

The Resurrection

Mark 16:1-14

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Years ago I saw a most unusual stained glass window. It was so unique that it literally captured my attention. I have never forgotten it. The window was a large circular masterpiece of stained glass located high above the pulpit of an old historic church. Here is what I saw, a beautiful pastoral landscape in various shades of green and brown. In the foreground two angels are eagerly awaiting the dawn. Lying on an overhanging rock, their impatient posture clearly indicates that something momentous is about to happen, something which they have been called upon to witness. Following the direction in which they are intently gazing, one can just barely visualize a distant hill. On it stands three empty crosses as sunlight is just now beginning to shine over the darkened countryside. It's the dawn of a new day. It's the sunrise of a resurrection, a resurrection that was unexpected, unbelievable and finally undeniable.

On that first day of the week, the day we call Sunday, three women were on their way to a gravesite. Mary Magdalene, from who Jesus had cast out seven demons, accompanied by Mary the mother of James, one of Jesus' disciples and another woman by the name of Salome were on their way to the tomb of Jesus. It was very early in the morning. Bringing herbs and spices, they were going to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus. They had not had time to do this last honor for Him on the day of His burial. His body had been hastily placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea on Friday evening, just before the beginning of the Sabbath. The Sabbath was a holy day, beginning at dusk on Friday evening and lasting for twenty-four hours until dusk on Saturday evening. Any and all forms of labor were strictly forbidden. But now the Sabbath was over and after impatiently waiting for the dawn of a new day, they were eager to get to the tomb. There was only one rather serious concern. Who was going to roll away the large stone which had been placed across the entrance to the tomb? It had taken several men to push it into place. How were they going to move it?

That's why they were so startled when they arrived at the tomb. The stone had been cast aside. Fearing that something very strange and awful had taken place, they tentatively stepped inside and were greeted by a young man sitting to the right side of where Jesus' body had been placed. They were both surprised and terrified. He said, "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is risen. See for yourself, He is not here. Now go and tell His disciples, including Peter, that

He will meet them in Galilee, just as He told them.” Bewildered and trembling, the women fled from the tomb and began running back into the city. They had come to anoint a dead man’s body. But something completely unexpected had taken place. Jesus had been resurrected. He was alive.

However, Jesus’ followers were not so ready to grasp that reality. It was just too unbelievable. When the women returned and told the disciples what they had seen and heard, they didn’t believe them. Dead men did not arise from the grave, especially after they had been so brutally maimed by a crucifixion. Even when Mary Magdalene said that she had actually met the risen Lord, they refused to believe her. After all women could be hysterical at times, imagining things that just weren’t true. Maybe they were just overwrought with emotion. Perhaps that angelic visitation at the tomb was nothing more than an hallucination. In any case, their hopes and dreams about Jesus being the Messiah, about His kingship as the new sovereign of a restored Israel had come crashing down during the chaotic events of the past Friday. He had been tried, condemned by his own Jewish countrymen and then brutally killed by the Romans. No legions of angels had appeared to rescue Him. There had been no miracles of divine deliverance. There had only been that horrible crucifixion on the outskirts of Jerusalem, a crucifixion that they had not even witnessed because they were so frightened. Perhaps they too would be arrested and dealt with in a similar manner. Only John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, had been there when He died. Now they were being assaulted by these reports of His resurrection. In fact, two of Jesus’ followers, who were not even a part of the inner circle of His followers, had also arrived with this same preposterous story.

Cleopas and another disciple of Jesus had been of their way to a little village outside of Jerusalem called Emmaus. They had been commiserating about all of the events that had just taken place. Their leader and teacher, Jesus, had been put to death. As they walked along to Emmaus, the place where they lived, a stranger had joined them. That was not unusual. People often traveled together. It was safer that way, especially since there were bandits and thieves abroad. What truly surprised them was that this stranger didn’t seem to know anything about what had happened. In fact, Cleopas asked him, “Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who doesn’t know the things that have taken place there in these past days?” “What things?” the stranger asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed Him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified Him; but we had hoped that He was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning, but didn’t find the body. They came and told us that they had

seen a vision of angels, who said He was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but Him they did not see.”

“How foolish you are,” the stranger said, “and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, He explained to them why all these things had to come to pass. Approaching the village of Emmaus, they asked Him to stay and have dinner with them. It was the customary thing to do. Then as this stranger took a loaf of bread and offered a blessing over it, their eyes were opened. They realized He was no stranger, but, in fact, the risen Lord. After vanishing from before their very eyes, they said to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while He spoke with us on the road to Emmaus and explained the Scriptures to us (Luke 24:13-32)?” Immediately they decided to return to Jerusalem and tell the disciples what they had experienced. What had been unexpected and truly unbelievable had now become a reality that was undeniable.

Unfortunately, that was not the case with Jesus’ inner circle. When the two from Emmaus returned and reported what they had experienced, the apostles, now eleven in number since the death of Judas, they remained skeptical. Even the report that Peter had met the Lord was just too good to be true. Their disbelief was like a roadblock standing in the way of the joy they should have been experiencing. Only after Jesus appeared to them while they were eating that evening did they begin to understand that He had indeed arisen from the dead. What was unexpected and at first unbelievable had finally become undeniable. Even then according to the gospel writer Luke, Jesus had to prove to them that He was not an apparition. At first the disciples were startled and frightened, thinking Jesus was a ghost. So He said to them, “Why are you troubled and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see, a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have” (Luke 24:38). In fact, even though they were filled with joy and amazement at His appearance, the disciples were still consumed by the unbelievable reality of what was taking place in their midst. Jesus had to prove to them that He was real by eating a portion of their dinner. Finally though, that evening and in the weeks which followed, the reality of the resurrection became undeniable as Jesus met with His followers before His ascension into heaven, an event which Paul said was witnessed by over 500 people.

Yes, the account of Christ’s resurrection can be summed up in three words—unexpected, unbelievable and finally undeniable. But what does any of that say to us this morning? There are several things that come to mind. First of

all, the resurrection really happened. It really took place. The gospel accounts clearly indicate that the resurrection of Christ was the furthest thing from the minds of His followers. They believed that when Jesus died, everything He had said and done had died along with Him. It was over. His life and His ministry were a failure. It took the resurrection to convince them otherwise.

Second, without the resurrection we are left with very little to look forward to when our lives come to an end. As Paul so forcefully proclaimed to the Christians in Corinth, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Corinthians 15:13-14). Simply put, Christianity stands or falls upon the acceptance or rejection of the resurrection. Without the resurrection of Christ, all we have are the words of a Nazarene teacher who was crucified and buried in a tomb just outside the city of Jerusalem. He may have been a good man, perhaps even one inspired by the divine, but nevertheless a mere mortal who died just like everyone does.

That, however, is far from the truth of what happened on that resurrection morn so long ago. Those angels in that stained glass window were not waiting in vain. They knew what was about to happen. They knew what it would mean for all of those who have entrusted their lives into the care of the Lord Jesus Christ. For He has boldly declared, "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live" (John 11:25).