

Sunday April 4th, 2021

Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8

“It All Comes Down to This”

The Moscow circus came to town with all its glory and its incredible acts. One of its most popular acts was that of a very beautiful woman lion tamer who would, as part of her act, have a fierce lion come up to her meekly, put his huge paws around her and nuzzle her face with affection. Every time this happened the audience would thunder with approval. Night after night it was the same presentation by the lion tamer, and the same reaction by the audience.

That is until the circus stopped in Toronto, and a rather brash young Canadian man in the front row declared in a voice that everyone could hear, “What’s so great about that? Anybody can do that.” The audience hushed at such a bold declaration. The ringmaster heard his words and challenged him, “Would you like to try it?” The Canadian replied back, “Certainly, but first get that lion out of there.” (1001 Humorous Illustrations, p.95)

It is true that any one of us can be particularly brave when the threat is removed. We might even argue that one of the blessings of Easter is that the biggest threat of all, hanging over our heads, is now gone. “O death where is your sting, O grave your victory”, as the Apostle Paul says. Easter is such an important, and significant day for followers of Jesus. A day that is even more important to us than Christmas. For it is the day our hopes were fully realized, and the final enemy, death, was defeated.

So, you might be wondering, as I have been for a long time, why the last words of Mark are these. “And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” I say last words because you may notice in your bibles that the rest of chapter 16 are later additions. The earliest versions or manuscripts of Mark end at verse 8. Actually, two endings were added, one short and the other a bit longer. Scholars have debated for hundreds of years about why these verses were added, and it is likely that at some point, scribes were uncomfortable with the rather blunt ending of Mark.

Perhaps, they felt it was unfinished. It is a feeling we can understand. I mean, who ends a book with “And they said nothing because they were afraid.” Not very triumphant. It reads kind of like a cliff hanger. Now, obviously, from the other gospels, and the witnesses of the early church, there was much more to the story than Mark originally included. Otherwise, there would be no church, and no celebration of Easter for these 2000 years. Still, it is unfair to simply dismiss the reaction of the women Mark writes about.

The specified goal of the women in our passage today was to come to the tomb, and anoint the body. This was the usual custom for family and friends of a deceased Jewish person in those days. You may remember that Jesus died on the eve of the Passover Sabbath, and although Joseph of Arimathea took care to entomb Jesus in a nearby garden tomb, there would likely have been little time to properly prepare the body before sundown and the Sabbath.

Now you might be wondering what the women actually hoped to accomplish in going to the tomb, but their desire to prepare the body was indicative of a desire to serve. It was a token gesture to respond in kindness to their leader who had died innocently for a good cause.

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Like so many in the past, and even in the present, they came to pay respect to the remains of one who gave dignity to the poor, and grace to the suffering. They loved who Jesus was, and they wanted to treasure his memory. In our culture, many people do the same thing, taking flowers to the gravesite of their loved ones. Some cemeteries even have special events called “Decoration Days” for the express purpose of honouring the deceased.

The only question on the women’s minds and lips that morning, had nothing to do with theology or philosophy. They were not debating the meaning of life, or who would carry on Jesus’ mission, or even why he had to die. The question they wrestled with was actually a practical one. “Who will roll away the stone for us?” If they were to anoint his body, somebody or probably a group of somebodies, would have to physically push the huge stone out of the way.

“Who will roll away the stone for us?” Maybe this should be our question today as well. I am assuming that most of us, if not all of us, tuned in today to pay our respects to a great teacher, a charismatic leader, a good man. We want to thank him for his words of wisdom, his philosophy of life. We may want to debate the finer points of the theology of the Easter event, and maybe even Jesus’ whole life, but primarily today we want to pay our respects.

But who are we kidding? As nice as honouring Jesus’ memory is, we don’t want or even need a memorial service today. We don’t want to just celebrate the past. We need hope for today.

So, like the women we ask, “Who will roll away the stone for us?” And quite frankly there seem to be a lot of stones in our way. Heavy, un-wielding, immovable objects, situations, and crises: that are in our way. So, who, we wonder, will roll away the stone of sorrow from the dark tomb of our losses? Who, will roll away the stone of bitterness from the dark tomb of our failures? Who, will roll away the stone of indifference from the dark tomb of the world’s suffering?

Who, will roll away the stone of cynicism from the dark tomb of our jaded vision of the world? Who, will roll away the stone of grief from the dark tomb of our broken hearts and broken relationships? I don’t have to remind you that when we opened up the YouTube program this morning, we are still living in a Good Friday world. Terrorists kill indiscriminately in several parts of the world. The pandemic is still raging.

Children and women are exploited. Famine, disease and natural disasters kill millions. And our frustrations grow when our political leaders are like Nero, fiddling while Rome burns. Maybe we have lost our job; maybe someone we trusted has hurt us deeply; maybe we wonder what the point to life itself is. So, pray tell, how can we open the large, dark tombs of our lives that hold all our sorrow, and anxiety, and brokenness, and loss?

How do we move the stone that holds humanity’s lowest moments, and worst cruelties? Who among us isn’t intimately acquainted with how heavy the stone is that seals in the anguish of our lives? So, let’s be honest today. All of us carry the same question as those women did so long ago, “Who will roll away the stone for us?” But the question carries within it some hope. Underneath the question, there lurks a desire to trust that somewhere, out there, there is a power that exists that can roll away the stone. We want to believe this. We need to believe this.

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We want to trust that there is an Easter power great enough to roll away the heaviest of stones from the darkest of tombs, and let the light shine in. “When the women looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.” This is the Good News, the Gospel that God can, and does, roll away those heavy stones that seal in our sin, pain and loss. The tomb is empty! Love is stronger than death! Forgiveness is deeper than sin!

The truth of God is more powerful than all the lies of the world! When the women arrived at the tomb, the stone had already been rolled away. They didn’t have to do anything but witness it. God had already done the work. God made a way where none existed before. The only question is; are we ready to show up? Are we ready to bear witness to God’s power to roll away the stones guarding our: hurts and pain and sin?

Or maybe, we are content to remain where the women were, to simply come and pay homage to a dead man. Albeit a good man, but one long gone. We can, without much thought and effort, continue to honour him, worship in his name, and try to do what Jesus would do, and teach our children all of his stories.

We can actually serve him well, if we think he is dead, just as those women did when they came that first Easter morning. But what if we are asked to do more than just honour a great teacher? What if we are challenged to do more than just pass on an ethic of love and justice which he showed us? What if we were called on to believe that God in Christ has turned this world upside down? What if in Jesus, God has given us the power to overcome every form of death we know?

What Easter asks us to accept, is that Christ did not leave this world, but continues to be present in it, through a death-defying power that can overcome every kind of tomb we encounter in our lives. The resurrection of Jesus defies our logic. It was why the Athenians laughed at Paul, when he spoke about Jesus. The resurrection offends our intelligence, it seems illogical, and it goes against everything we understand about death and burials.

And maybe that’s the point. God is not anti-intellectual, or he would not have given us these amazing brains in our heads, nor would we have been instructed to love God with all our mind and heart and strength. However, just as we can be misled by the confusing emotions of our hearts, so to we can be misled by the logical workings of our minds. We are amazing creature we humans.

Our minds allow us to develop some pretty impressive inventions and understand some complex realities of the universe. We enjoy computer chips and send space probes to other planets. Yet, for all our intelligence, we cannot save ourselves. The poet W.H. Auden wrote: “Nothing possible can save us.” If there is something logical and reasonable that can mend a broken heart or restore a fractured relationship, we would have thought it up by now.

But there is no possible answer. It took the impossible to save us. It took an incredible, impossible, unbelievable event to break through our attempts at self-sufficiency, and our misguided ideas about saving ourselves. Nothing possible can save us. Nothing possible can roll away the stone. Nothing possible can bring light into darkness and life into death. “He is raised. He is not here.”

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This is the impossible message the women heard when they dared to look in the tomb past the rolled away stone. They were startled to see a young man sitting where the dead Jesus had been, and absolutely floored to hear the words, “He has been raised. He is not here...He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.” This is our key Easter promise. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.

Notice the women did not hear that Jesus was raised to sit on a throne, far off in heaven with God. No, they heard something far more radical than that. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. Where is Galilee? Galilee is where the disciples were from. It was their home. It was the place they had families and jobs and the ordinary routines of life. Jesus wasn’t going to Jerusalem-the Holy City, the center of power-but Galilee, the place of ordinary life.

The call to the women is the same one to us. Go back to your ordinary, everyday lives. Go back to where your jobs and families are. That’s where Jesus will meet you. That is where you will find Jesus and be empowered by him. Go back and finish the story. The empty tomb was not the end of the story. This was a beginning. This is where our work begins.

This is where our lives begin. This is the message of Easter to us. Don’t stand at an empty tomb, paying homage to a dead teacher. Don’t set your sights on simply putting ointment on wounds already created. Go back to the place where you choose to live your life and meet the living Saviour there. Go to meet the God who chooses to walk among us with a power greater than all the powers that can ravage us and ruin us and lead us to despair.

Go to meet the risen Christ who cannot be stopped by the world’s intolerance, or fear, or violence, or greed. Go to Galilee, go home, to the place where God has planted you and find Christ there. Christ is alive and that means that we can live as well. We don’t just exist in a selfish, take all you can get world. We don’t have to just get by in life. We can live because we have the courage to go to Galilee and meet the Living Lord.

Then we can live a life that cannot be stopped by meaninglessness or loneliness or hatred or injustice or disease or poverty or anything else in all of creation. We can enter the reality of the empty tomb. A reality that overturns the fears of this world; a truth that overrides everything, everything that goes against the love of God.

The Easter promise is that God’s business was not finished in a tomb long ago. The Easter promise is that the same Jesus who could not be held back by torture, by death, by stones rolled in front of tombs, is the Jesus who is alive today and here today and available today to live in you, to rescue you and heal you and empower you and set you free from any tomb you’ve ever known.

Who will roll away the stone for us? God has already done it. Christ is alive in our world and he is waiting to meet us. Alleluia!