

Easter 2023: The Empty Tomb, Mark 16:1-8, 4/9/23

I'm 41 years old, educated, relatively well-read, mentally healthy I think... and I've based my entire adult life on the belief that an ancient, uneducated, Jewish peasant named Jesus rose from the dead. And I do know how that sounds to some of you here, and many people I meet out in our community. In a crowd this large we enter this space coming from a whole spectrum of opinions, worldviews and feelings about Jesus. Of course, there are many who are here and you, like me believe that Easter is more than bunnies and egg hunts and over-priced brunches after church. And you are here to celebrate the greatest news in the world, the resurrection of Jesus. And so Happy Easter- He has risen!

But others of us are standing on the outside of that mantra we just said peering in- some with curiosity, you are seeking something more, and wondering "Maybe Jesus is what has been missing from my life." Some are peering in with skepticism. Jesus for you is a leftover myth from a bygone religious era, he's little more than wishful thinking to make life more livable. Or that Jesus existed but he was just a good teacher, political revolutionary or guru that was here to make the world a better place but nothing more. Some of us stand right on the line of that circle- maybe you mouthed the words "He has risen indeed" but genuinely you are unsure or just uninterested. Maybe you've just never really thought about him much since confirmation, is that fair to say? And if you are in any of those places, you are welcome, you are our guest, I'm so glad you came for whatever reasons you did... and I can personally relate to many of those places you are...It's an honor that you would give me your attention so I am going to do my best not to waste your time.

I'm going to make an educated guess that whatever you think about Jesus, ultimately depends on what you believe about that first Easter. Because if Jesus didn't actually, bodily rise from the dead, let's be honest what you think about Jesus would be any different than what you think about the ideas of Confucius or Ghandi or Martin Luther King Jr or any other historical figure who is dead and gone. But if Jesus really did rise from the dead? Then what you think about Jesus is the most important decision you will ever make. Because anyone who made the claims that they would rise from the dead and then actually does it? Well that validates everything that Jesus said about who he is- God in Flesh, Lord and Savior, why he came, about Heaven, Hell, Sin, Salvation, how to live, why you exist, everything. And so what you believe about Easter is essential. You follow the logic there?

How is it that I came to believe Easter is true, and base my entire life around this? That's a longer story that would be better to share over coffee, open invitation for you to take me up on that offer and we can swap stories, but suffice to say today it was at least two things that converge in my life around the same time. **The compelling evidence for the resurrection.** That it's not a myth and the Bible and history are telling the truth. But you know that we don't choose important things in life just based on left-brain logic... and there is plenty of research to back this up...because we aren't brains on sticks. We also need what we might call **Moments of Clarity**, where everything hits us and it clicks for us. We associate moments of clarity with our heart or gut usually because it's not a cognitive moment as much as it is an affective moment, a

conviction. Like the moment that I realized I wanted to marry my wife, Shannan. I didn't make a list of positive and negative attributes and use a mathematical calculation...although I had plenty of logical rationality. How it happened was I visited her one day when she was serving at inner-city youth summer camp outside of Coatesville, PA. And in the chaos of kids at play and camp counselors... I saw her... [Unchained Melody Righteous Brothers start Playing] It was as if there was a Beam of light...slow motion... a moment of clarity, I'm going to marry this woman. And if you've had the privilege to choose a spouse, or choose your career or make a big move of some kind that changed your life, you have likely had that experience of that moment of clarity, where all the facts, all the logic may have been there...but you made that decision from convictional place deeper, and it gave you the courage, the fortitude, the peace to move forward.

[Title Slide] And so yes, I'm a Christ follower today not only because of the compelling evidence but because there was a moment of clarity in my life that it clicked and the life of Jesus came crashing into my life, I encountered him in such a way that it awakened something in me, change my heart, and that hasn't gone back and I will never be the same. This brings us to the resurrection story in Mark 16 because we will encounter compelling evidence but also an invitation to a moment of clarity. That's our outline.

Compelling Evidence for the Resurrection

Many people believe that the gospels are just myths and legends written centuries later by Christians and there is no way to know what really happened. But Mark's account challenges that notion. Rigorous scholarship tells us that Mark was not written centuries later, but only 3 decades later (Mark Written 66-68AD). Which means that Mark was not written centuries later when Christianity was a powerful force in the Roman Empire and may have been subject to corruption. It was written while Christianity was still just a tiny persecuted, marginalized, powerless minority.

We also know these aren't legends written centuries later because many of the historical Easter events we find in Mark's gospel as well as the other gospels are verified in history by other early non-Christian writings from historians like Josephus, Tacitus and Lucian to name a few. Virtually every Bible expert and historian today (both Christian and non-Christian) can agree on at least 5 Facts:

- There lived a 1st century Jewish rabbi named Jesus who claimed to be the Son of God and perform many miracles.
- Jesus suffered a Roman execution by crucifixion upon the decree of Pontius Pilate,
- Jesus died and was placed in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.
- After three days, the tomb was empty, there was no body to be found.
- Hundreds of Eyewitnesses claimed to see the risen Jesus and did not recant their story, even upon threat of death.

Because Mark's gospel was written within 3 decades of the Easter event, this also means that there were plenty of eyewitnesses still living at the time it was written that could verify Mark's account. Who were some of those eyewitnesses? **Eyewitness accounts**. Here in Mark 15-16

three times within a span of a dozen verses or so, Mark records the names of some women who witnessed these events Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome- Mark 15:40, 47 and then in 16:1. This repetition might be strange to use, but it's purposeful. Richard Bauckham, British scholar and expert in ancient historiography, says that this has all the marks of how historians wrote history in those days. Living eyewitnesses were critical, as they are today. The repeated names of these women here are source citations, like ancient footnotes. Because these women were still alive and so he's saying, "You want to verify what I'm saying? Go talk to these women." This isn't how legends are written, this is history.

But there's also something else significant that lends credibility to Mark's gospel, not just that they were eyewitness but **Women eyewitnesses**. Celsus, a Greek philosopher who lived in the second century A.D. was highly antagonistic to Christianity and wrote a number of works listing arguments against it. One of the arguments he believed the most telling went like this, "Christianity can't be true because the written accounts of the resurrection are based on the testimony of women and we all know that women are hysterical." And many of Celsus' readers agreed because for them that was a major problem, in ancient societies as you know women were marginalized and the testimony of women was never given much credence. Do you see what that means? If Mark and the Christians were making up these stories to get their movement off the ground they would never have written women into the story as the first eyewitnesses to Jesus' empty tomb. The only possible reason for the presence of women in these accounts is that they really were present and reported what they saw.¹

You say, "OK, Nate, so maybe Mark was written as eyewitness accounts and not centuries later, but we can't trust that they really saw the resurrected Jesus because **ancient people were superstitious and gullible**. They believed in magic and miracles and of course we know none of those things exist now. It was easy for them to believe in a resurrected Jesus." Again, Mark's account challenges this notion. **The Resurrection was Unexpected and Hard to Believe for 1st century Jewish people**, just as much as it would be today. And I say this almost every Easter because it's so critical. All throughout Mark's gospel you see that Jesus predicted his death and resurrection on the third day. Why is it that not one of these disciples woke up Sunday morning and were like, "1,2, day 3...Hmmm...Maybe we should at least send someone to go check on the tomb?" These three *women* came to the tomb that morning, but not expecting a resurrection. Look what they were doing... **[They] bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body...³ and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"** They weren't coming for an Easter brunch with a resurrected Jesus, they were coming to memorialize a dead Jesus.

Here's the point: **Nobody believed in the actual, literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus... until it happened! Why?** Scholar N.T. Wright explains at length in his landmark book *The Resurrection of the Son of God* that Jewish people in the 1st century did not believe a man could be God (which was blasphemy and earned the death penalty) and would have never believed it was

¹ From Tim Keller's Book *Jesus the King*, p.237

possible for an individual in the middle of history to bodily rise from the dead.² And yet, somehow these women, along with the disciples and thousands and thousands of Jews suddenly began believing both of these things were true. How is that? Because hundreds of witnesses of the risen Jesus began telling everyone what they saw with compelling evidence and a moment of clarity...conviction- and Christianity exploded! Many of these witnesses were killed because of their testimony, and went to their death never recanting what they saw and believed. What other explanation do we have of this phenomenon than it actually happened? N.T. Wright: “no other explanations have been offered in 2000 years of sneering skepticism that can satisfactorily account for how the tomb came to be empty, how the disciples came to see Jesus, and how their lives and worldviews were transformed.”³

And if the resurrection of Jesus is true, you can see why it transformed these cowardly disciples into courageous, loving men and women. Because **the resurrection changes your past**. Jesus says that only he has the ability to forgive sins, only he can wipe our past clean before God...you aren't defined by your past failures and limited by your baggage? Wow. It **changes our future** because Jesus said “I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except through me.” Jesus' resurrection secures our future resurrection one day when we die...which you will, so that life doesn't end in dark defeat but shining victory with God forever and ever. And Jesus' **resurrection changes your present**, because Jesus promises to give us life to the full- healing our wounds, freeing us from addictions, bringing us the kind of meaning, purpose and dignity we deeply desire, it will give us a hope that no amount of suffering we experience in this life can take a way because Jesus said, “In this world you will have troubles but take heart, I have overcome the world.”

And all of this is compelling evidence to believe, but it's not enough. And it wasn't enough, even for these women. Because every one of us has to have our own moment of clarity. I want to take us to the end of Mark 16:8, after these women visit the empty tomb and they are told of the resurrected Jesus by an angel and that Jesus is calling them to meet him. And the next verse is surprising. ***Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.*** There is good evidence that Mark's Gospel ended right here with verse 8, not verse 20, and your copy of the Bible may make that point somewhere in the margins, because the oldest manuscripts of Mark's gospel, which we have discovered over the last 200 years of modern archaeology don't contain v.9-20. Then why is it there? Well, we probably all experienced the agitation of an abrupt ending in a movie. It can't possibly end like that! Likely it was some well-meaning group of people many centuries later that looked at the ending of Mark's gospel and said, we don't like this abrupt ending. We need to write in the other things that happened like the other gospel accounts and tie this thing up in a neat bow.

But might I submit to you that Mark's ending in verse 8 was intentional for us the readers? I believe Mark wants us to place ourselves in the shoes of these women. They aren't

² N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, p.81-84

³ N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God*, vol. 3, p.81-84

superheroes, they are struggling to believe, they are confused, they have their doubts and fears about what this means for their lives, we are left unsure of what they will do with this information they received- do they tell the disciples as the angel instructed? Do they go on to meet Jesus for themselves in Galilee? Do they have their own moment of clarity? And likewise, we can go and experience the empty tomb where perhaps Jesus once was, either through reading these stories, or by visiting the Holy Land. And we can hear the proclamation that He is risen and gone before us...but the question remains, how will we respond? Is the compelling evidence enough to convict us? I love how author Ben Witherington put it, "I would suggest that Mark is telling us that the empty tomb and the witness are necessary but by themselves are insufficient to create faith. A real encounter with the Divine is required."⁴

Maybe you feel some ache in your soul that there is more to this life than climbing the ladder at your company, trying to make your mark in the world, or \$7 Lattes at Brew Haha, the next good meal or good glass of wine or good time and whatever else you see at the good life. And Jesus is calling you, just as he did the women at the tomb, to come encounter him, to have a heart-to-heart moment of clarity with the living Savior, so that something clicks and it hits you- that his life was given for you, his love was given to you and the greatest demonstration of that God sent Jesus Christ, the son of God, to be my savior from my sin and the penalty that is death. He was crucified, buried and he rose again from the dead that first Easter morning to reunite me forever with my Creator. And there are three things that happen in a moment of clarity like this that I experienced: **Repent, believe and follow.**

Repent: That's nasty language in today's culture, but it was actually a beautiful lifegiving word in Jesus' day. And the word the Bible uses to express a change of mind and heart. You begin to rethink your way of life all around the reality that Jesus is Lord.

Believe: To believe that he wasn't just a good teacher or leader, but that He is your Savior and Lord, God in flesh. You trust and lean all the weight of your life onto that reality, not your good works, not trying to be a good person, but the finished work of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection for you.

Follow: Not just something we assent to and then go onto the rest of our life. To follow means to begin reorienting the direction and purpose of our lives to reflect who Jesus is and what he taught. To learn and relearn how to relate to God, yourself, others, this world and make it the kind of place where the values of His kingdom are bringing life. I want to make some space for a moment of clarity because that may be happening for you now and I want to give you the opportunity to make that decision.

Salvation Prayer.

Connection Card- My next step today is: A decision for Jesus so that we can follow up with you. And if that is you today here's what I want you to do, I want you to go out to the Guest Center

⁴ Ben Witherington, The Gospel of Mark, pg.419.

and Get a Free Book “Why Easter?” that is going to help you think through some more compelling evidence. And I want you to sign up for Alpha. Alpha is a no-pressure environment where people can ask questions and explore the Christian faith. Dinner is provided. Alpha Course begins April 23 at 5pm and continues for six weeks. Sign up right now while I’m talking by scanning this QR code, or Stop by the display in the Lobby table to sign up.

Now maybe you didn’t pray that prayer but you are curious, you thought about it- listen you owe it to yourself to not just keep passing by but stop and really consider what you believe about Jesus. So I want you to also grab that book and sign up for Alpha.

And maybe you are here and you are skeptical, maybe you have lots of arguments and reasons why you don’t believe- no problem here’s what I want you to do- grab that book and sign up for Alpha!