“More of faith than we’d like to admit consists of sitting in the tomb. And while maybe we didn’t anticipate those dark moments of waiting, they are nonetheless holy moments. Faith isn’t just Good Friday and Easter Sunday; faith is Awkward Saturday too. So much is sitting in that tomb with the soon-to-be resurrected Lord. It’s so dark. So damp. So scary. The silence is deafening. But there is hope in there.

In the tomb, the darkness is thick. But that’s where God is.”

A.J.Swoboda in A Glorious Dark

But life would never be the same again for these disciples of Jesus. They had seen him die and now they saw Him alive, really alive with a real body. There was no doubt for them that this was really real however fantastical it might seem to anyone else.

Resurrection truth or fiction?

The following is from the Bible Handbook by Holman

A number of theories have been put forward to explain what happened:

1. Swoon Theory - Jesus didn’t die just passed out and revived later
2. Spirit Theory - Jesus appeared only in Spirit form but his body remained in the tomb
3. Hallucination Theory - The disciples experienced mass and personal hallucinations thinking they saw Jesus but they were mistaken
4. Legend/Myth Theory – “This is the most popular view among people with antisupernatural biases, In it the idea of ‘resurrection’ is considered simply a first-century pre-scientific metaphor that expresses that in Jesus something significant was present. “resurrection” is not to be understood as a literal bodily event of rising from the dead.”
5. Stolen Body theory – The body was illegally removed by either the Jews, Romans or the disciples
6. Wrong Tomb theory – The followers went to the wrong tomb
7. Hoax Theory – Deliberately and knowingly fabricated the resurrection for profit
8. Mistaken identity theory - the disciples mistakenly identified someone else as Jesus after His crucifixion and burial or
9. Literal Bodily Resurrection theory – Jesus of Nazareth was supernaturally resurrected from the dead bodily and the tomb was empty and He appeared to disciples on numerous occasions up to his ascension.

There are various evidence which identifies no 9 as the most likely supported by historical and biblical data:

- a) Naturalistic theories are weak and they have to manipulate evidence as they are antispiritualism
- b) The birth of the church at this time
- c) The transformation of the disciples into bold witnesses willing to die for their faith
- d) The change in day of worship from Sabbath to Sunday by devout Jews
- e) The testimony of women
- f) The empty tomb and articles of cloth left

- g) The unlikely nature of mass hallucinations
- h) The fact that reported appearances lasted forty days and then suddenly and completely stopped
- i) The fifty day interval between the resurrection and the proclamation on the day of Pentecost
- j) The unexpected nature of the resurrection
- k) The character of Jesus and His claims that He would indeed rise
- l) The fact that no one could disprove the resurrection by finding a body
- m) The conversion of a sceptic like the half brother of Jesus (James) and the subsequent conversion of an antagonist like Saul of Tarsus

The truth of the resurrection is an essential one for our faith for without it we are nowhere and this is all a fantasy. Paul has a very good passage in his 1st epistle to the Corinthians about the resurrection. I imagine this was in response to people at the times who were sceptical about the resurrection. I don't have time to do the passage justice here but it is well worth reading and thinking about.

1 Corinthians 15 v 1 – 56

Some sound bites for today:

V 1 – 11 Importance of the resurrection as part of the gospel message (I will come back to this)

V 12- 19 If there is no resurrection of the dead then Christ is not resurrected either and our faith is futile and we are to be 'pitied more than all men'

V 20 – 34 Hope of the resurrection for believers encourages people to become believers otherwise there is no point

V 35 – 58 The resurrection body would be different and would be a result of the work of Jesus in conquering death once and for all.

Following his justification of the resurrection Paul finishes this passage with these words

V 58 "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain."

On the first Easter Sunday following the truth emerging of the true resurrection of Jesus the disciples faced a new challenge. This was going to change their lives for ever. Now they were commissioned to go and tell the good news about Jesus to others and to tell them that Jesus death on the cross was to pay the price for their sins.

To really achieve this they needed the gift of the Holy Spirit which would come later but in these early times after Jesus resurrected he spent more time teaching them and reminding them of what he had previously taught them.

Luke 24 vs 45 – 49

From this scripture emerges the nutshell of the Gospel

The Christ will suffer and rise to dead on the third day Hosea 6 v 1 - 3

Repentance and forgiveness will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem.

The disciples are the witnesses of these things and through the power of the Holy Spirit they would be able to do this.

Interestingly when we look at 1 Corinthians 15 v 3 – 6 we read this:

“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve...”

This is the evidence that those first disciples did indeed pass on the gospel as they had been taught. It is clear that they really learnt it when Jesus taught them even if they do seem to have been slow learners! Remember when Jesus was teaching them in Luke, he was reminding them of the Scriptures and showing them how He had fulfilled them. He had taught them this before so this was more of a revision session.

But the real change that would happen would come when the Holy Spirit would come upon them and they would be empowered. Remember Jesus talks about the Holy Spirit and that He “... will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” (John 14 v 26). The disciples would not be left alone, they had the Holy Spirit coming who would be Jesus within them, to demonstrate God to an unbelieving world. I am so glad for His work in my life, my memory is fickle but I can trust the Holy Spirit to prompt me and all I have to do is listen to Him... and obey.

Today we have a faith because of those early disciples and their faithfulness to do what Jesus had told them to do. We know of what Jesus did for us and “how it all works” because of their faithfulness in spreading the good news about Jesus. Let us not be slow in fulfilling our own commission for this generation so that all may know about the saving grace of Jesus for all.

Application points from the sermon

1. “Awkward Saturdays happen but Easter Sunday comes next!
2. The resurrection is real and is a foundation of our faith
3. As a result we have a commission on our lives to tell others about what God has done for us.
4. Even in that Commission God helps us through the work of the Holy Spirit