

**Address – Easter Sunday – 4/4/21**

Mark 16:1-8

“They went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8)

Well, are you ready to turn the world upside down? That’s what Easter is about, isn’t it? The impossible made possible. Christ is risen indeed we have proclaimed with as much gusto as we can beneath our face-masks! This is our triumphant holy day. This is the day we lift up the Lord’s name with confident alleluias. This is the day that we glorify the risen, conquering Jesus, a day that we are glad to count ourselves amongst the hundreds of millions the world over who celebrate this special day, a day when we expect to see something of the Christian message hitting the headlines, a day when it’s OK to be out and proud as a Christian. So, if we’re not ready to go out from here and turn the world upside down today, when *are* we going to be doing it?

Perhaps surprisingly, the first Easter day was rather less obviously triumphant than we might think, rather more hesitant than our celebrations are today but perhaps more akin to the way we feel most days. We read this morning: “They went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.” It is with those astonishingly downbeat words that the earliest manuscripts of Mark conclude the account of the resurrection of Jesus, and in fact bring the whole of his account of Jesus' life to a close. That’s the very end of the Book, and you might be forgiven for thinking that a final chapter is missing. Later writers indeed thought that that is exactly what had happened and added what they thought was a better ending drawn from the other Gospels.

But is it not possible that Mark actually *intended* to finish his Gospel where he did, at verse eight, with distress and terror and fear? Was it not Mark’s way of expressing the true extent of the shock that Jesus’ resurrection brought to those who had been so traumatized by the death of their Teacher and Friend? It’s as if Mark’s Gospel ends in the air with three dots... and that all of us who read it must finish the story for ourselves. If you think about it, since Jesus is risen from the dead, the story of His life can actually have no ending at all. Because He is risen for ever, people go on hearing

the news of the resurrection and encountering Jesus for themselves and the Gospel message continues to be written in human lives in every age.

Imagine the emotions that the women who went to the tomb were experiencing and the feelings that the disciples had before and after they heard the news of the resurrection. The women had been there when Jesus was crucified; they were there when Joseph buried the body and rolled the stone against the entrance to the tomb; they would have been numb with pain at seeing Jesus die, filled with grief to see him buried; and then they had to endure the long wait through the Jewish Sabbath until nightfall when they could go and buy spices to anoint the body properly for burial and then wait again until first light on Sunday morning when they could go to the tomb and face the reality of what had happened. Imagine the emptiness and the mixed-up feelings, the grief.

The disciples might well have felt even worse. They had deserted Jesus in His hour of need because of their own fear; they would have heard from others of Jesus' death and been overcome with guilt. How must *they* have received the news of the resurrection? With utter confusion I suspect, desperately wanting to believe it but afraid that it was just a cruel hoax.

When the women were on the way to the tomb, they asked each other: 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' But the needs of their own powerlessness were answered in the way they least expected, because not only was the stone already moved, there was in fact no body for them to anoint. The impossible had been made possible.

I'm sure I am not alone in finding Mark's hesitant account of Easter morning a hugely encouraging place to start. Yes, the first Christians *did* go on to turn the world upside down in the power of the risen Christ, but they came from a place of emptiness and powerlessness, of distress and terror and fear, to do it. Does that not mean that that can be experience of any one of *us*? Paul wrote to the Ephesians of 'God's incomparably great power for us who believe, which is like the working of his mighty strength which he exerted in Christ when he raised Him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms.' That resurrection power is still at work today to turn people's lives upside down - darkness can become light, grief can become a deep sense of joy at God's living presence, distress and terror and fear can become faith as it did for those who first heard the good news of Easter morning.

It doesn't matter where we come from, from how far away or from how low down; it doesn't matter how distressed or terrified or afraid we are, however we come to the empty tomb we simply need to discover what the women and the disciples went on to discover – that Jesus Christ *was* in fact raised from the dead according to the Scriptures. Then God will do the rest. Have you discovered the reality of the risen Christ yet, or does that wonderful experience still lie ahead of you?

On Friday, one of today's fundamentalist atheists, Professor Alice Roberts, tweeted “Just a little reminder today. Dead people don't come back to life.” She should perhaps be careful. With similar scepticism and pride in the 1920s a man called Frank Morrison set out to test the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus and to put it forward as it would be in a court of law. His aim was to establish once and for all that the Gospel accounts did not tally and that the Resurrection could not possibly have happened. But by the time he was finished, Frank Morrison was a convinced believer. His book *Who Moved the Stone?* is a classic.

Many people do not accept the Gospel records as a reliable account of what happened. They say it is a story that has been made up. Yet who, in first-century Palestine would make up a story in which the chief witnesses were three women whose testimony (at that time) would have been inadmissible in a court of law simply because they were women? Surely they would drafted a more convincing tale than that. Who would *make up* a story which ends with distress and terror and fear? Surely they would have manufactured a joyful, triumphant ending. Maybe, just maybe, Mark's Gospel tells it just the way it happened.

The risen Christ is present in every generation. I personally have seen lives transformed by hearing and believing the good news, and there have been hundreds of millions of people over the centuries who could bear witness to the same transformation. The effects of faith in Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, cannot simply be explained away as delusion. We're dealing here with the most mind-blowing truth the world will ever hear – it's impossible, people say, dead people don't come back to life. But what we proclaim today is that the crucified Jesus *was* raised from the dead and is alive today.

If that is the truth, then the truth is for telling. So are you ready? Ready to tell, ready to make disciples of others, ready to make the same difference in the world today as the first witnesses of the resurrection did then? Yes, we too may be distressed and terrified, we may be afraid at the thought of sharing our faith in a sometimes hostile world, but while Mark's Gospel

ends hesitantly, in the purposes of God the story continues to unfold in the life of the early Church, and it is still unfolding in our world today. The apparently impossible *is* possible. No matter how hesitant we may be, Christ is ahead of us – so let us follow Christ, let us spread the Word and in so doing let us serve our community.

Maybe we are ready to run, distressed and terrified. Maybe we feel like saying nothing to anyone. Well maybe it's time to make a start. It may sound a little muffled behind your mask, but that doesn't make it any less worth saying: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!