

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 8, 2012
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The Resurrection of the Lord
Mark 16:1-8

Mark 16:1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" 4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 6 "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. 7 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.'" 8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

1. Jesus was slain – for two reasons

For a season, Jesus was the most popular man in Israel. Jesus touched the sick and healed them. The blind saw, the lame walked and the mute spoke. He taught and held crowds captive for hours, until they ran out of food. He burned off religious traditions and legal regulations. He said wondrous things: Love your neighbor as yourself. Judge not, lest you be judged. Blessed are the peacemakers. You are the light of the world. Ask and it will be given to you.

People felt that Jesus was open to everyone. He talked to insiders – community leaders, Jewish teachers. But he also touched lepers, talked to prostitutes, and ate with Israelites who got rich by collaborating with Rome.

Jesus offered himself to everyone. He sometimes began with two words: If anyone: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink (John 7:37). If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death" (8:51). "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching (14:23). Anyone can follow him. "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing (14:12).

These are powerful offers, but Jesus says daunting things too: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last and the servant of all... If anyone would come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 9:35, 8:34). If he wants to win disciples, this is a strange strategy. But he had to say it; it's true.

Because people sensed that Jesus was open to everyone, they approached him saying, "I will follow you wherever you go" and offered to do whatever Jesus said (Matthew 8:18, 19:16). Jesus never rejected anyone but he did ask, "Are you *sure*?"

You want to follow me? "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests," but are you ready to sleep on the ground? You will do whatever I say? OK, "Sell all that you have, give it to the poor... and come follow me (Mt 8:18-22, Mk 10:17-21). In short, Jesus said that "Anyone can follow me, but it's hard to follow me."

The difficulty and the popularity go together. Jesus' popularity attracted the suspicion and hostility of the authorities. The Pharisees saw Jesus as a rival. They thought he set himself up as a teacher of the law even while he broke the law, as they understood it. He worked on the Sabbath. He ate with sinners.

Jesus worried the Romans, too. They had seen demagogues come and rouse the masses. Now Jesus proclaimed the coming of the kingdom and the reign of God. God is king? What about Caesar? Did Jesus foretell the end of the reign of Rome?

Jesus was a hero. If the legends of Batman, Spiderman, Superman, even the Incredibles teach us anything, it's this: Heroes have foes who swear to destroy them. Actually, the Bible said it first. Heroes stir envy and draw opposition. Jesus is no exception. So the authorities were antagonistic. They looked for reasons to accuse him – and found some. He ignored their rules. More important, he stepped onto their turf. The prime example came early in the week of Jesus' crucifixion.

When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the crowd that was with him praised him as a King and Prophet: "This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth" and "Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming" (Mt 21:11, Mk 11:10). Grand words!

After he entered the city, Jesus did what prophets and kings do. He "went to the temple [and] looked around at everything" (11:11). He inspected the temple - and found it wanting. Next morning, Jesus "entered the temple area and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves" (11:15). Why did Jesus do this?

There's nothing wrong with currency exchange. People traveled to Jerusalem from distant lands to celebrate Passover. They had to convert their currency and buy animals. Fair enough. Jesus never opposed commerce, he opposed commerce *in the temple*, especially in the area set aside for Gentiles who wanted to worship the Lord.

Scripture said, "My house will be called a house of prayer... *for all nations*" (11:17). Jews and Gentiles were free to come to the temple for worship, prayer, teaching and praise. But now clamor of animals and trade made it impossible, at least, for Gentiles. So Jesus protests. Imagine if we put a coffee shop in the back of the church. It makes money. It promotes fellowship. Yes, but it's impossible for people in the back to worship!

It was wrong, but Jesus didn't just say, "That's wrong," he threw the merchants out. He turned tables over and tossed seats. For a while, he stopped all traffic (11:16). It's impossible to exaggerate the uproar. Roughly like someone coming to a church and taking an axe to the piano, organ, guitars, pulpit and pews.

Yet the temple was more than any church. It was the center of Israel's life, like Manhattan and the capital in Washington. As a prophet and priest, Jesus guarded the temple for worship. As king, he exercised authority over it.

The authorities took it as an insult. They had approved the commerce. Now Jesus called it corruption and shut it down. When he re-opened it, he first invited those who had been excluded: "The blind and the lame came to him at the temple, and he healed them" (Mt 21:14). So Jesus expelled those whom the authorities permitted and he permitted those whom the authorities expelled. He gave grace to outcasts.

The authorities were furious and began to look for a way to kill Jesus. A few days later, Jewish and Roman leaders joined forces to murder Jesus.

Jesus saw this coming. "He knew what was in a man." He saw the envy, fear, and rage, of the powerful. He knew that meant trouble for his followers. So it's hard to be a disciple. That's why he said "Take up your cross and follow me."

I don't recommend the movie "A League of Their Own," but it has one great scene. The star is the catcher in the women's baseball league of the 1940s. Catcher is surely the hardest position in baseball and the catcher of the leading team decides to quit just before the championship. She tells her manager Tom Hanks. "It just got too hard." Hanks ignites, "Hard? It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The 'hard' is what makes it great."

Exactly right, in baseball and for life. It's easy to be mediocre. But it's hard to be great. To our point, it's hard to be a disciple.

You may think, "What's hard about being a Christian? Christianity is the dominant religion and ethic in America. What's the danger? What's required? Believe in God, go to church when you can, be moral. How is that hard?"

It is safe, here, to *call yourself* a Christian. But it's not safe in vast swaths of India and China, the world's most populous nations. It's not safe in the Middle East, North Africa, or North Korea. In Jesus' day it certainly wasn't safe to be a disciple. Most of the apostles died for their faith eventually.

In America it's safe to *call yourself* a Christian, but it's not entirely safe to *follow* Jesus. There are costs. Disciples keep their eyes open to see and help the poor, the needy. We give up time for worship and prayer.

And certain elements of discipleship aren't welcome in America. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." In America, we like religions that say, "This is *a way to your truth* and a *better life*." It's fine for you to tell friends they might want to think about Jesus. But if you say it's *essential* that they read the Bible or go to church so they will *trust Jesus* who is the source of life, that may not be cool. What do you follow? The gospel of Jesus or the gospel of cool?

It is hard. That's why Jesus said, "Take up our cross and follow me." He said, "If you really want to follow me, know that I'm going to the cross." Let's go back to the question "Why did Jesus die?" First, he offended the authorities, they resolved to kill him and they seized their opportunity. But there is a second answer. Listen:

- The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).
- Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (Jn 15:13).
- Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

A classic Christian confession explains Jesus' love something like this:

- Jesus endured anguish that we might receive joy
- He was abandoned so that we might be God's friends.
- Thirsty that we might drink. Put to shame that we might inherit glory.

- He groaned that we might sing. He wept so he could wipe the tears from our eyes.
- He endured reproach that we may hear God's blessing. He died that we might live.

He didn't just say this *would* happen, he said he *had to die*, then *had to rise*: "The Son of Man *must*... be crucified and on the third day be raised again" (Lk 24:7). Jesus said this over and over, because the disciples couldn't hear it. "Listen... the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. But they did not understand what this meant... and they were afraid to ask him about it.

You know the feeling. Someone tries to explain the rules of cricket. Shorting stocks. The difference between realism and critical realism. The merits of broiled vs. pan-seared vegetables. The guide is patient and clear but it doesn't stick.

The disciples couldn't believe that Jesus, the Messiah, would be crucified. It seemed like nonsense. They thought their problems were moral and political – they needed freedom from Rome so they could follow their laws. That's how people think today, too: We hope for political and moral reform.

Yes, but the final reason for social failure is spiritual, not moral or political. Jesus taught morals, but he is a Redeemer first. He came to save a race hurtling toward physical and spiritual death. He died for our sins - the just for the unjust. On Easter, just as important, he demonstrated his power and mastery over death by rising again, in the body. God gives life to the dead, beginning with Jesus.

Mark 16 shows that the disciples grasped none of this, so they were devastated when Jesus died. John, two women named Mary and Salome watched him die. They "had hoped that [he] was going to redeem Israel" and install a new order. They were crushed, disoriented, and yet loyal. Their love answered his love.

Jesus has risen

Jesus died on a Friday afternoon. The Sabbath started at sunset a few hours later. For a while, the disciples hid and huddled together in misery. But when Sabbath ended – Saturday night to us - "Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought [aromatic] spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body." Then "very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on the way to the tomb" to anoint Jesus' broken body (16:1-2).

Still reeling as they start toward the tomb, they realize they have a problem, "Who will roll the [large] stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" (16:3). None of the disciples, a scattered, shattered band expected Jesus to rise to life.

They had completely forgotten Jesus' promise of resurrection, so they were surprised "when they looked up [and] saw that the stone... had been rolled away" (16:4). They stepped through the low entrance and "entered the tomb" standing in a small central area, with stone shelves cut into the rock to each side, with space for a whole family. And they found it empty!

Skeptics say the disciples found an empty tomb because they went to the wrong tomb. Impossible. The women who went to anoint Jesus' body saw him die. They saw Joseph of Arimathea bury the body, saw that he ran out of time to anoint the body with spices according to tradition. The location of the tomb is not the kind of thing we forget. The women went to the *right* tomb.

[[It was not empty because Jesus lapsed into unconsciousness on the cross, woke up in the tomb and walked out. Crucifixion kills – every time. The soldiers were trained executioners; they certified that Jesus was dead 15:44-45.]

[[The women saw the broken, lifeless body; they knew he was dead. Still they stay devoted in a way that's touching yet sad. They think, "He's dead, let's anoint the body." They're loyal, clinging to their faith but they're in shock.]

They expected Jesus' body, wrapped in linen. Instead they saw a young man in a white robe, sitting to the right on the shelf where Jesus had been. The Bible often calls angels "men" for so they seem at first. But it's clear that this is an angel. He is dressed in white (dazzling, the other gospels say). And he alarms and commands people – all standard for angels (Mk 9:3, Acts 1:10, 10:30).

The angel knows everything, explains everything and commands the scene in a few words: Don't be alarmed! You seek Jesus, the crucified. 'He is risen, he is not here. See where they laid him.' It's "just as he told you."

Everything is there. To the women, Jesus is "crucified" but missing. They watched his body die and want to anoint it, but where is it? The angel knows what happened and why. The body is gone. The women wonder why? Did someone move the body? No, the body is gone because He is alive. There is proof.

None of this is an accident. He foretold it. This had to happen, at his word, by his power. He is the Author of life; death cannot hold him (Acts 2:24, 3:15).

The angel is *not* claiming that Jesus' spirit lives on, that he is alive with God and in our hearts. No angel needs to say that. The women already believe it. He means "The Jesus who perished in your sight, that Jesus is *alive* physically." And, we soon learn, he is stronger than ever.

This is a core Christian belief and it's factual. The church constantly asserted that Jesus' tomb was empty. In the early debates between Christians, pagans and Jews, no one disputed it.

[[Note that the Gospels name the women as the first witnesses. In that day, the testimony of women had no legal value. If the church made this up, who would the first witnesses be? A priest, an elder or a Roman official. But the gospels insist that the women saw the empty tomb.]]

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is essential. I lived next to a church in 3rd and 4th grade. I went to Sunday school. I heard that if I believed in God, when I died I could go to heaven and be like an angel. I would sit on clouds, play a harp, and sing all day. This alarmed me. I knew I wasn't supposed to think that way, but I wanted no part of cloud-harp heaven. What boy would? What man or woman?

The message of Easter is not "Jesus is alive." It is: Jesus is alive in flesh and blood, chewing fish, shaking hands, slapping backs, looking better than ever. The resurrection displays God's power and more. It's a foretaste of a new heaven and a new earth. Jesus' resurrection is the appetizer. Our resurrection and life with him, is the main course.

The Bible says that when Jesus returns he will reform and renew all creation. How would you like it to be? You'd like to be young, but not naïve? Thirty years old or thirty-five? Strong, vibrant, young enough, but wise? Like your old self, but renewed? Maybe with new powers. Remembering the past, old

friends and family, but ready for new things too. Yes? I just described Jesus, after his resurrection. And the Bible says, "When he appears, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2). So our character will be noble, like his. And our body will be like his too.

Humans have a unique design. We are embodied spirits. We have bodies, but we have eternity in our hearts. Angels are spirits. Animals have bodies. Some even have personalities. But humans are unique - embodied souls, a body-spirit unity. Jesus' disciples get to live with him forever with renewed bodies and healed spirits.

3. The first witnesses were confused because it's hard to be a disciple

Jesus offers glory, but suffering first. It's hard to be disciple. Hard to follow all his plans. Hard to see him rejected. Hard to watch him die. Even his resurrection is hard – confusing – at first.

Back to that angel. He's not a man who arrived earlier that morning. He knows what Jesus told his disciples and commands them to obey this message, from Jesus himself: "He has risen... 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'" (16:7-8).

Indeed, Jesus said this very thing, in Mark 14:28: "After I am raised up, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." The disciples were not listening, but the angel was. The angel commissions the women to go tell the disciples! He singles out Peter who failed so terribly. Three times he denied that he even knew Jesus.

This is love and grace. The disciples are shattered and scattered but they will re-gather. Peter failed. He's humiliated. But Jesus didn't write him off. He doesn't write anyone off – not you or me. Take this home: You may feel like a failure, rejected. You may have good reasons for those feelings. But Jesus doesn't discard his people, who trust in him. He gathers them.

So the angel told the women: Go tell the disciples; You will see him. But the women are stunned to silence. "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (16:8). We can expect fear and astonishment, but this is more like panic and failure. The angel said, "Go tell," but they said nothing to anyone.

This is unexpected; what shall we say? First, it's hard to be a disciple. It was hard to take in the crucifixion, now it's hard to take in the resurrection. Second, we know they spoke eventually. The other gospels say so plainly. The very existence of the church shows that they spoke eventually. Third, in 16:7, the angel says, "You will see him... in Galilee." Angels don't err, so we know they did see him.

4. What do you think of the Christ?

The confusion of the women can speak to us. Our position is a bit like theirs. We hear that Jesus is crucified and that he has risen. It's stunning to hear that Jesus, Son of God, died. That he is alive. That he offers us perfect and eternal life with him. Yet it's hard to be a disciple. There are hard ideas and a demanding way of life. What do you think? Do you trust him? Do you want life with him forever? What do you think of Jesus?

William Wilberforce probably did more than anyone to eliminate the slave trade in Europe. He was a tiny man with a big voice, big heart, and big mind. Born to wealth, educated at Cambridge, he was such a gifted orator that he was elected a Member of Parliament at twenty-one and a leader there by twenty-four.

He was rich, famous, powerful, charming and tormented. When Wilberforce was a child, his father died and he went to live with a beloved aunt and uncle for two years. Like the rest of the family, they were well-connected, wealthy, influential, and moral.

But while the rest of family went to church and lived a *fairly* respectable life –Uncle William and Aunt Hannah loved Jesus and the gospel. They knew that moralism is bankrupt, that mere duty will never give life. Therefore they abandoned morality, threw themselves on God's mercy and trusted Jesus.

Wilberforce embraced this faith when he was ten. But when his mother heard of it, she wrenched him from that aunt and uncle and their far-too-hot religion. They wanted a tepid religion. So they taught their son to love parties, songs and banter rather than the gospel. For twelve years it worked. Wilberforce was a singer and a comedian and he was moral enough. He drank, not too much. He gambled, not too much. Perfect!

But Wilberforce was uneasy. He was a leader of parliament at twenty-four. To what end? He wrestled with God. He remembered the gospel. Was he a moral man or a gospel man? Was he Jesus' disciple? If so, what might that mean? Wilberforce decided he *was* a disciple and, because of that, he gave his life to the poor, to end slavery.

The great questions still remain. Do you believe Jesus died that you might live? Do you believe he is alive? Do you want to follow him, to see him, to know him, to live with him forever? It's hard to be a disciple, but it's good to be a disciple. I hope you know that and that you long to see Jesus – the crucified and risen, Lord and friend.