The Resurrection of Christ
Mark 15:40-16:8

So this is our last time in Mark's gospel. And today's passage tells you something extraordinary: Christianity stands or falls on an impossible event. An event so unlikely to have happened that you'd be a fool to believe it… unless of course, it did happen.

You see, over the centuries, the Roman authorities crucified literally thousands of people. Not a single one of them survived the experience. And so, if Christianity was built on the argument that Jesus of Nazareth, *had survived* crucifixion, that would be remarkable enough. But it isn't. What it's built on is that, along with every other victim of crucifixion, Jesus died, but on the third day physically rose from the dead. And that's not just unlikely, that's impossible.

Impossible, unless, of course, it happened. And Mark sets out for you the evidence that it did. And yet, he does something else as well. He tells you that evidence is not enough. That you can know it all in your head and it not change your life. That you need something more than the facts.

You see, one of the glaring differences between Mark's account and the other gospels is that he doesn't give us any post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. He ends at v8 with the women leaving the tomb in fear, and you can think, is that it? Isn't there anything else to say?

And if that's how you respond, you're not alone, because clearly sometime in the second century scribes started adding the bits you'll find after v8 to try and give us a more satisfactory ending. But it's clear those weren't how Mark chose to close this gospel off. So why does he leave it hanging?

And the answer is, the resurrection of Christ is not the end, it's the beginning. But to experience that, you need more than just the facts.

Jesus - the Risen One
So it's Friday of Passover, and Jesus has just died on the cross. But Mark tells us, v40, 'there were also women looking on from a distance.' And he gives us three of their names - Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. In fact, including here, and in v47 and 16:1 he gives us their names 3 times.

And that's not him being boringly repetitive. It's intentional. You see, in their day you needed 2 or 3 witnesses to confirm something as being true. So this is Mark giving us - three times - the names of the witnesses: three saw Jesus die. Two saw where he was buried, and all three returned to the tomb Sunday morning.

But if Jesus died in front of their eyes, that event started a clock ticking. Because the Romans didn't just see crucifixion as a punishment for the criminal. They saw it as a deterrent. And to discourage anyone else breaking the law, they would typically leave the bodies on the crosses to rot. But for Jews that was abhorrent, because even criminals and enemies deserved burial, and the law commanded that be done before sundown. And if Jesus died sometime after 3pm, and the sun would set sometime around 6:30, then someone needs to act.

But who's going to take responsibility for the body of a man rejected by the Jews and crucified by the Romans? Verse 42-43, 'And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.'

But, v44, ‘Pilate was surprised to hear that he should have already died.’ You see, he knows that victims of crucifixion could take hours, even days to die. So he insists on checking Jesus really is dead, because the last thing he needs is someone he’s supposed to have executed taken down too early. So, v44-45, ‘summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the corpse to Joseph.’

Note how Mark is laying out the evidence. The women watched Jesus die. Pilate, the Roman governor, wants to make sure he really was dead, and the centurion - a man who has done this countless times - confirms it. And to drive it home, in v43 Mark uses the word *soma* for the body of Jesus, but in v45 he switches to the word *ptoma*, which means corpse. In other words, Mark wants you to be really clear: along with every other victim of crucifixion, Jesus died.

And taking the body down from the cross, v46, Joseph ‘wrapped him in a linen shroud and laid him in a tomb [very likely his own tomb] that had been cut out of the rock.’ And two of the women, v47, ‘Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was laid.’

Which means, when they return and find the tomb empty, it’s not that they’ve gone to the wrong one. They know where to come. And come they do. Chapter 16:1, ‘When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.’

And they went to anoint him for burial. Except, remember back in chapter 14, how a few days previously, when Jesus was eating dinner, how a woman had come and anointed him. Do you remember what Jesus had said? Verse 8, 'She has anointed my body beforehand for burial’. Why do it beforehand? Because, when the women come to anoint his body afterwards, there’s no body to anoint.

Instead, they find the stone rolled away from the entrance - a stone, Mark points out, v4, that ‘was very large’.

Now, why had they come, apart from anointing Jesus’ body? They’d come to try and bring some closure, some dignity to his death. But rather than closure, they find the tomb wide open. And going in they find it empty.

Except it’s not empty, there’s a young man, dressed in white sat there - on the right side, Mark says, which is an eyewitness detail. But that description tells you, he’s an angel and he tells them, v6, ‘Do not be alarmed’ Now, when an angel tells you that, you know that, humanly speaking, you’ve got reason to be! And he adds, ‘You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him.’

So he knows why they’re there. They thought this was the end, and he’s telling them it’s just the beginning. You see, he describes Jesus in two ways - he was crucified. Literally he calls Jesus, the Crucified One. And he uses the perfect tense - the one who was and is crucified. In other words, Jesus’ crucifixion is not some horrible part of his past to be forgotten, he was and will always be the Crucified One.

But he could be that and dead. But he's not, because secondly the young man says, He has risen. The one you saw die, the one you saw buried, the Crucified One, is the Risen One.

Which is why he says, v6, 'he is not here.' Because it's corpses you find in tombs, not Christ. And that tells you, this is not some kind of spiritual resurrection. That somehow Jesus rose spiritually, in the first disciples' hearts, but his bones are slowly turning to dust somewhere in the Middle East. No, he's not here, He has been raised, because his body has been physically resurrected.

Now, if you're not yet a Christian, maybe you hear that and think, 'come on, this is crazy! Angels dressed in white, bodies raised from the dead, this is make believe!' But if that is what you think, you've got a problem, haven't you? Because in Luke's account, when the women report all this to the disciples their response was the same as yours, 'these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them' (Luke 24:11).

So it's not as though you can engage in what CS Lewis calls 'chronological snobbery' and think just because they lived 2000 years ago they all went round believing dead bodies could live again. Like you, they know then when you die, you die.

And if they all knew that, and Mark is just making this up, why have the women as the witnesses? Why have them as the people who watch Jesus die, see where he's buried, go to the tomb, find the stone rolled away, and find the tomb empty and an angel inside? Why, when everyone knew that a woman's testimony was worthless? Why, when as one Rabbi said, 'Happy is he whose children are male, but alas for him whose children are female.' And I have 4 of them, so what does that say for me?!

If Mark is making this up, cut the women out and write in Joseph of Arimathea as the chief witness. Because he really would carry weight as a witness. He's respected, he's a leader, he's a man. But Mark doesn't. And the reason he doesn't, the only reason he has the women as the first witnesses, is that they were; that they really did find the stone rolled away, and the tomb empty, and the body gone, and this young man sitting on the right side. And that might be socially embarrassment, but something can be socially embarrassing and still be true.

But it's truth with implications. Firstly for Jesus. You see, running through this gospel has been the question, who is this man Jesus of Nazareth? And we've heard what the demons think, what Peter thinks, what a blind beggar thinks, what the high priest and Pilate think, what the centurion guarding the cross thinks. But now, God gives his verdict. Because the resurrection of Christ is the ultimate vindication. And if in chapter 1, at Jesus' baptism, we heard God the Father say, 'this is my beloved Son', and if when the high priest asked him 'are you the Christ, the son of the blessed?' And if the centurion said, he was the son of God, by raising him from the dead, *God* is saying, that's exactly who this is.

Secondly, there's an implication for death. Because when the angel says, 'he is not here' he's saying the grave is no resting place for the Son of God. But neither will it be for those who trust him, because his resurrection is just the beginning. As Paul writes, 'Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep… [that] as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.' (1 Cor 15:20,22).

Last Sunday night, as a thank you to Su, the students and young adults paid for Su and I to go to a concert and have dinner out after. And the concert was Handel's Messiah and one of the great moments is when the bass soloist sings 'The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised' and as he does, the trumpet sounds. It's one of those transcendent moments. But those are Paul's words, that when Christ returns, like him we will be raised. And so Paul can say, because of Jesus' resurrection, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' (1 Cor 15:54-55). But that victory begins here, as the women find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty.

But thirdly, there's an implication for Peter and for all who fail. Look what the angel says the women should do: v7, "Go, tell his disciples *and Peter* that he is going before you to Galilee." Now, these are men who have abandoned and disowned Jesus, but Jesus doesn't disown them. They're still 'his.' But why single out Peter? Because, through his denials, Peter has singled out himself,. And Jesus singles him out for grace, not disgrace, and knows he needs to be spoken to personally. Because Jesus doesn't shoot the wounded, he restores them.

And the angel tells the women to tell the disciples that Jesus is going before them to Galilee. Now, we know from the other gospels that he first meets them here in Jerusalem, so why mention Galilee? Because for these men, Galilee has a special meaning. It's home, but it's also where Jesus first called them. And they're waking up on this Sunday morning with all their dreams shattered around them. With their heads and hearts full of 'what-ifs?' And 'if-onlys'.

Maybe you know what that feels like. Maybe like them you feel like you've turned away, or denied Jesus, or let him down, just once too often, and there's no way back. But Jesus says, I have not given up on you. My plan and purposes for you are on track. Let's go back to where it all started and restore your first love.

And the reason that's possible, is the reason Christ came, to give his life as a ransom for many. And the resurrection tells you, that ransom has been paid and accepted. And if you trust him, your debt, just like Peter's, is wiped clean, because you're his and you always will be.

Now, have you ever had the experience of becoming interested in something and suddenly you see it everywhere? Maybe you're thinking of buying a certain model of car, and you do all the background reading, and as you do it seems like every other car driving around is that car, and you start seeing them everywhere.

Well, as we've seen, one of the things Mark's gospel is famous for is his sandwiches. And the danger is that once you see one, you start seeing them everywhere. But despite that danger, I think Mark ends his gospel with one, which would be a fitting way to end.

You see Mark begins this final passage with the women standing at a distance, then he inserts the account of Joseph going to Pilate, before going back to the women. And he does it to make a comparison.

Joseph - the Brave One

Look how Mark describes him: v43, 'Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus.'

Now Matthew and John both call Joseph a disciple of Jesus, so when Mark says he was looking for the kingdom of God, he doesn't mean he's just a godly man hoping the messiah might come. He means he was at very least sympathetic to Jesus' ministry, even if he kept that quiet from his colleagues on the Sanhedrin. And Luke tells us he did not agree with the Sanhedrin's decision to execute Jesus.

But if he's kept his admiration for Jesus in the shadows, he does so no longer. Mark says he took courage and went to Pilate. And that *would* have taken courage. Pilate has just executed Jesus on a charge of insurrection, of trying to encourage rebellion against Rome. And to risk being identified as at best sympathetic, and at worst as involved in that, could prove very costly.

But it would also have taken courage to do that knowing what his peers in the council thought. You see, Joseph's respected, which means he has a reputation to lose. And if he comes out publicly for a man everyone else thinks is a blasphemer and a fraud, he'll lose it. And think how they might have tried to dissuade him: you don't want to find yourself on the wrong side of history, Joseph. Why ruin your reputation for this?

But Joseph's willing to take that risk. To risk his future on Christ. But you know what makes that all the more inspiring? He's doing it for a corpse. Jesus is dead, and Joseph doesn't know anything of the resurrection yet, because it hasn't happened yet. Yet, for the sake of Christ's dead body, he takes courage and risks. Think how even more courageous someone would be, think of the difference it would make if someone knew Christ was risen from the dead!

Or would it? And that's the contrast Mark wants you to see.

The Women - the Fearful Ones

And the contrast is not that Joseph has influence and the women have none - which was true; it's not that he's male and they're female in a male dominated world, which is also true. It's between his courage even though he thinks Jesus is dead, and the fear of the women when they know he's risen.

Look how Mark describes them. In v40, at the crucifixion, they were 'looking on *from a distance*.' The last person Mark described like that was Peter, following Jesus *at a distance* before his denials.

And while on Sunday morning, when there's no sign of the male disciples, these women come to the tomb at some risk to themselves, Mark tells us they come anxious - v3, "Who will roll away the stone for us?" When what they discover is they had no reason to worry - it had already been moved. It's a reminder of how many of the things we worry about never come to pass.

And whereas Joseph took courage and finally nailed his colours publicly to the mast, when the women entered the tomb and saw the angel they were, v5, 'alarmed.' And having been told Christ was risen, he tells us v8, they 'fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.'

And that's the end of the gospel! Right when we're expecting joy and triumph and boldness and proclamation we get fear and silence!

What kind of an end is that? Well, we know they didn't stay silent for long. And we know that by the time Mark wrote this the church had been publicly proclaiming Christ's resurrection for 30 years.

So why end it like this? Because the facts of the resurrection alone, apologetics on their own, knowing it all in your head on its own, doesn't make you bold. It doesn't answer the fear. These women *lived* the apologetics, they lived the facts, but that didn't turn the fearful into the brave.

And Mark is writing this to Christians who are by now as socially disadvantaged as these women. And they're also facing the dilemma, do I come out for Christ or not? Do I take courage and identify as a Christian or not? Do I tell people?

And Mark leaves the ending hanging because it's up to them to write it. How am I going to respond to the resurrection? But it's also up to you. You see, what the women needed, what we all need, is a personal encounter with the risen Christ; to know, not just in our heads, but with our whole hearts, that Christ is risen.

You - the… what?
What will you be? How will you respond? And not just to the ending of the gospel, but to the whole of it?

How do you answer the question, who is this man? What are you going to do with the Crucified and Risen One?

And do you know, not just intellectually, apologetically, but in your heart, that he was crucified for you and he is risen? And then let that free you from fear and change forever they way you think and speak and live?

So as we finish, Linley's going to come up and play for a few minutes before we go into our last song. And as she does I want to suggest some areas of response.

Maybe you're not yet a Christian, but having seen Christ in the gospel, you want to become one. Do that today. Take a moment, in your heart, to call out to Christ. Tell him you repent of your sin and trust in what he has done for you. Ask him to save you and make you his, and he will. And then come and tell me or a friend after.

Maybe you would have called yourself a Christian but now you're not quite so sure. You know it intellectually but you also know he doesn't have your heart. You know the facts, but you also know that's not enough. You call out to him as well. Ask him to come, and change your heart and give you a heart of flesh, to love him and treasure him and trust him.

Or, maybe you know you're a Christian, and you know the facts, and like these women you love Christ, but like them you're fearful. Well, ask him to fill you with his Spirit, that you might encounter the Crucified and Risen One again and that that would give you the faith and the courage you need.

And for those of you who know you're a Christian, and you know he's risen and you feel his courage… worship him. Tell him again, he's your Lord and you love him.