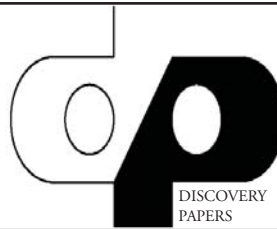


A NEW DAY

**SERIES: THE WAY OF THE LORD: FOLLOWING
JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF MARK**



Catalog No. 100822
Mark 16:1-8
49th Message
Scott Grant
August 22, 2010

In the beginning, when the earth was formless and void, “darkness was over the face of the deep.” Then God said, “Let there be light; and there was light.” (Genesis 1:2-3). Then there was sin, and the earth went dark again. When we crucified the Son of God, “darkness fell over the whole land” (Mark 15:33). Darkness—evil, suffering, despair—seemingly covers the world.

Philosopher Bertrand Russell, an atheist, waged war against the darkness his whole life:

“Echoes of cries of pain reverberate in my heart. Children in famine, victims tortured by oppressors, helpless old people a hated burden to their sons, and the whole world of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a mockery of what human life should be. I long to alleviate the evil, but I cannot, and I too suffer.”¹

In the end, Russell collapsed into despair. Not long before his death at the age of ninety-seven, he penned these words:

“There is darkness without, and when I die there will be darkness within. There is no splendor, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment and then nothing. Why live in such a world? Why even die?”²

Indeed, why live in such a world? Or, is there another way of looking at the world? Mark and the other writers of the New Testament would have us believe that something happened almost 2,000 years ago that changes everything. With the last words of his narrative, Mark tells us the story.

Early to rise

Mark 16:1-5:

¹When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might come

and anoint Him. ²Very early on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. ³They were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” ⁴Looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away, although it was extremely large. ⁵Entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe; and they were amazed.³

The three women, who came to the tomb, had earlier “looked on” from a distance as Jesus was being crucified. Two of them were “looking on” as Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus in the tomb. In every place where these women appear in his gospel, Mark emphasizes what they see.

Having seen where Jesus was placed, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James bring Salome with them to anoint the body of Jesus. Just as Joseph of Arimathea honored Jesus by purchasing a linen cloth and wrapping him in it, the women seek to honor Jesus by purchasing spices with which to anoint him. It was customary to anoint the deceased with oil in order to reduce the stench of decomposition. The women, though, take the extraordinary measure of purchasing not oil but expensive spices—and not for a man in good standing but for a crucified man.⁴

If we have read this far in the Gospel of Mark, though, we might wonder, even before the women get to the tomb, whether their act of devotion is necessary. Earlier in Bethany, a woman, in a similar act of devotion, poured costly perfume over the head of Jesus, who then pronounced that she had anointed his body beforehand for burial (Mark 14:3-9). If he had already been anointed, did he need to be anointed again? Or, do the women need to come to the tomb for another reason—one they don’t even know about yet?

Because of prohibitions connected with the Sabbath, the women have to wait until the first day of the week, Sunday morning, to anoint the body of Jesus. They waste no time, springing to action at first light. Eagerly, they make their way to the tomb, the place of death, ex-

pecting to consecrate a place of immense sorrow with a small scent of comfort. Mark adds the apparently unnecessary detail that the women come to the tomb after the sun has risen. Might the rising of the sun signal another kind of rising?

Joseph, apparently with the help of others, had rolled a stone down an incline to cover the opening of the tomb. Rolling the stone up the incline to uncover the opening, however, would be a more difficult task. The women expect that they will need help, but they don't know where it will come from—or if it will come at all so early in the morning. Still, they make their way to the tomb.

Sometimes, we think long and hard about everything that could go wrong with a plan and then set about planning for every contingency. In some cases, we're paralyzed by our own planning. We might even give up on a plan entirely because of everything that could go wrong with it. The women, on the other hand, were so taken by Jesus that they didn't stop to consider the flaws in their plan until they were already on their way to the tomb. They were simply carried away by their desire to honor Jesus. Then, once they became aware that they didn't have the ability to do what needed to be done, they didn't throw up their hands and turn back. Don't let everything that could go wrong keep you from honoring Jesus. Don't worry if there's a stone in the way, so to speak. If you behold the man on the cross, in the manner of the women, much of life will take care of itself. If you behold him—truly behold him—what you see will inspire you to honor him.

Large stone, no problem

The women, whom Mark earlier depicted as looking on both as Jesus was crucified and as he was buried, now look up and see that the help they needed has already been rendered: the large stone had already been rolled away. Who moved the stone (God, an angel?), Mark doesn't say. Suffice it to say that the barrier turned out to be no problem. Now, the women suppose they can enter the tomb and anoint the body of Jesus. They enter the tomb all right, but instead of proceeding with their task, they see something even more surprising than the removal of the stone: “a young man sitting at the right, wearing a white robe” (v. 5). Who is this guy, and what's he doing in the tomb? Although he appears to the women as a young man, he's an angel. Luke, like Mark, calls angels men (Luke

24:4, 23; Acts 1:10, 10:30).

A tomb, a place of death, is a strange place to see a “young” man. His youth signifies new life. Earlier, Jesus cast out a “legion” of demons from a man who was living among the tombs, after which the man was seen “sitting down, clothed and in his right mind” (Mark 5:15). Now, another man from the tombs, so to speak, is sitting and clothed, signaling, once again, victory over evil, albeit in a much larger way. The young man speaks of amazing things, as if he's out of his mind, but he, too, is in his right mind. Earlier, Jesus predicted that he, the Son of Man, would “sit at the right hand” of God, sharing the throne of God (Mark 14:62). Now, an angel is “sitting at the right,” indicating that what Jesus predicted is coming to pass. Earlier, the Roman soldiers clothed Jesus in a robe of purple, the color of royalty, in order to mock him as the Jewish king (Mark 14:17, 20). Now, the young man is clothed in a robe of white, the color of heaven, the color Jesus' garments became when he radiated the glory of God on the mountain (Mark 9:3; Revelation 6:11, 7:9, 13). The earthly powers have rendered their verdict, but heaven seems to have ruled otherwise.

Finally, the appearance of the young man in the tomb reminds us of another “young man” who managed to pull free from the linen sheet he was wearing and to escape when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane (Mark 14:50-51). Now, the women see a “young man” dressed in white where they expected to see a corpse wrapped in “linen.” The young man in Gethsemane, who was following Jesus, escaped arrest. The presence of the young man in the tomb, dressed in white rather than linen, indicates that Jesus, though he had been arrested, convicted, and crucified, has escaped the tomb.

What's this guy doing at the tomb? Before he even opens his mouth, the young man/angel is signaling, simply by his presence, new life and victory over evil: the resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of the Son of Man, who is, even now, as the women stare dumbfounded into the face of an angel, coming “in the glory of His Father with the holy angels” (Mark 8:38).

Pilate, the Roman governor, was amazed that Jesus died so quickly. The women are amazed by the young man in white, whose very presence indicates that Jesus has risen—and has risen now, so quickly, in the middle of time, not at the end of the age along with everyone else.

When you seek to honor Jesus and you don't know

exactly how you're going to be able to do it, watch for what God does. He is eager to help those who want to honor his Son. If you honor the Son, you, like the women who came to the tomb, will see amazing things. You might not see an angel, but you'll see evidence that evil has been defeated, that Jesus has risen from the dead, that he has ascended to God, and that he is Lord of the world. The help we need to honor Jesus will be rendered, often in surprising ways. God flicks immense stones out of the way.

The women, shocked by the presence of an angel in the tomb of Jesus, have only begun to be amazed. The angel also speaks.

'Do not be amazed'

Mark 16:6-8:

‘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. ⁷But go, tell His disciples and Peter, “He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see Him, just as He told you.” ⁸They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had gripped them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

If you're not supposed to be amazed by the presence of an angel where you expected to find a corpse, what exactly is the kind of thing that should amaze you? In any event, the angel tells the women not to be amazed—or, more literally, not continue in a state of amazement. He might have added, “Well, if you're amazed by an angel, wait until you hear what the angel is going to tell you next.” No one understood what Jesus meant when he said he would rise from the dead. Many Jews expected the resurrection of the dead all at once in the new age. For Jesus to talk about a one-off resurrection made no sense. Still, he said he would rise from the dead, didn't he? Because the power of God was manifestly at work in what he did and said, perhaps the appearance of an angel in a tomb that no longer holds his body is not cause for amazement.

The angel knows what, or who, the women want: Jesus. The angel calls Jesus “the Nazarene,” a moniker that a servant girl applied to him in a pejorative way when he

was brought before the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:67). From the standpoint of the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem, Jesus was a would-be usurper from the backwater town of Nazareth. The angel, though, has something quite different to say about the Nazarene: “He has risen; He is not here” (v. 6). The women knew where Jesus was placed. Two of them were looking on when he was placed in the tomb. Now, the angel tells them to look again. These women at the end of the Gospel of Mark seem to have the capacity, unlike the men in the narrative, to see—to see beyond the mere appearance of things. So the angel invites them to “behold” the place where Joseph and others laid Jesus. Look, the angel says, he isn't here.

Mark has dropped hints that the story of Jesus would not end in a tomb. Way back when all this started, Jesus came from Nazareth to be baptized by John in the Jordan River. After being baptized, he came up out of the water (Mark 1:10). Now, says the angel, Jesus the Nazarene has come up out of the tomb. Mark reported some of Jesus' healings as if they represented a kind of resurrection, making us think, especially in hindsight, that they foreshadowed the resurrection of the Son of God (Mark 2:11-12, 3:3, 7:34-35, 9:23-29). In fact, in one healing, Jesus actually raised a girl from the dead, a girl whose age, twelve, symbolized Israel, which had twelve tribes (Mark 5:41-42). Mark has depicted Jesus as the new Israel—the new Israel, who rises from the dead. One of Jesus' stories also hinted at his resurrection: the one about a man who went to sleep but got up, who cast seeds that broke through the ground to produce a crop (Mark 4:27). Mark even reports the call of Levi, who “rose” to follow Jesus, in resurrection-like terminology (Mark 2:14).

The belief that a man rose from the dead almost two millennia ago and that he lives today, through the Holy Spirit, in the hearts of his followers is an affront to the age of reason. Listen to the angel, though: “Do not be amazed.” Sure, be amazed, in the way you're surprised when something amazing happens. But don't be amazed in a way that discounts the possibility that something amazing could happen. Many people don't believe in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth simply based on the premise that people don't rise from the dead. Of course, they have a vested interest in not believing that Jesus rose from the dead, for if he rose from the dead, then he's Lord, and if he's Lord, then everyone must answer to him.

For many others, though, a thorough investigation of the evidence has led them to believe the angel: “He has risen.” If Jesus didn't rise from the dead—or, at the very least, if his first followers didn't believe he rose from the

dead—no one would be following him today. Who today, for example, is following Simon bar Kochba, a second-century Jewish leader whose followers heralded him as the Messiah? No one. Bar Kochba led a Jewish rebellion against Rome. Rome responded by killing 580,000 Jews, including Simon bar Kochba. He died, he was buried, and he stayed dead. Jesus, on the other hand, has legions of followers today because he rose from the dead.

Alive from the dead

The women were looking for Jesus, but they won't find him in a tomb for the dead. They will, however, find him elsewhere—not as a corpse to anoint but as a Lord to serve, alive from the dead. Therefore, the angel tells them, get out of here. Having reported news of Jesus' resurrection, the angel tells the women what to do with the news. They are to tell the disciples that Jesus is "going ahead" of them, as a shepherd before his sheep, to meet them in Galilee. Especially, says the angel, tell Peter, presumably to reassure him that Jesus still wants him despite his failure in the courtyard of the high priest. In case the command strikes the disciples as too outlandish to obey, the angel tells the women to remind them that Jesus said he would go ahead of them to Galilee after he had been raised from the dead (Mark 14:28). John the Baptist went ahead of Jesus to "make ready the way of the Lord" (Mark 1:2); now, Jesus goes ahead of his disciples that they might walk in the way of the Lord.

The journey of Jesus and the disciples will come full circle. They started in Galilee and journeyed to Jerusalem. Now, they will reunite in Galilee, where it all began, to begin a new journey together—a journey that will take them not only from Galilee to Jerusalem again but also from Galilee to the world. At first, "Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God" (Mark 1:14). The disciples will pick up where Jesus left off, except that Jesus will be with them always, as they take the gospel "even to the remotest part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

Earlier, the women were speaking to each other, wondering how they were going to gain access to the tomb. Now, as they flee the tomb, they say nothing to anyone. That's not to say they failed to deliver the angel's instructions to the disciples. Mark simply describes what happened as they fled from the tomb. They've been traumatized by their encounter with the angel. They're dumbfounded. Yes, they're also afraid, like the disciples

when they encountered the power of God at work in Jesus, but not so afraid for so long that they never reported the angel's instructions to the disciples.

With verse 8, in the Gospel of Mark—or at least what we have of the Gospel of Mark—comes to an end. The earliest copies of the narrative don't include anything after verse 8. Whether Mark ended his gospel at verse 8 or his ending was somehow lost is the subject of much debate among scholars. The most plausible explanation for the presence of verses 9-20 in later manuscripts is that copyists, unsatisfied with the abrupt ending, borrowed from other gospels and added what they considered to be a better conclusion. In any event, Mark would not have us believe that the women remained silent for long. News of the resurrection reached the disciples; Mark, the author of the gospel; and others. Matthew acknowledges that the women were afraid but also contends that they conveyed the angel's instructions to the disciples (Matthew 28:8). The other gospel writers likewise report that the women were faithful to angel's instructions (Luke 24:10, John 20:18).

The women came to the tomb to anoint Jesus, but it looks as if there was a different reason for their trip to the tomb—a divine reason. They needed to see something. Or, more accurately, they needed to not see something. They needed to not see what they expected to see: the corpse of Jesus. They needed to see that the tomb was empty and to tell others why it was empty. They needed to tell others that Jesus has risen from the dead.

For evidence of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, consider not only evidence from the first century but also evidence from today. Jesus cannot be found in a tomb for the dead. He can be found, alive from the dead, working through his followers to bring God's healing, loving rule to the world. Look for him in his followers who continue with their mission to bring medical healing to the poor of Afghanistan even though ten of their compatriots were murdered because of their association with Jesus. Look for him in the collection of men and women who follow him at our church. In recent weeks, overflowing crowds have packed Fellowship Hall to support and celebrate what the Lord is doing through people in this church to bring hope both to villagers halfway around the world, in Kenya, and to recovering addicts down the block at Our Brother's Home, in Mountain View. Christ is risen!

A blank to fill in

Like Bertrand Russell, perhaps we, too, long to alleviate evil in the world, but we cannot. Or can we? The resurrection of the Son of God changes everything. Satan, sin, and death have been defeated. Yes, they still stalk the earth, but their time is up. The kingdom of God—his healing, loving rule—has come, and there is more to come: it will be established. Or, to put it another way—the way Jesus puts it in Mark 4:26-29—the seeds have been planted, the crops will grow, and the harvest is coming. In the meantime, between the in-breaking and establishment of the kingdom of God, between seedtime and harvest, our Lord commissions us and empowers us, by his Holy Spirit, to implement his victory. The apostle Paul promises that the Lord will enhance our work so that it contributes to the establishment of the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:58). If Jesus of Nazareth did not rise from the dead, then we, like Russell, have every reason for collapsing into despair. If he has risen from the dead, then the darkness that covered the land when he was crucified was a prelude, and God's new creation has begun.

The long night of humanity is over. The sun has risen, says Mark. We are those who greet the new day, who feel the warmth of the sun on our face, eager for new opportunities. The stone of death has been rolled away, and the young man sits at the right. We see him and we marvel that God is making all things young. Finally, the way of the Lord leads from Galilee to Jerusalem, from Jerusalem to Golgatha, from Golgatha to the empty tomb, and from the empty tomb out beyond, into the world. Behold, our shepherd goes before us, like he went before his first disciples, to meet us, to forgive us, to love us, and to walk with us in the way of the Lord, down the block and even to the ends of the earth.

It's essential that we gather as followers of Jesus to worship: to study God's word, to pray, to sing, to share our stories. But if that's all we're doing, and if we have completely oriented our lives around the church, and if the only people we know are church folks, then we might do well to heed the words of the young man in the tomb: Get out of here! A new day has dawned. The stone of death has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. Our shepherd, risen from the dead, goes before us. Tell the world! Preach the gospel: Jesus is Lord, death has been defeated, and

God has begun to rule. Heal the world! Cast out demons: challenge the strongholds of evil that keep people enslaved in our world. Don't worry about the stones in your way. Watch for God to do amazing things. Jesus commissions us and empowers us to bring God's healing, loving rule to the world.

Don't be surprised, though, if God transforms your plans into something you couldn't have imagined. The women planned to anoint the corpse of Jesus. Instead, they were commissioned to announce the resurrection of the Son of God. Be ready for a different assignment than the one you envision for yourself.

The abrupt ending to the Gospel of Mark, whether by Mark's design or God's sovereignty, draws us in and makes us want more. It leaves us with a blank to fill in. We hear the news, the best news imaginable: Jesus Christ our Lord has risen from the dead. The angel told the women to tell his disciples, but Mark's narrative ends before they do so. Well, we can't have that. Take up the pen and write your own ending. And don't forget: Write yourself into the story. The angel tells you, "He has risen." What will you do now? The pen is in your hand.

NOTES

¹Bertrand Russell, *What I Have Lived For* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), 13.

²Bertrand Russell, *Bertrand Russell Autobiography* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 393.

³Literary structure:

A Women came to the tomb (1-2)

B Women were saying to one another / looked up, saw stone had been rolled away (3-4)

X Women entered tomb, saw a young man (5)

B' Young man said: "behold, here is the place ..." / "there you will see Him" (6-7)

A' Women went out and fled from the tomb (8)

⁴Asa, a king, was anointed with spices when he was buried (2 Chronicles 16:14). Mark highlights Joseph and the women's costly devotion to Jesus. Joseph, by placing Jesus in the sort of tomb normally reserved for the rich, gives him a burial fit for a king. The women, by bringing spices instead of oil, seek to anoint Jesus as if he were a king.