



A TREMOR OF BLISS

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Mark 16:1-8

46th Message

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We come now to the climax of Mark's gospel, the glorious resurrection of Jesus. Walter Wessel writes:

The climax to Mark's Gospel is the Resurrection. Without it the life and death of Jesus, though noble and admirable, are nonetheless overwhelmingly tragic events. With it Jesus is declared to be the Son of God with power (Rom 1:4), and the disciples are transformed from lethargic and defeated followers into the flaming witnesses of the Book of Acts. The Good News about Jesus Christ is that God, by the resurrection of Jesus, defeated sin, death, and hell. It was this message that lay at the heart of the apostolic preaching.¹

We are privileged to have arrived at Mark's account of that resurrection. He was the first to document the event, and he does so with profound simplicity and restraint, that we might enter in.

I. The Text of the Resurrection (Mark 16:1-8)

And when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. And very early on the first day of the week (*sabbath*), they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He said to you.'" And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8, NASB)

II. The Story of the Resurrection

Corpses rapidly decay in the hot climate of Palestine, so promptly at 6 p.m., at Sabbath's end, the women who observed the crucifixion and grieved in silent sorrow, went to purchase more aromatic spices to anoint Jesus' body. As Wessel states: "The anointing was not for the purpose of preserving the body (embalming was not practiced by the Jews), but was a single act of love and devotion probably meant to reduce the stench of the decomposing body."²

Their action appears to be an extravagant expenditure on what seems a lost cause. But, love's devotion, which is often outrageous, turns a blind eye to the practical. Ask any mother. So strong was these women's inner compul-

sion they gave no thought to cost or effort. They were driven by that necessity to expend every last drop of their grief in a tomb where the only love in their universe now lay.

But by the time their purchase was completed it was too late to make the trek outside the city walls to the tomb. Evening had fallen on this Passover night and a solemn stillness had settled over the holy city. In every home, Jewish pilgrims gathered around the table before a lamb, and a choir of Hebrew voices narrated the ancient story of Israel's miraculous deliverance from Egypt. As the voice of Exodus was recreated in every Jew's memory these three women went to bed, holding their spices. Anticipating the morning's first light, they probably slept very little. They were counting the hours in the dark.

At morning's first opportunity, when the glimmering light from the east began to break through the colored clouds in sharp shafts of light, just before sunrise, they set out for the tomb. Driven by the necessity of the hour and a rapid pace, they made good time. But when they got to the tomb, it struck them that they had not fully prepared for the obstacles they would face. The enormous stone sealing the tomb, which Joseph and Nicodemus had rolled into place down the inclined trough, would be much too heavy to roll back up the incline; and at such an early hour there would be no one there to help them. But no sooner had they finished voicing their dilemma than they looked up, and behold, the stone was rolled away.

Seizing the opportunity, they asked no questions but swiftly moved inside to give that final touch to the one they so dearly loved: to hold the hands that healed, to caress his gashed side, to wipe his thorn-studded brow, and perhaps to seal it all with a kiss on those lips that spoke as no man spoke. One last act to say goodbye, to give thanks, and to weep freely, with no restraint. We know that we must do this at death, but sadly, our culture seldom permits it. Let us be like these women, who would not be deterred from such holy acts, even though Roman law prohibited grieving over executed criminals.

Stooping into the antechamber, the women made their way through the low passageway leading to the burial chamber, expecting to find the body of Jesus resting on a stone slab hewn out of the rock. They were ill prepared for what they were about to see. To their right sat a vibrant young man, clothed in white. Mark has carefully prepared us for this event. Seeing this young man in our mind's eye, we are reminded of the other young man clothed in a white linen cloth who witnessed the arrest of Jesus (14:51-52). Though he was seized by the Roman soldiers, he escaped naked into the night, leaving his linen cloth behind. That youth was as anonymous as this young man was.

Many scholars surmise that the first young man was

Mark, but there is no doubt as to this one's identity. Matthew says that he was an angel (Matt 28:5). The first young man foreshadowed Jesus' deliverance from death by resurrection; this young man "sitting at the right" foreshadows Jesus' ascension, where he will be exalted to the right hand of God. The man's youth is a burning symbol that, following the resurrection, everything is new. The sight of all this seizes the frail hearts of the women. The young man, recognizing that they were stunned to the point of emotional overload, tries to calm them with his words. But there are no words capable of preparing minds and hearts for the event that has just happened, let alone the effect it will have on their souls:

"Do not be amazed; you are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who has been crucified. He has risen; He is not here; behold, here is the place where they laid Him."

The authenticity of Mark's report of the resurrection is heightened by the fact that it is succinct, calmly factual, and understated. It sounds almost as prosaic as if he were giving directions to a lost passerby: "Oh, I know the house you are looking for. They moved it across town just last week. Go three miles to the north, then take a left and you'll find it three houses on your right." This is not the kind of report the church would invent for the explosion of the resurrection. And if they had wanted to impress their world with it, they would have never identified the women as the first recipients of this earth-shattering news. Both the substance and style of the resurrection announcement would not have been an effective marketing strategy in that culture, but it is so typical of God's ways.

The angel knows why they have come and whom they are seeking. It is Jesus the Nazarene, "*the crucified one*." The perfect tense suggests the permanence of his new name. He asks, "Do you want to see Jesus? He is not here." Then he emphatically tells the women, "Behold (look, pay attention), here is the place where they laid him." The tomb was empty. It was only needed for three days and two nights, about as much time as people spend in a bed and breakfast. But before the women can catch their breath he commissions them to a holy task. They have a job to do, and must not delay. They would be the divine link between the resurrected Lord and the twelve apostles. They should return to the city, find the disciples, especially Peter, who had betrayed him, and tell them that the Lord was risen and he was on the move. Thus they would not find him in the temple, or anywhere in the precincts of Jerusalem; they had to go north, to Galilee.

As Isaiah foretold,

**Galilee of the Gentiles.
The people who walk in darkness,
Will see a great light;
Those who live in a dark land,
The light will shine on them...
And you will be glad in His presence
As with the gladness of harvest...
For you shall break the yoke of their burden...
The rod of their oppressor. (Isa 9:2-4)**

Thus Galilee became the home base for Jesus' ministry: Galilee, the center of everything personal and dear to our Lord; Galilee, the place where the New Jerusalem would be launched. Galilee is where you will find him, not Jerusalem. On my last visit to Israel I remember feeling the

contrast between these two places. In Jerusalem my soul felt strangely suffocated, while in Galilee it soared with the wind. The very air of Galilee breathes freedom.

The appearance of the angel, coupled with the sight of the empty tomb, and the announcement of the resurrection, was too much for these women. They were gripped by a fear so strong it muted them in an awful silence. This wasn't the first time that the appearance of the holy and the announcement of God's rule suffocated the hearers in silence. Holiness breeds silence, awesome silence. But though it choked out their words, it did not impede their obedient feet. They promptly delivered their kingdom orders from their commander, at full speed, like messengers running home from battle. As the dust flies in the wake of these swift-footed gazelles, we can't help but see Isaiah's words finding their true resting place:

**How lovely on the mountains
Are the feet of him who brings good news,
Who announces peace,
And brings good news of well-being,
Who announces salvation;
Saying to Zion, "Your God reigns!"
The salvation of our God. (Isa 52:7)**

III. How Does It End?

This is where the gospel of Mark ends, with the women seized in silent fear, bringing the report of the good news to the apostles. But is it the end? Notice that the rest of the text, verses 9-20, has brackets around it, and another set of brackets around a final, shorter paragraph after verse 20. The reason for this is that the early church felt uncomfortable with such an abrupt ending to Mark's gospel. The other gospels conclude with at least one or more resurrection appearances to the twelve, a mention of Christ's ascension to his Father, climaxed by the great commission to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. But Mark's last words leave us with the women speechless in fear. Could it be that, with Peter's imprisonment, Mark was unable to complete his text, or was the last page of the autograph codex accidentally lost before it could be multiplied by the copyists.³ Or did Mark truly mean to end his gospel here?

Looking at the larger literary context of Jesus' passion (Mark 14-16), it does round off the initial section quite nicely. It begins with a woman who does not speak anointing Jesus for burial, and ends with three women who have come to anoint Jesus, fleeing and unable to speak. In any event, because the early church was uncomfortable with such an abrupt ending, they added verses 9-20 sometime between the late first century to the middle of the 2nd century. That Mark did not author these verses is clear. For one thing, they are missing in all the earliest manuscripts. Secondly, the vocabulary and style is quite foreign to Mark ("over one-third of the words are 'non-Markian'"⁴). And finally, these verses break the continuity of the narrative. A shorter ending, which also attempted to patch up Mark's ending, is found in many manuscripts by the mid-second century, but it did not gain acceptance.

For our purposes, I will conclude our text at the point where Mark's pen ceased. I will leave the longer endings for the scholars to speculate on, and commend you to study the other gospels for the authoritative views of the resurrection appearances, the ascension and great commis-

sion. Whether or not our text is complete or broken off, I find here more than adequate images for an understanding of the resurrection. For whatever reason it might have been cut short, if we let it stand as we have received it, its very incompleteness has a way of pulling us into the drama as recipients of the good news of these women. That is where I want to leave us, right in their shoes. As we reflect on them we discover the paradigm of how to enter into it. To our amazement, it is profoundly simple. It involves just three things: our feet, our speech, and our eyes.

IV. The Way of the Resurrection

Firstly, where does resurrection life begin? For these women, it began as they were being pulled into the center of a very lonely sorrow. They followed that inner compulsion and boldly marched into a grief that was cold and dark. They did not want to go, but they had to go because love and devotion drew them there. Following that compulsion, their feet took them to the tomb of Jesus. They went obediently, to love and to mourn. I would urge us not to run from sorrow or avoid those centers of grief. Plunge yourself into the center of the world's sorrow, for that is where you will find resurrection.

One of my most precious spots in the Bay Area is Alta Mesa cemetery. It is precious because many PBCC friends are buried there, especially a number of children. I visited there one morning this past spring, invited by a dear friend whose daughter died in a car accident one year ago. He set up two lawn chairs under a huge oak tree, and we sat in sacred silence before Missy's grave. Slowly, the silence was broken by a few words, then tears. I was overcome by the sense of privilege that Steve would draw me into the most sacred center of his universe. Two fathers, two daughters now sealed in sacred memory. It's taken me years to freely obey that inner compulsion to go to the center of sorrow; now I long for it. For once you are there, you are prepared to touch the edge of the horizon, life itself.

Secondly, these women took no notice of obstacles. On the way to the tomb they spoke about that insurmountable stone, set permanently in place and impossible to move. Their speech noted it, but it did not impede their feet. They kept pressing on, not knowing how it would work out. They had no plan or any human resources available. Resurrection doesn't need any. God doesn't need our help, our frail human props, our five-year strategies. In fact, he usually works before we even arrive. The obstacles that once seemed insurmountable are simply "rolled away."

Thirdly, once the women arrived their senses were stunned by what they saw. God had already acted in advance of their arrival. The stone was rolled away, the tomb was empty, and at the center was an angelic vision of the risen Christ, seated at the right hand of God. And he was so young! When you taste the resurrection, the whole world is new. That is why we can never predict what is going to happen when we follow Christ; it's too full of surprises.

Fourthly, once they glimpsed this angelic vision they were in turn commissioned to be the privileged link between the resurrected Christ and the next generation of leaders. They were to tell the disciples that the Lord was on the move and they were to catch up to him in Galilee. That was where they would find him. The resurrection is not a remodel, it is a new creation. The New Temple will

not be constructed of stone on top of the old but in human hearts, to transcend the old. And it will not be a stationary building in Jerusalem, but a new temple that fills the whole creation. Thus the first connection will be in Galilee, not Jerusalem. It is a brand new beginning.

Finally, in response to what the women saw and heard, they fled in obedient fear. They could not speak yet, but they could run. Something new was at hand, something very large, something that unites creation, enlarges the horizon, and links angels, Christ, women and men into something so large it is all-encompassing. What a privilege to be part of it! Has the resurrection touched you?

As I reflected on my life in the context of the resurrection last week, I was amazed to think of how it has touched me and my home. Almost every good thing in my life, my wife, home, friends, occupation, education, and ministries, has come unplanned, as a surprising gift. And the best gifts have been unexpected treasures from the well of deepest sorrow, especially my children. When you wake in the morning, expect that the Lord is on the move ahead of you. You only have to arrive, wait and observe in order to be part of it.

June closes a very special season for Emily and me. Now that our youngest has graduated from high school, our time of being associated with Homestead High School has come to an end. I remember long before our kids went to Homestead, I would drive past the school every day and see a group of forlorn kids hanging out in front, dressed in black, with spiked hair. Crippled by a strong sense of intimidation, I would whisper a one-line prayer for God to send his Spirit to that place. I didn't pray loud or long. I just prayed. I'm not even sure I believed it.

But then, surprisingly, different doors began to open through Emily's persistent volunteer efforts. I found myself in settings I never thought I'd enter, linked with people I never thought I'd meet. I remember our first experience of Friday night football games. Staring out over the horizon as the sun set behind the stands, I said short prayers to the Father for the lives of some of the students. Then I found myself part of the "chain gang," holding the first down markers, pacing the sidelines in front of hot-headed coaches from different schools and looking into the eyes of countless young football players. Their bold faces masked their insecurities and longings to be loved by fathers rather than abused by coaches.

Then, to my amazement, I found myself in that very role, coaching softball for six years. I didn't have a clue what I was doing, but I was determined to treat these girls with the dignity of daughters. Before each season, Mickey Cook and I would walk the softball field, praying for the girls that God would send us. I was always surprised. It never turned out as we planned. Yet in the midst of memories and fun, our last season seemed to be the worst. After six years of effort and care, team turnout was meager, motivation at an all-time low, parent involvement minimal, and the girls did not play well. With that I hung up my cleats and walked off my field of dreams. Dreams seemed washed and expectations lost. A few seeds planted, that was all. I took my role on the sidelines again.

Then in spring of this year I got a phone call telling me that the younger brother of one our former players had been killed in a car accident. I immediately called his par-

ents, and they asked me to officiate at his funeral. The service was held here in church to a packed house of grieving students, teachers and friends. As I looked out over the sea of faces glistening in their tears, I felt as if I was looking over ten years of intimate relationships. The church became a well of tears exploding with expressions of love for Matt and his family. At the end I shared a brief word as a dad who had lost a son, and why I believe in heaven.

After a couple of weeks had gone by, one of Katie's teachers asked me to come to his classroom and share what I had shared at the funeral. I would be part of a larger collection of guests sharing their philosophy of life, and he wanted me to take the entire hour in all six of his classes. I was a bit taken back. Katie said to me, "Now dad, don't teach and be boring. Just share your story. You have a good story." So on a Thursday that I will never forget I went to Homestead High School as a guest teacher and shared my life story to 180 students in six different classes. My host teacher said he was surprised to hear no backpack zippers that day. Usually the students can't wait to leave, and five minutes before class ends you can hear all the backpacks being zipped up. But that day the students were mesmerized.

I left the campus feeling that same acute sense of awe that gripped the women when they fled the tomb. What a privilege to have been a vital link for the risen Christ to this next generation of leaders! I thought of all those times I had driven by the campus as a stranger praying a doubting prayer. Arriving home, I was overcome with emotion, yet I was still unprepared for the note I found on the refrigerator door:

"Wow, Daddy,
You're so awesome. Everyone loved you so much!
One guy said it was the best day he had in Vos's class all year.
I love you. Katie."

A lifetime of ache for a father's words is swallowed in a moment of a daughter's love. Such is the resurrection.

Since then you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth. For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.

Amen.

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1. Walter W. Wessel, "Mark," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 786.

2. Wessel, 786.

3. This is the view of Wessel, 793: "Thus the best solution seems to be that Mark did write an ending to his Gospel but that it was lost in the early transmission of the text. The ending we now possess represents attempts by the church to supply what was obviously lacking."

4. Wessel, 792.