

The First Day of the Week

Mark 16.1-8

HAPPY NEW YEAR?

What were you doing a year ago? What thoughts were going through your head? What about this year? What's just around the corner that you're waiting for? I'm sure most of us have had some time in recent weeks to reflect both on things that have happened, as well as events we're expecting to see in the coming months.

On this, the first day of the first week of the first month of the New Year, we turn our attention to the events of another 'first day of the week.' Jesus, the one seen by crowds who work wonders and speaks with unheard-of authority had been put to death. And His lifeless body had been laid in a tomb. Most of his closest friends and faithful followers had fled out of fear for their own lives and they were wondering about their own futures and what was to come.

MARK 16.1-8

1 When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" 4 And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. 5 And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. 6 And he said to them, "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. 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." 8 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.

WHO IS JESUS?

As you have no doubt read and heard countless lists of everybody's favorites of 2005 one list that stands out to me includes the names Johnny Carson, Arthur Miller, Rosa Parks, William Rehnquist, and Pope John Paul II. During the past 12 months, I have attended more funeral services than I had in my previous 30 years of life. What's been on my mind in recent months as a result is the finality that death is for us. It is a hinge of time that is like no other; when we lose a loved one, nothing is ever the same afterward. We can't have a do-over; we can't get a new one; we can't simply rebuild. We often do not have satisfying answers as to 'why' this happens, but it's part of our experience, truth we must face. In some ways, it may be one of the truest things any of us ever confront. We have no control over it; we cannot change it. We are left simply to live in its wake and respond.

This is where we meet these three women in the early verses of Mark 16. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome were close followers of Jesus – they had spent the

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better part of the last few years traveling with Him and serving He and His disciples. And here we find them facing the dark reality that many of us have known this year. Looking back on these events, knowing what happened, it's easy for us to read past these early verses. In the midst of their grief, they are mourning the only way they now how: they buy spices to take and pour on the body of their beloved friend. The snippet of their conversation recorded here reminds us these women were acting out of love and devotion in their sadness; they hadn't thought through the probability that they wouldn't even be able to enter the tomb. They are striving to face the truth that their beloved Teacher, Master, and Friend, is no longer with them.

It's this weight of truth that Mark wants us to face throughout his account of Jesus' life—but it's not limited to death. He presents us with facts, he describes response to those facts, and then (without saying it), asks us to compare our response. He doesn't spend many words in detail (this is the shortest of the 4 accounts); he doesn't often include long explanations of what happens. He key events of Jesus' public ministry and then describes the response to those events, which is often filled with fear and doubt—even by Jesus' closest followers. Mark's intention here is that we would consider our own response to these events. Mark states Truth and calls his readers to submit their lives to it as Truth, as reality.

One of the key ways he does this is by repeated asking (often unsaid) the question "Who is Jesus?" In these verses, the answer comes through the words of the young man sitting in the tomb—no doubt an angel sent by God, bearing this message [5-7]. As we hear the answer, we need to wrestle ourselves with the Question, "Who is Jesus?"

THE RIGHT ANSWER

The right answer given by this young man, is that Jesus was a man from Nazareth "who was crucified" [6]. Jesus was a man, who was put to death as a criminal. From the rest of Mark's account, we know that Jesus was a great teacher, who amazed crowds both with miracles and with teaching that came with authority. But here we find that he was killed as a criminal. This is the only assumption of the grieving women we meet in verse 1. Mark tells us that these women watched from a distance as he died, and then saw the tomb where He was laid [Mk 15.40; 47]. In fact, we're even told at the end of chapter 15, Pilate (the man who sentenced Jesus to death), had the body inspected to verify that he had actually died. Days later, the natural response of these women was to purchase sweet smelling herbs to put on Jesus' body and around the tomb. Jesus words had come true, that He must "suffer many things, be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed" [Mk 8.31]. There is no question as to who this man was.

The response of Jesus' followers to these events was grief and fear; mourning over loss, and fear that in mob mentality they might be next. We must not read too quickly past this

suffering. Jesus had said repeatedly that He would be cast aside by those in authority, and would suffer and be put to death. This was part of the plan—Jesus was honest about the life of repentance and faith to which He calls us. We need to honestly face this part of reality: because this world is not as it once was, there is suffering, there is pain, and there is death—even for those following God’s ways. We cannot be surprised by the rejection we often face as we live out the Gospel in this world. We also need to consider the facts and the events of this past year that each of us has brought with us this morning, the thankfulness as well as the grief, and consider our response to it in light of the Gospel.

THE DIFFICULT ANSWER

The difficult answer is that not only was Jesus a teacher from Nazareth who was put to death, but He is also the one who came back to life. This is the clear proclamation of the Angel sitting in the tomb: “He has risen; He is not here. See the place where they laid Him” [6]. The message is that He was in that tomb at one time; but He is there no more. He was dead, but He is now alive. By their response, we see that this was difficult for these women [5; 8]. But note also that Mark doesn’t go into great detail to prove or even explain what happened. He assumes that Jesus was raised from the dead, and then challenges us to face this truth by our response to it.

We need to feel the weight of what happened here. A man seen by many to have died a brutal death is no longer dead. This is difficult for us, because it is not apart of our normal experience. This is not somebody on an operating table whose heart stops briefly or someone who loses consciousness and is brought back to life through CPR. Mark has made it clear this was not the case. If the right answer to the question “who is Jesus?” is that he was a Nazarene who was put to death, the difficult answer we must face is that he is there no longer.

Consider what this means for us. I said earlier that humanly speaking, death is the ‘great end’—for many the most real event we can experience. And yet with the resurrection, God is declaring to us that death is not the very end; reality is greater than what we thought. There is hope for those who would believe beyond the grave. Even as death is the great divide, the ultimate truth we must face, we now add to that the promise of something more.

THE OFFENSIVE ANSWER

Not only is there a right answer and a difficult answer, but there is also an offensive answer to the question “Who is Jesus?": Jesus is the One who restores us. We see this in verse 7. The angel singles out ‘Peter’, the one who had boldly professed that even if all the other disciples would flee from Jesus, he never would [Mk 14.26-31], but then denied even knowing Jesus 3 times [14.66-72]. In naming him specifically here, Peter has to face both his sin of rejecting God’s son and the darkness of his heart that led him there, but also the promise of restoration by the very One he rejected. The offense of the Gospel is that Peter couldn’t fix this situation; even through his own tears [Mk 14.72]. There was no list of tasks for Him to complete, there were no magic words to make things right. He had denied knowing Jesus altogether – to other people, nonetheless. And yet, in an abundance of

grace, he was mentioned specifically, as if to say “yes, Peter, even you.”

Note that these words were written by John Mark, a companion of Paul who had to learn about restoration firsthand [cf. Acts 15.36-41], but also a companion of Peter in Rome [cf. 1 Peter 5.13]. It’s most likely that Mark wrote these words under the direction and authority of Peter himself. Imagine Peter having to confess to Mark what he had done, and even about his boasting that of all Jesus’ disciples, he would never leave His side.

There is a challenge for us in these words to be honest with ourselves, with God, and even with each other with regard to our sin. This must be the starting place for us. The Gospel does not allow us to pretend any of us are really okay, that we don’t have thoughts of doing serious harm to other people, that we don’t resent people sitting across the room from us even this morning, or that we really are good people. At the same time, while the Gospel takes us to the end of ourselves, but it does not allow us to stay there. The offense of the Gospel is that beyond our ability to pretend being good enough Jesus has taken care of our rebellion, our idolatry, and even our hatred. By His acceptance of us—of those who believe the Gospel and embrace Him—He reminds us that His grace is sufficient for anything we might do, say, or even think.

WHY WERE THEY AFRAID?

The response of these women is fascinating. In a brief but direct way, they have been told everything they need to know about Jesus, and their response is to be visibly afraid—to be so afraid that their bodies moved—and then to tell no one about what they had been told. And they fled from the tomb in fear. In fact, verse 8 tells us that they were so afraid that it caused their bodies to shake. But why? Everything they thought to be true, all of their assumptions about the world in which they lived, were turned upside down by the miraculous entrance of God into their lives. They are face to face with Truth.

In most of our Bibles Mark continues through verse 20, but there are notations that tell us that the earliest manuscripts of Mark do not include anything after verse 8. Scholars have to come understand that while Mark’s intention was to end with verse 8, scribes who copied these verses later inserted a longer ending because they weren’t comfortable with Mark’s Gospel ending with the women being afraid. But this is consistent with how Mark describes Jesus’ followers through His public ministry. In fact, on numerous occasions this was the response to the amazing things Jesus did – by the crowds, and even by his closest followers.

As we consider our response to these events in light of the coming year, it’s difficult for us to grasp their situation. We can go to the movie theater and see a 30 foot gorilla defeat 3 dinosaurs, and then ravage part of New York City, and be amazed by the technology that generates those images. The honest response of these women, fear, points to the eternal impact of these events. At this point, the Gospel is no longer merely a set of principles by which we may or may not choose to live. It is not merely signs and wonders intended to impress and awe. The Gospel—the proclamation of good news from God Himself—is something that takes hold of us, something we can’t deny. What is your response?