

The Strangest Story of All

Mark: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Mark 16:1-8

November 19, 2017

Randy Lovelace

And so we come to this final sermon on the Gospel of Mark. And it ends, as it should, with the end of the story, that is, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. It is, as C.S. Lewis said, the strangest story of all, that Jesus Christ would be raised on the third day, victorious over sin and death. But this is the story. And I'm grateful that we can do this just prior to the beginning of the Advent season, coming in a couple of weeks. Where we begin again to look at what God has done in preparing the world to receive his Son. We now see that the stranger story of all is that Jesus did not die merely as a martyr, but he died as a victorious King, whose weakness was demonstrated in giving himself for our sin and dying upon a cross, but being raised in victory.

In Mark 16:1-8 we hear of this story. And so I now ask that you join with me as we see this passage together.

¹When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you." ⁸And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. [ESV]

This is the Word of God. (Thanks be to God.) Again, will you pray with me. Now we ask you, O Lord, to teach us again of the strangest story of all, that the revealed Son of God—fully God and fully man—was crucified and was buried. But on the third day his tomb was empty. We pray that you would help us to see that story again, not merely as a story, but a truth which transcends, a truth that can strengthen us and encourage us and meet us this very day, whoever we are and from where ever we come from. May you give us the hope of the resurrection of Christ. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

So you see in your outline it is **The Door Forced Open, The Body Raised, The Birth of Hope. The Door Forced Open, The Body Raised, and The Birth of Hope.**

The Door Forced Open is where we should begin. It is very clear to us that as these women, who were the first evangelists, went to the tomb expecting to find what they had expected, but what Jesus had told them would be otherwise. Yet it's clear yet again all that Jesus taught, all that he explained to those who were closest to him—[they] still did not get it.

That's comforting. Have you ever been in that place? Perhaps you're in that place this morning. When you're in your life, and if you are a believer and you look at the Lord—perhaps in prayer, perhaps eyes wide open driving down the road—and you're saying to God, I just don't get it. All the promises of God, all the promises of his grace and mercy, yet I still don't get it. That is a very human reality. That even when the Lord tells us what will happen we still find ourselves expecting something different. We still find that we rest on our own understanding. We rest on our own performance. We rest on our own doings rather than what the Lord has laid out.

But here we see that as they were expecting, who is going to open that tomb? Who will roll away the very large stone? This is where I get the first point from: **The Door Forced Open**. Why? It's because it is an indication of a new beginning. A new beginning. Everything up until this point. . . Yes, resurrections had taken place, but they would not live forever. They would die again. Lazarus would die again. But here we have Jesus prophesying that he would give of himself on a cross, give himself over to those who had come against him. Against the advice and counsel of his own disciples he went and did precisely what he said he would do. He would end on a cross, precisely that which all the Psalms pointed to. His hands and his feet would be pierced, and he would die as a sin offering. For God's will was that there must be a payment for sin. Yet he said but on the third day the Son will be raised.

Well, the stone is removed. This is the new beginning. What is it a new beginning of? It is God declaring to the world and declaring to us again and again and again that sin and death is not the end of the story. But more importantly than that, Jesus in his resurrection was raised in a way perhaps we would not expect, yet we need for him to be raised. The new beginning is the story that will be what happens to our bodies.

Listen to the poem by John Updike. [Seven Stanzas at Easter]. He says:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all
it was as His body;
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules
reknit, the amino acids rekindle,
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
each soft Spring recurrent;
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled
eyes of the eleven apostles;
it was as His flesh: ours.

For Christ took on flesh. It was our body in his body that was raised. Updike continues:

The same hinged thumbs and toes,
the same valved heart
that – pierced – died, withered, paused, and then

regathered out of enduring Might
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
analogy, sidestepping, transcendence;
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the
faded credulity of earlier ages:
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-maché,
not a stone in a story,
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,
make it a real angel,
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are
embarrassed by the miracle,
and crushed by remonstrance.

What is Updike getting at? Updike is getting at this. The new beginning of the door being forced open is this. That Christ, the Son of the living God, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, who died on the cross, was buried in a grave, is now raised. That means the beginning of God's abundant, mighty strength, whose wrath was poured out on Christ for sin. Our sin has now been made manifest through the victorious Son of God over sin and death. That means what remains is God's power.

God's power can never be eclipsed. Not by arson or the evil doings of Satan or our own evil doings. God's power is in control. He is victorious. And that same power, that same strength that raised Christ from the dead, is the same strength that removes the stone. It is the same strength which proclaims to us God's power and God is not dead. Therefore we have the opportunity at this new beginning of Christ being raised to ask the question: What are we to do with the power of the Living God that raised Christ from the dead? It is the same power that is on offer for us. It is the same power that invites us to believe in Jesus Christ for our salvation. But it is the very same power that comes in judgment. What are we to do with God's power? It cannot be eclipsed. It cannot be diminished. It is on full display. God's power has marked a new beginning at the resurrection of Christ.

But it isn't just the new beginning. It also creates and shapes new expectations. They were not expecting this. Even those Jews who believed in resurrection did not believe in

this kind of resurrection. They believed in a general resurrection at the end of history where God's people would be raised, but not a resurrection in the middle of history—especially the Son of God who has died because of sin and become a sacrifice for us all, and now being raised to life victorious over sin and death. They did not expect that. So the new expectations are if that is what happens to Christ, that brings new light on all that he taught, all that he prayed. They knew that Jesus prayed; it's recounted for us in the Gospel of John Chapter 17. He prayed for his disciples and then he prayed for those who have believed at the testimony of the disciples—that's us!

And the new expectation is if we are united to him and united to Christ in his death, we are united to him in his resurrection. That means if Christ is victorious over sin and death, and sin has been forgiven, what difference does that make to our lives? Imagine the expectation, imagine the opportunities, imagine the freedom of a heart set free from the guilt of sin. And a heart that is seized with the reality that the end of the story is not death, but resurrection. I will return to that question at the end. What possible expectations could be shaped in that reality that the stone, the door, has been forced open. What life would lie ahead of us?

Second point. **The Body Raised.** This is important for us to seize upon. We cannot diminish it and should never diminish it, and we should fight tooth and nail to hold on to this doctrine. And what is the doctrine? The doctrine is that it is the body of Christ that was raised. It is a completely new mode of living, that is, Christ's glorified body. But what was this body? C.S. Lewis wrote of this in writing about the resurrection. He says, "The resurrection narratives are not a picture of survival after death." He didn't just get by death by the narrowest of margins. "No," Lewis says, "they record how a totally new mode of being has arisen in the universe. Something new had appeared in the universe, as new as the first coming of organic life. This man after death does not get divided into ghost and corpse. A new mode of being has arisen. That is the story. What are we going to make of it?"

What do we mean by the body being raised? How is that a new mode? That is, when Christ was raised from the dead it wasn't somehow a materiality that didn't have flesh and blood. Jesus—we know in the post-resurrection narratives—he eats with his disciples. It's clear that it is a glorified body. It can do things that we in our present bodies cannot do. But it was a body. It wasn't like a body; it was a body. It was a body as we were intended to have—glorified bodies. That means the glorified body of Christ—which is our future at the resurrection, believing in him—has happened already in the middle of history.

So what are we going to make of it? This is important as we consider the second part of this idea, that it is incorruptible physicality. That this new mode of being, this body being raised, is Jesus in his incorruptible physicality. What do I mean? I've taught on this before. And for some, I recognize it is hard at times to understand what we mean. So let me describe it this way. We've heard the Apostle Paul say the following words: That flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, cannot inherit eternal life. So when we read that, many Christians believe that OK, that means flesh and blood are bad. Spirit: good. Flesh and blood: bad.

But that is not what Paul means. Let me describe it this way. As one writer says, this underlies the remarkable conclusion of Paul's explanation in 1 Corinthians 15. For Paul, the bodily resurrection does not leave us saying so that's all right, we shall go at the last to join Jesus in a non-bodily Platonic heaven. But, so then since the person you are in the world God has made will be gloriously reaffirmed in God's eventual future, you must be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the Lord's work, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. Belief in a bodily resurrection includes the belief that what is done in the present body by the Spirit of the Lord will be reaffirmed in the eventual future in ways that we cannot presently. . . or presently only guess. That is, he doesn't mean that the physicality of Christ will be abolished. Flesh and blood is a technical term for that which is corruptible. That means that when Paul talks about "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God," what he means is flesh and blood in its corruptible state, in its corrupted state as we experience in this room this very moment—our bodies, our flesh and blood is corrupted because of our sinful natures. Therefore our bodies are headlong moving towards death. But that isn't because something is inherently wrong with the idea of flesh and blood. It's just the flesh and blood we have is corrupted by a sinful nature.

But because of Christ's resurrection, his bodily resurrection, he has been raised from the grave, united with his incorrupted spirit—because of his full and righteous obedience as our Savior and Messiah and sacrifice. That means that Christ in his bodily resurrection has within himself and incorruptible physicality, flesh and blood. That means that our resurrection bodies will also be flesh and blood, but they will not be corrupted. We will be fully glorified. That's the new mode. It isn't that flesh and blood is bad and spirit is good. It's that we are corrupted by our sinful natures. But because Christ, who has gone before us, has paid the price for our sinful natures and was raised on the third day—ladies and gentlemen, you and your personality, you and your body will be completely and utterly redeemed. And we will eat at the wedding feast of the Lamb. We're going to eat. We're going to eat real food. We're going to eat. We're going to drink real drink, just as we're going to take this morning. But this morning is a symbol; then it will be in perfect fellowship. Amen.

But here's the reality. I'm still going to be five, five and a half. I'm so sorry, love, I'm still going to be this height in my glorified body. I see no indication that somehow we're just. . . All men are going to be what, whatever is supposed to be the model and women are going to be whatever the model is supposed to be. You're going to be you in all the beauty that God has created you in his own image in your mother's womb. But you will receive an incorruptible physical body and a redeemed and renewed soul. Amen?

That's why, then, when we are saved by grace through faith, the life which we lead in the body, now by the Spirit, demonstrating the fruit of the Spirit, is not stuff that's just going to go away. No, that when we do good works, when we love one another, when we pray for one another, we give a meal or a drink to one another, or we care for the poor and the needy, the widow or the orphan—when we do such things we're doing them as unto—whom? To the Lord. So that which we do now which pleases him will also go on into eternity, because it has already begun. A new life has begun. God is making all things new, one person, one thing at a time. Our works matter. Our bodies matter. Which is why it matters what we do with them: what we think about, what we

give ourselves to physically, what we think about spiritually. These things matter. Because he's created them to be that way.

I must move forward. Final point. **The Birth of Hope.** These verses end with these women being astonished and afraid. But we know it doesn't stay that way. We know that the other gospels declare that they go and they tell the disciples. They run to verify the story. And then everything changes. Jesus appears to his disciples. He teaches them, as we were learning this morning in the Sunday school class. As we learn in the Gospel of [Luke] on the Emmaus road, he taught them everything that the Scriptures taught were concerning him, beginning with Moses all the way through. This is what Jesus was demonstrating, that with his resurrection there is the birth of hope.

What do we mean, and what do I mean by the birth of hope? That though this particular passage ends with them in fear, we know that because of the other gospels it ends actually in fellowship and in strengthening and in sending out and in the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. They learn now what they had failed to understand in the past, and it is a lesson for us. That to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, to have faith, to trust in him, to give yourself to him, is to be united to him. Therefore our futures are united with Christ. And that makes all the difference in the present.

Some of you know of the Christian writer—and in many ways an evangelist, but certainly a fellow believer in the faith—Joni Eareckson Tada. In reflecting on her future in Christ, how that began to birth in her a hope, she describes it in this way. While at her church in a wheelchair—she is a quadriplegic. And in a worship service the person who was preaching that particular day encouraged everyone who was present to get on their knees and to pray. But of course she couldn't; she's bound to a wheelchair. But she began to weep. She began to weep not because she physically couldn't get on her knees, it's because of what she began to see as her future. Because when she saw everyone kneeling, she saw what was the future and the picture of heaven. She writes these words. "Sitting there I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump, dance, kick, and do aerobics."

Right, Emily? Emily, who we have baptized. Do not let this be the only picture of what you think is here. The Lord is at work. This is not the whole story. She will dance. She will kick and sing and do aerobics.

And Tada continues: "And some time before the guests are called to the banquet table at the wedding feast of the Lamb, the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on the grateful glorified knees. I will quietly kneel at the feet of Jesus. I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light bright, clothed in righteousness, powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope that the resurrection gives someone who has a spinal cord injury like me? Only in the Gospel of Jesus Christ do people find enormous hope to live. Only the resurrection promises us not just new minds and hearts, but also new bodies. They are going to be more indissoluble, more perfect, more beautiful. They will be able to be and do and bear the burden of what bodies are supposed to do in the way in which our bodies presently cannot."

The resurrection is the reality of God's power on display, which will never be eclipsed by sin or death. It is the body raised, that is, Christ in his flesh and blood, in his glorified body, and our faith in him, united to him, gives us true hope, not just of our future as Tada writes about it, but also this day.

And I end with these thoughts. These women, as they were declared to by the angel, began with trembling and astonishment and some fear, but it would be followed by rejoicing—but only when the reality of the resurrection of Christ entered in to their present. Can it be true? And if it is, as I asked earlier, what difference does it make? The birth of hope means not just that our futures are united with Christ, it's that our present is filled with hope.

Paul writes in 2 Timothy 2:10-12, beginning in actually in verse 10-12. “Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the [church], that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.” That is, even though these things the Scriptures declare we believe ~~them~~ to be true, [it] doesn't wipe away the present life that we experience in the body with our fallen natures and the suffering, anxiety, and trouble that we face every day. But what Paul invites us in to seeing is that though we are at times faithless and full of doubt, the Lord is never faithless, because to do so would be to deny himself. He is faithful to you. And this same Faithful One is the one who raised his Son from the dead.

Therefore we can say the present anxieties that we experience, the present suffering that we experience, the present doubt, the present circumstances, the present loneliness, the present frustration—all these things are real. We are not asked to check them at the door, to slap on some Christian smile as if everything's OK. Because when we are honest we recognize everything is not OK. But if what is true of Christ is true of us about our future, then we can also say that because Christ has been raised from the dead, it opens up in our present new opportunities to speak truth to our present anxieties, troubles, sufferings, doubts, and circumstances. It will not remove their difficulty, but it does bring out the reality of hope that we will not be defined or saved by our circumstances. We will not be defined or saved by our anxieties. We will not be defined or saved by our failures or our successes.

Because if Christ, who has gone before us, has died on our behalf, and now been raised from death to life, nothing will conquer us. Nothing we can withhold from him and [we can] bring all of it. And just as Christ knew what he was going to suffer and did so willingly—the same one who has died for you—the someone who has been raised for you is the same one who will be faithful to you. That means in all of these situations we can call Lord, in my faithlessness, in my doubts, in my loneliness, in my darkness—will you make your presence known. The Lord is faithful. We can cry out to him and he comes to us. He will come to us in Scripture. He comes to us reminding of these scriptures in prayer. He will come to us in reminding of his promises through the encouragement and prayers of others. In other words, Christ's resurrection changes everything, not just about our future, but even now.

So I encourage you, wherever you are this morning. I'm going to end in prayer and I'm going to end first in silence. And I ask you, whatever your need may be, ask that the Lord would meet you there. And the Lord who is faithful, I believe will do it. And then I will close our time in prayer.

Let's pray. [Silence.] Our Heavenly Father, by your Holy Spirit, which you have poured out on your church, we now call upon you in your power that raised Christ from the dead, make your presence known to the hearts of those who call upon you this very moment. May you pour out your presence and Spirit upon them, the beauty of your promises, the power of your grace. May it weave the truth of Christ's death and resurrection into our lives wherever we are this morning. May it give us a new breath of life and hope. And [may] it open up doors of opportunity to remember that because of our union with Christ, nothing else can define us, because you are faithful. And we would ask, as we have read and heard of your resurrection, Lord Jesus Christ, we pray for your second coming. That you would bring about the great resurrection, the renewal of our bodies to incorruptible glory to live with you for eternity. For we are tired and we are broken and we are in need of your mercy and grace. Come, Lord Jesus, come. But while we wait, give us the wisdom and grace and power to walk with you. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.