

Mark 16: 1-8 Isaiah 53:1-9

March 2025

Our short series in the gospel of Mark comes to an end today with the incident which above all others changed everything. Last Sunday we heard that Pilate could have had Jesus released as was the custom at the Feast but the crowd scream for Barabbas, a convicted murderer and Pilate weakly gives in and hands Jesus over to be crucified.

The crucifixion lasts for six long painful hours, during which time Jesus is mocked and insulted. Mark records certain unusual events. There is darkness over the whole land for three hours. As Jesus dies, the temple curtain is torn in two from top to bottom. This is no ordinary death. The centurion, who would have witnessed hundreds of crucifixions is moved to cry out, "Surely this man was the Son of God!"

Mark tells us that there were women watching at a distance. He even names them. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses and Salome. The Sabbath is approaching and Mark tells us that Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who has become a believer, goes boldly to Pilate and asks for Jesus' body and places it in a tomb cut out of rock. The two Marys see where he puts Jesus' body and they see a large stone rolled against the entrance to the tomb.

The Sabbath begins. From Friday at sunset till Saturday at sunset no-one can do anything except mourn the great loss of their Lord and Master. The Sabbath ends and these three same women go to buy spices so that as soon as it is light they can go and anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the Sunday morning, but after sunrise Mark tells us, they walk back to the tomb. They know where to go but their concern is how they are going to move the stone, which we read was very large. However as they approach the tomb, they see that this is not going to be a problem. The stone has already been removed.

Shocked and confused the women enter the tomb. Why was the stone removed? It wasn't to let Jesus out. No, it was to let the women in. They go in and they see a young man, dressed in white and not surprisingly they are pretty scared. Mark uses the word alarmed, but he tells us later that they are trembling and bewildered. It's the same word Mark uses in Chapter 14 to

describe Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane- deeply distressed and troubled. The women are expecting to find Jesus' body and instead they find an angel. This is a deeply troubling and confusing experience. Interestingly they remember later that he was sitting on the right side. It's strange isn't it, the details we remember when we look back at something that happened to us years earlier? These are the memories of people who were actually there, who witnessed this amazing experience. More importantly they remember what the angel said.

"Don't be alarmed," he tells them. How many times have we read that in this story of Jesus? The angel speaking to Zechariah, to Mary, to the shepherds. "Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy." And here again the angel has good news. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here."

The angel addresses their fears and then gives them wonderful, unexpected hope. You're looking for Jesus who was crucified. But He has risen! They thought this was going to be the end- that they had come to anoint a dead body. But it's a new beginning – a totally new start. The angel establishes a continuity between the historical Jesus they have known – Jesus the Nazarene, Jesus their Lord and teacher, the One who performed miracles and taught them about the kingdom of God and the resurrected Jesus, who has defeated sin and death and who will reign forever as this world's true Lord.

Are the angel's words a mild rebuke? After all Jesus had spoken of his death many times to the disciples. Mark 8:31 Jesus began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things, that he must be killed and after three days rise again. Mark 9:31 The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him and after three days he will rise." Mark 10: 33 The Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.

The disciples clearly did not understand what he meant. We read in Mark 9 that after the Transfiguration, the three disciples were told not to tell anyone what they had seen until the Son of Man had risen from the dead. V 10 tells us "they kept the matter to themselves, discussing what rising from the dead meant."

They did not understand that Jesus had come to die. They wanted him to stay with them, to be their teacher and to show them the Father, but Jesus' purpose was much bigger than that. Isaiah in the wonderful chapter we heard read earlier prophesies that the suffering servant will one day come to carry our sorrows, to be pierced for our transgressions, to be crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Jesus died for our sins so that we could be forgiven. The punishment which was rightly ours was taken by him and the power of death was broken. Jesus was dead, the angel says. But He is risen! He is not here.

The angel goes on to give the women a task. See where they laid him. They are to be witnesses. It was surprising that Mark should use these named women as his witnesses. In those days the testimony of women was not always given credence, especially in a court of law. Yet these are the witnesses God chose to take the message of the resurrection first to the other disciples and then to the world. At this moment, the men are nowhere to be seen, hiding in fear. The women are the ones who have come to the tomb to show love and respect to their master. But now everything has changed. They have a new task. "Go," the angel tells them, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Again, this is not a new message. On the night before Jesus is crucified, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus tells his disciples that they will all fall away. "But," he tells them, "after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Now the angel is reinforcing that message. Go and tell his disciples and Peter to go to Galilee, back where it all started. How very kind of God to pick out Peter particularly when he had let Jesus down so badly. As Jesus had warned him he would, Peter fell away spectacularly. He denied three times even knowing Jesus and when the cock crowed he wept bitterly. But it was not the end for Peter. He was to be forgiven and restored and go onto became one of the leaders of the church. How encouraging this is for us when we let Jesus down. There is always forgiveness from God when we repent.

The disciples were to go to Galilee, where they would meet Jesus. The women were to present them with the evidence that Jesus was alive but they had to do something about it. They were to be told to go to Galilee and they had to actually go there in order to discover that Jesus was really there. And faith for us is that same daily exercise of walking to where the Lord has already gone,

believing Him to be there and finding Him to be so. What is the Lord asking of you today? What a comfort that the Lord goes before. He goes ahead of us and shows us the way. We do not have to manage on our own.

This was the message of the angel: Go and find the disciples and Peter and move them along to the next stage. But we read that the women went out and fled in fear, trembling and bewildered. Ironically the one time they are told go and tell someone, they don't do it. They are just overwhelmed.

And this is where Mark's gospel ends. There are many theories as to why it ends like this. Some believe that the original ending has been lost. Some say that this is what Mark intended. The ending to Mark's gospel which we find in the church Bible was not written by Mark. It's vocabulary and sentence structure are not Mark's. Some believe that Matthew used Mark when he wrote his gospel and that we should read the end of Matthew's gospel to see what Mark might have intended.

But we know from looking at all four gospel accounts of the Resurrection and the rest of the New Testament that the women did not keep silent for long. The disciples did get the message the angel sent and they did go to Galilee and they did meet the resurrected Jesus. In some ways Mark's realism is comforting to us when we let Jesus down. The men in this chapter are not even there. Peter denied even knowing Jesus. The women are trembling, bewildered, afraid. They were just ordinary fallible people yet they all went on believing and the gospel spread. It was no easier for them than it is for us. They struggled with life's harsh realities but the resurrection showed them that Jesus would never let them down and that His promises could be trusted. There in Galilee they found Jesus in all His risen power.

Not everyone believed that Jesus was raised from the dead. Even today people say that He was never really dead, that the women went to the wrong tomb, that unknown thieves stole the body, that even the disciples stole the body. But the disciples are changed by the resurrection. Peter is transformed.

He comes to understand how the Scriptures fit together- how they all point to Jesus. On the day of Pentecost, Peter stands in front of a great crowd and testifies to the resurrection. He tells them that "God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses of this fact." Three thousand were added to the church that day. Peter goes on to lead the church, to write his two letters and finally to die for Jesus. The resurrection changed everything for Peter.

But what difference does all this make to us? Where do we stand on this? Have we accepted that we are sinful, that we deserve God's punishment for the things we have done wrong? Do we believe those words from Isaiah: "But he was pierced for **my** transgressions, he was crushed for **my** iniquities. Each one of us has turned to his own way and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all including **my** sin."

If we ask God to forgive us then we can be sure He will. And we are not left alone. The letter to the Ephesians has this wonderful verse in Chapter 1 for we who know Jesus to be our Saviour. "I pray that you might know the incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of His mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when He raised Him from the dead."

How amazing is that? That same power at work in us? Changing us, making us more like Jesus? Strengthening us? What a wonderful promise.

Lent is coming. It starts on Wednesday when as we have heard there will be a service on Ash Wednesday. Jeremy challenged us last week to read the whole of the gospel of Mark. Could we read it during Lent?

Jesus kept his promise about being raised from the dead so now we can trust him to keep all his promises. As we read the gospel through let's discover again what those promises are and believe that Jesus will keep every single one of them.