

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

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Today marks the end of the Gospel of Mark; but I trust, in our lives, the beginning of the good news. The ending of Mark is rather unusual, for it most probably in its original context ended in verse 8. At least, the manuscripts of the first four centuries of the Church by and large bare witness to that fact.

However, verses 9–20 certainly provide an authentic summary of events, which are further indicated in other portions of the Word of God. For example, the visits of Jesus to Mary Magdalene in verses 9–10 are noted more fully in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John. The appearance of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is dealt with at length in the twenty-fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Jesus' appearance to the eleven as they gathered together is talked of not only in Luke and John but also in Matthew. What He had to say to them, that they would speak in new tongues, is seen as we go through the pages of Acts, and that they would take up serpents is further seen in the apostle Paul's experience on the island of Malta, where he is impervious to the bite of the snake and continues to minister in that community. The fact, also, that they would drink things (deadly poison) and it would not hurt them, was confirmed in my own father's experience as a missionary to China and Tibet; he was once given poison—enough to kill ten men—and was impervious to it because God's mission had not yet been finalized or accomplished in his life.

And the further promise of Jesus is realized not only in the pages of Acts but through the experience of Christians in all centuries and even more so now. The Word of God is confirmed through signs and wonders which follow it. Mark 16:19–20 so beautifully tells us that when

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

Jesus ascended into heaven, we must not associate that with an absence of His presence with us. Physically, He is in heaven, but spiritually, He continues to minister through the lives of those who follow Him.

But with that in mind, I would like, for the rest of the moments we have today, to spend our time looking at the first eight verses of Mark. It really shouldn't surprise us if Mark did end his Gospel there. For he has been—as we have seen together—an exceedingly abrupt and concise writer; he is the quintessence of a writer in the sense that he states something and then lets us think about it. He forces us to draw conclusions.

He began his Gospel very abruptly, “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God”... and then, we're in the text! Into the ministry of Jesus as it occurred, beginning with John's baptism. No mention in Mark of Jesus' birth, or the visit of the shepherds or the wise men, or of Jesus' visit to the temple when He was twelve. Mark immediately introduces us to the earthly ministry of the Lord. And, as He comes to a conclusion in 16:8, he thrusts us immediately into that question of life: “What happened to Jesus?” At the beginning of the Gospel, we're asked the question, “Where does this man come from?” And all through the Gospel, we have been at work answering it. He came from God.

At the end of the Gospel, we ask on this Easter day the question: “What happened to this man?” If we don't know by now, if we don't know by our experience through the Gospel of Mark, then maybe we could never know that what Mark intends for us to do—as he lays down his pen—is to pick up the word of inquiry and to force from our lips the question, “Is there more?” And if we can lay down the Gospel of Mark at verse 16:8 and go our way nonchalantly and carelessly and assume that that's the end of the story, then we're dead. Intellectually and spiritually, we are dead.

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

But when Mark was writing, and the early Christian messengers had the chance to read His writing to the congregations; that great question and answer session where the Lord was spoken of in further detail immediately followed. You see, the message of Easter has to be actualized, realized by us in our own heart, and unless we are in a position this day to ask what this all means to me; then the story, for us, is but another tale without eternal significance.

As we see these women coming to the tomb of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark, we can't help but notice some responses that certainly must have been within their hearts. Mark, the brief writer that he is, does not draw conclusions for us; but in the first verses of the sixteenth chapter we can certainly project that the women as they came were filled with sorrow, bearing spices to anoint the body of Jesus, hoping that, through the spices, there might be a more pleasurable, aromatic perfumed atmosphere within the sepulcher itself.

These women, according to Mark 15:40, had witnessed the crucifixion. Not only had they witnessed the crucifixion, but also—Mark further tells us in verse 47—they had seen where Joseph of Arimathea had laid the Lord. Furthermore, in 15:41, we see that Mark tells us that these women had ministered to Jesus in the course of His earthly sojourn. They ministered probably by cooking for the apostolic crew with Jesus. They had ministered maybe by taking care of the children. I sometimes wonder how Jesus taught all the crowds with children. Maybe these women provided help in that department. Most of all, they ministered by being there, by listening, by loving.

As they go to the tomb on that first day of the week, you cannot help but read their sorrow. This is the end. These are their final respects. Salome—one of the three who comes...her hopes are dashed. It was she who had asked Jesus to give her two sons, James and John, the right and the

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

left seat in the kingdom. Now the one who could grant the kingdom is locked within the prison of the tomb. Their hopes were gone.

Emily Dickinson has incredibly expressed the feeling of mourning and death—perhaps this would have been their emotion, “The bustle in a house, the morning after death, is solemnest of industries enacted upon earth. The sweeping up the heart and putting love away we shall not want to use again until eternity.” As they brought the spices, they were sweeping up the heart. Their sorrow was also marked with the great respect that they had toward the Lord. They chose to pay their respect at the break of day by coming to the tomb early, so they would avoid anyone else who might be there. Evidently, they did not know that Pilate had ordered, through the Sanhedrin, a seal be set and a guard be posted. So they come, and their great question as they come is a question of procedure, “Who will roll away the stone?”

That’s such a great question for us this day. But for them, on that first day of the week, it was simply a question of procedure. Compared with the great questions which have been asked in the Gospel of Mark, it seemingly pales into insignificance. It is as if grief has the capacity to drown out all the other great questions of life. The demons asked Jesus in Mark 1, “What have you to do with us?” The leper had asked Him, “If You will, You can make me clean.” The critics had said of Him, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” The disciples had asked Him in the storm at sea, “Do You not care if we perish?” Jesus Himself had probed the disciples in asking, “Who do you say that I am?” The Pharisees had said, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?” And the rich ruler had said, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” All of those great questions of life are drowned out by the crashing roar of grief.

We can’t forget that either when we go through grief. Grief has that tendency to dull all the senses so that all the other questions of life which are so important become momentarily

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

obliterated. And we, with the women on the way to the tomb—if Jesus is there, if He is not gone—we also find that we are without hope in the world, when none of the other questions can be answered, if He is in the sepulcher. As Thomas Gray, in his *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, said “The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power, And all that beauty, all that wealth e’er gave, Await alike th’ inevitable hour. The paths of glory lead but to the grave.”

That sorrow, in that respect, is followed by another emotion in the Gospel of Mark, an emotion Mark chose to conclude his story with. In verse 5, we read of the emotion, “They were amazed” (NASB). In verse 6, again, the angel said to them, “Do not be amazed” (NASB). In verse 8, “The women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (NIV).

Throughout Mark’s Gospel, he has been attempting to show us that the one who he is describing is far more than a mortal man, that He is the supernatural Son of God. And that, if you are to be in His presence, you will find the occasions when the hair on your head will stand on end and every goosebump within your flesh will rise, because He is doing the thing which no one has ever dreamed of doing, no one has ever dared to do, no one ever could do. It’s not surprising, therefore, that when we come to the end of the Gospel of Mark, we should find the emotion that we are confronted with is the paralysis of persons in the very presence of God. It would be the same emotion that we would feel this morning if suddenly Jesus physically would swing open those center doors and walk down the aisle and stand in our midst, and show us His hands and His side and His feet and say, “It is I.” There is not a person in this room that would literally not be filled with fear and trembling.

All through Mark, we have seen it. In chapter 1, the persons were amazed as they saw Him exercise power over the Capernaum demoniac. In chapter 2, they were amazed when He healed a

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

man who had paralysis. In chapter 4, the disciples were filled with awe when they saw Jesus quiet the storm. When Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from death, in Mark 5, they were overcome with amazement. When Jesus walked on the sea, they all saw Him and were terrified. And when He came into the boat, they were utterly astonished. When Jesus healed a deaf man, they were astonished beyond measure. When in Mark 9 He was transfigured or His form changed in their presence so that they saw not just the man but the divine, the disciples were exceedingly afraid. When He goes to Jerusalem in Mark 10, they were amazed. Those that followed Him were afraid. In Mark 11, they were astonished at His teaching.

We need that feel of the Lord Jesus Christ. A feel on Easter that we're not going through a kind of fashion parade or a once a year experience; but a reverential awe that we are gathered here today in the presence of One who holds all power and all authority.

I suspect that most in this audience have seen the Grand Canyon. I remember my first impression of that fantastic sight. You'd have to be there to really feel it. As I came over a small crest, as I was walking, for the first time my eyes searched over that vast expanse of God's creativity, I just drew a deep breath. I felt awe. Silence. Reverence. Stillness. As I stood there, I knew that there had to be something which explains the presence of the Grand Canyon. As little as I know about culture and archeology, I know that the Grand Canyon was not caused by an Indian, over the centuries, dragging his stick along the ground until he created a cavity. That was not within his power.

I feel that way about Easter. Mark wants us to feel that way as well. We are in the presence of the living God.

Mark leaves us with great questions that each of us needs to answer. Questions of history. Question like, for example, whatever happened to the body of Jesus? The fact that, within

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

history, Jesus' body was never produced. Had, for example, the early disciples been preaching the message of the resurrection in the temple and the high priest been able to produce His body—that would have stopped the preaching of the resurrection immediately. No body was found.

Were the disciples telling the truth? On this Easter day, the witness has to be “yes.” There is really no other conclusion. They had no reason to tell a lie. The Lord had had a decent burial. Why bother with Him further? They were not theologians and they were not philosophers. They were so ill-prepared for the task of preaching the message of the resurrection. Had they been making up the story, they would have never begun their preaching in Jerusalem, which was the scene of the crime. They would have started in the boondocks in Galilee where people were more susceptible to swallowing a myth. They were contemporaries of Jesus. They had seen Him. For them to say that Jesus of Nazareth had risen from the dead would be the equivalent of someone coming along in 1974 and saying F. D. R. rose from the dead. We would either put that person on a TV talk show or lock him up in an asylum, but nobody would take him seriously. Jesus rose. Their lives were radically changed and they died for the sake of their witness in the Lord.

People die for many causes, but no one dies willingly for something he knows to be an outright lie. Did Jesus rise from the dead? The empty tomb is not enough. Once we go to the tomb, we find the presence an angel, who said, “He is not here. He has risen!” And beyond that, according to the Scripture, we read in Matthew that the Lord meets the women and appears to them.

The temptation on Easter Sunday morning is to do what Constantine did in the fourth century. The temptation was to try to get everybody—instantaneously and overnight, without any volunteerism on the person's own behalf—to be named Christian. So Constantine marched an

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

army down by the river and had priests sprinkle them with water and they all became Christians.

But to be a Christian, one begins to believe deep within his heart, like a groundswell, Jesus Christ has risen.

And because He has risen, I can accept all that He has to say. I can accept what He has to say about my sin: that I need it forgiven and that it's separating me from God. I can accept what He has to say about how I should order my life. And I can believe what He has to say when it comes to my future and my eternal union with God.

Mark's story is not the story of a group of terrified women who created the Easter message. It is the story that we're in the presence of a universe created by a God who we now know.

Have you come today asking in your own heart, "Who will roll away the stone? Who will roll away the stone of doubt? Who will roll away the stone of bondage and sin in your own life? Who will roll away the habits and the unbelief? Who will roll away what separates you from knowing the future and knowing God? Who will roll away the stone of your sickness? Who will roll away the stone of your dark night?"

There is an answer in the Easter message. Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

In this moment of reverence and worship, we bow before Thee, O living God. How easy we find—when we are together with the saints—to say quite naturally, "O Thou, living God." But what another thing to know within our heart that Thou, the Lord God, must indeed live and hast perfectly manifested Yourself in the person of Jesus. On this day, we celebrate something far more than just the beginning of spring or the passing or the changing of fashions and the seasons of the year. We have a faith that is founded upon an absolute certainty. Thou art risen. We rise to greet Thee. We rise in faith within our own hearts to say, this day, "We own Thee as our Lord

WHY AN EMPTY TOMB IS NOT ENOUGH

Mark 16

and Savior.” I pray especially, Lord Jesus, for those who are in our midst who have come as visitors and guests. Perhaps, out of a sense of reverence for the past, they have been brought up in a Christian experience; and they have come during this one time in a year to be in a place where the Easter message is proclaimed. I pray that today You would especially bless and minister to those whose faith in You is not yet formed but within whom there still beats a curiosity, a lingering idea it might all be true. I pray that today You would draw these friends into Your fellowship and that, as a result of this experience shared together, there would be the beginning of the good news in each of their lives. And that, for each of them, the gospel story would only begin and that, once it has begun, it will culminate in more fellowship with the body and, more importantly, with You. I pray that everyone in here today, Father, would be saved.