

Mark 16:1-14 (1984 NIV)

Resurrection Sunday: Making a Comeback

1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" 4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 6 "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" 8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. 9 When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping. 11 When they heard that Jesus was alive and that she had seen him, they did not believe it. 12 Afterward Jesus appeared in a different form to two of them while they were walking in the country. 13 These returned and reported it to the rest; but they did not believe them either. 14 Later Jesus appeared to the Eleven as they were eating; he rebuked them for their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him after he had risen.

Introduction

If you are reading Mark 16:1-14 (our text today) from the NIV, you will notice this notation just above 16:9 that reads, "The most reliable early manuscripts and other ancient witnesses do not have Mark 16:9-20."

- This is because there is a debate in biblical scholarship as to whether these verses actually belong to the gospel of Mark originally.
- Some scholars believe that Mark did stop at 16:8.
- Others believe that Mark actually wrote beyond verse 8, but that section was somehow lost—they surmise that a later writer added vv. 9-20 in summary form so that the ending of Mark's gospel would not be so abrupt.

My purpose today is not to debate on this issue. Rather, I have chosen to share from Mark 16:1-14 because of two reasons:

- One, what is recorded in this text has in fact been validated and expanded by parallel accounts in the other gospels—i.e. Matt. 28, Luke 24, and John 20.
- Two, my purpose today is not to engage in biblical criticism, but gospel communication. And I believe our text today has good gospel value.

The local newspaper (*The Straits Times*, 29 March 1997) once reported a mass suicide by 39 people of a cult group called "Higher Source" in San Diego, USA.

Among the dead was the leader of the group named Marshall Applewhite. He was 65 years old and a music professor.

This cult group had a website on the internet. On it, the group talked of their belief in the appearance of a comet named Hale-Bopp from the “Level above Human” to take them all home in the “Literal Heaven”.

And the comet Hale-Bopp had been sighted in the Northern Hemisphere since the middle of March in 1997. Supposedly, it was last seen 4,210 years ago, and would only remain within view for only a month. After this, its next appearance would be some 2,400 years later. So, it would be a long, long wait if you had missed seeing it in 1997.

It is no wonder that those who died in that mass suicide had their bags neatly packed, and said that they were happily prepared to leave this world and live in that world in the “Literal Heaven”.

I wonder if we talk to people about the death of Jesus on the Cross on Good Friday and His resurrection on Resurrection Sunday (aka Easter Sunday), would they think that we are somewhat like these esoteric cultists and Jesus is the leader of the flock? Perhaps, it is not surprising if some people think this way about us and Jesus. In fact, even the disciples of Jesus found it hard to believe that Jesus was alive when they heard it from some women who reported the news to them.

So, what really happened on that first Resurrection Sunday morning some days after Jesus had died on the Cross?

- Our text today tells us that three women heard an angel announcing to them that Jesus had risen.
- Then, they saw that the place where Jesus’ body was placed was indeed empty.
- They heard, they saw ... and they believed.
- Mark tells us that they were trembling, bewildered, and afraid in 16:8; Matt. 28:8 qualifies this by saying that they were “afraid yet filled with joy”. In other words, the reality of Jesus’ resurrection so thrilled these women with awe and excitement that they were momentarily hushed into silence, yet their feet were walking so fast as if they were rushing to tell others of what they had heard, seen, and believed—the good news that Jesus had risen.
- But surprise! Surprise! When they told the disciples of Jesus of what they had heard and seen, the disciples did not believe them! Perhaps, these disciples were all so grieved that they could not believe that this was possible. Perhaps, they thought that these equally grieved women were so emotionally stricken that they had an illusion that Jesus was alive.
- Of course, the disciples wanted very much to see Jesus alive themselves ... if it could be at all possible. But they just could not put themselves to believe the news that the women had brought to them.
- When Jesus eventually appeared before them in 16:14, He rebuked them for their unbelief.

What is the point here? The point is this—as far as Jesus was concerned, He wanted His people to believe first by faith, and not by sight. And this is also what Jesus wants you and me to do in our lives—to believe first by faith, and not by sight in what God’s Word has to tell us today.

I cannot bring Jesus before you today and say to you, “Here is Jesus. He is risen!” But I can proclaim to you what the angel said to those three women who were looking for Jesus in 16:6—“Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.”

- Yes, Jesus was risen on that first Resurrection Sunday morning. And Jesus is risen today! Do you believe it?
- Skeptics throughout history have tried to deny the risen Christ. They say, “The body is not risen, but stolen.”
- But you know, Jesus’ first disciples suffered much in the days that followed because they eventually believed that He had risen; some had even died for this belief. Would they be willing to suffer and die for a lie if they knew deep in their hearts that His body had actually been stolen?
- Also, the early church grew by leaps and bounds after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. The hostile Jews and Romans could have brought out the body of Jesus to discredit the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and counter the growth of the church if they themselves had indeed stolen it. But they didn’t because they just couldn’t discredit what had actually happened.

But what does it mean to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ today?

I. To believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ today is more than believing in a fact, it is moving on to come to Him in faith.

My intention today is not so much to prove to you beyond any doubt that Jesus has indeed risen, but to proclaim to you that Jesus has indeed risen. Jesus has risen! He has made a comeback from the dead! And the same power that has raised Jesus from the dead will also help you make a comeback from the so-called “dead-end” situations in your own life ... if you would come to Him in faith today.

The power that has raised Jesus from the bondage of death; that has enabled Him to make a comeback from the dead, is that same power that can deliver you from the bondage of sinful defeats and failures, and make you experience a comeback in your life.

- Unfortunately, the greatest hindrance that deters many of us from experiencing this power of God and from God; from experiencing freedom over certain bondages in our lives; from experiencing a comeback from sin, defeats, and failures is this—our own personal unbelief.
- Our text today tells us that immediately after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the disciples who were supposed to be more spiritual-minded than the three simple-minded women, were still languishing in the pit of despair and gloom. And the text gives us three reasons why they were still in despair and gloom in spite of the good news of Jesus’ resurrection from the women.

- One, "... they did not believe" (v. 11).
- Two, "... they did not believe" (v. 13).
- Three, "... their lack of faith and their stubborn refusal to believe" (v. 14).
- What is sadder is when we consider their unbelief in the light of what the angel said to the women in v. 7, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he had told you.'"
- We see here that in anticipation of His rising again, Jesus had promised His disciples earlier that He would see them again in Galilee (see Mark 14:28).
- Thus, the disciples were not actually asked to believe in some "old-wives' tale" or to believe in a vacuum with no context.
- They were actually asked to believe in a promise given earlier by the Lord Himself ... but they didn't.

Yes, the biggest hindrance in believing that Jesus Christ has risen is personal unbelief in what the Lord has spoken in and through His Word of promise. Put in another way, to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to hear, to know, and then come to Him in faith because He has invited and promised to meet us.

Let's not repeat the same mistake of the disciples—they received a promise from the Lord, but they didn't believe it and respond accordingly (at least in our text today). In the same way, the same Word of God is telling us today that Jesus is risen from the dead. And with this proclamation, God is promising you and me today that:

- In Jesus, He has the power to make us a righteous person according to God's own absolute standard.
- In Jesus, He has the power to bring us back to God in reconciled relationship—our sinfulness will be forgiven and cleansed so that we can be in right relationship with this Holy God.
- In Jesus, He has the power to help us go through life's pain and difficulties (and not always avoid them or be spared from them), and make a comeback from the "dead-end" situations in life.

To receive the blessings of these promises, we need to come to Jesus with openness and faith. Now, what does this mean to come to Jesus with openness and faith? It means ...

II. We come to Jesus with openness and faith even without knowing all the answers.

I believe the women who went to the tomb on that morning had a big question they could not answer.

- They loved Jesus; they loved Him enough to risk going to the tomb to pour oil on His body as a rite of last respect. Indeed, they were there too when Jesus died on the Cross.
- But even before they were on their way to the tomb, they had a big question—i.e. "Who will roll away the huge stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" (v. 30).
- It was a huge stone; it was sealed and heavily guarded.

- Yet, in spite of these obstacles, the women decided to go. They did not debate on how they could roll away the huge stone or evade the guards at the tomb. In short, they went even though they were unsure of how to answer the question(s) they had as they went.

But then, what happened when they arrived at the tomb?

- Great things happened; miraculous things happened.
- The huge stone was rolled away; all the guards were gone.
- The women went into the tomb and saw something very strange and even disturbing perhaps—they saw an empty tomb.
- Just while they were wondering if the body had been transferred elsewhere or even worse stolen, an angel (in the form of a young man dressed in white) told them that Jesus had risen! What!? Jesus had risen from the dead!? Unbelievable!!
- But they saw with their own eyes that the place where Jesus' body had laid was indeed empty.
- Jesus' body had been hijacked or stolen away would be very bad news. But Jesus' body was not there because He had risen would not be easy to believe. Yet it would be the greatest news of a miraculous event.
- As the women hurried away to tell the others what they saw at the tomb and heard from the angel, we are told in Matt. 28:9 that Jesus appeared to them to reassure them that what they saw and heard were indeed true.
- These women were indeed very blessed people. They were the first to see and hear of the miracle of the risen Christ. Why were they so blessed?
 - Because in spite of the question(s) they had, they went to the tomb, and they saw great and mighty things.
 - They did not allow that huge stone in front of the tomb's entrance to become an obstacle in hindering them from coming to Jesus.

In the same way today, you don't need to have all the answers before you come to Jesus today.

- What are your questions today? Are they like huge stones that obstruct and discourage you from coming to Jesus today?
- Maybe your burning question today has to do with the sufferings and pain in life today. And you are asking, "If Jesus is really the One who comes to save, why is He so silent, so absent, so passive in such times of suffering and pain?"

I really don't have easy answers for you. But when I look at the resurrection of Jesus Christ (on Resurrection Sunday) in the light of what happened three days before when Jesus Christ died on the Cross (on Good Friday), I am greatly reassured with hope and anticipation that the Lord Jesus Christ will make all things beautiful and right in His time.

- You see, when Jesus was crucified on the Cross, almost all His closest people deserted and distanced from Him because they were fearful, disappointed, and discouraged—Jesus could not even protect Himself, much less to fight for them.

- Even His enemies taunted Him, saying that if He's really the Son of God, then He should call on the Almighty to intervene and deliver Him.
- But no great intervention and deliverance came to Jesus on the Cross. In fact, in a moment of extreme anguish, Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Nothing happened, except that Jesus suffered greatly and eventually died on the Cross with an anguished cry.

But as we commemorate the Risen Christ on Resurrection Sunday today, we are reminded that Jesus Christ is working out the salvation and deliverance of humanity from this fallen world of suffering and pain. Our text today—Mark 16:1-14—does not allow us to stay at what happened to Jesus on Good Friday when He died on the Cross. Instead, our text today brings us three days forward to that first Resurrection Sunday to tell us that Jesus did not lose the "game plan" on the day He died on the Cross.

- He did not stay dead and defeated on the Cross or in the tomb. On this Resurrection Sunday as we commemorate and celebrate the Risen Christ, we are reminded that Jesus is alive and victorious over death and His enemies. Jesus is risen today!
- So we commemorate and celebrate because Resurrection Sunday today corrects what happened on that Good Friday when Jesus died on the Cross.
 - It does not correct Good Friday as if it was a mistake on Jesus' part to die on the Cross.
 - Rather, it corrects Good Friday in that it corrects the wrong human perception that Jesus died in suffering and pain; in death and defeat, and so that day was actually the end of a tragic story.
 - Resurrection Sunday corrects Good Friday in that it tells us that the ways of God in Jesus Christ are not the ways of man; God's ways in Jesus Christ are always higher than the ways of man.
 - God in Jesus Christ can know, see, and do unimaginably beyond what the greatest of all men can know, see, and do—when we say a full-stop is the end of the story, God in Jesus Christ says that full-stop is the beginning of a new chapter to reassure us that the best from Him is yet to be and come.
 - When we are feeling helpless and hopeless in our suffering world, God in Jesus Christ is working out His salvation and deliverance for our fallen world.

Indeed, all that the Bible has revealed to us from that first Good Friday to that first Resurrection Sunday is to reassure us that God in Jesus Christ will and can make all things beautiful and right in His time. So, what does this mean to us today, especially concerning life's darkest hours?

- It means what we experience at a point in time may not be all there is over a longer period of time. In other words, what we experience at a point in time often cannot be considered reliably conclusive. This is because being human, we cannot know and see all there is from now till eternity—we are finite in our human knowledge, understanding, and reasoning of people, things, and events. Thus, we finite human beings need to accept that we cannot know and have all the answers to life's complexities.

- However, our reluctance to accept or recognise our human finiteness can lead us to mistakenly believe and conclude that what is now true remains true both for now and forever.
- But only the Almighty God can know and see all there is from beginning to end. That's why His thoughts and His ways transcend our human thoughts and ways.
- This further implies that all that God has promised in Jesus Christ are worthy to be trusted because they will all come true one day. And the resurrection of Jesus Christ that we commemorate and celebrate today reminds us that even in our darkest hours of suffering and pain; death and defeat, we can be anticipative and hopeful about moving on from all this to rejoicing and gain; to life and victory in His time one day.
- Remember, after Good Friday comes Resurrection Sunday, NOT after Good Friday nothing good comes about. The Cross followed by the empty tomb; death on the Cross followed by rising again to life; the cry of Jesus to His Father God on Good Friday, "Why have you forsaken me?" was followed by the Good News of the angel to the women on Resurrection Sunday, "He is risen!"
- Yes, Good Friday is only good because there is Resurrection Sunday three days later.

Are there experiences and challenges in your life today that are leading you to believe and conclude that all is lost, helpless, and hopeless not only for now, but also forever? If so, take heart because today is Resurrection Sunday. Today, God is telling you and me that even in our darkest hours, He is working out His plan in the risen Jesus Christ to correct every wrong in our situation and fallen world. There is no hopeless situation, only people who have lost hope in what God will and can do in Jesus Christ.

- What questions are you asking today? You know, you need not have to get all the answers before you come to Jesus today.
- Be like the women who came to the tomb looking for the body of Jesus in spite of the question(s) they had.
- When they came to the tomb, all their obstacles were removed—the huge stone was rolled away and the hostile guards were gone. They were the first to be blessed with the opportunity to see the miracle of the empty and hear the Good News from the angel—"Jesus is risen!" They probably still didn't have answers to how the stone was rolled away and why the guards were not there. But all that did not seem to matter anymore.

It is very much like that when we come to Jesus in spite of our question(s).

- When we do so, He will show us great and mighty things.
- So, don't let our question(s) deter us from coming to Jesus today; from having the openness to come to Jesus; from experiencing His resurrection power working often first in us rather than in our seemingly helpless and hopeless situation—i.e. He can help us face and go through our challenges, even if there may be no immediate changes in our situation.
- And as we come with such openness and faith, the Risen Christ will and can reveal to us the many wonders of His divine grace, mercy, and love.

Victor Hugo, the well-known French novelist and politician, wrote two famous novels in his lifetime—"The Hunchback of Notre-Dame" and "Les Misérables". He once said, "Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace."

Someone added to his original quote with these words at the end, "... go to sleep in peace. God is awake!"

Indeed, God in Jesus Christ is awake even when we are fast asleep; God in Jesus Christ is there even when we are in our most vulnerable posture of sleep; God in Jesus Christ is there and working things out even in our darkest hours of helplessness and hopelessness. What a comforting thought indeed!

God is promising you and me today that:

- In Jesus, He has the power to make us a righteous person according to God's own absolute standard.
- In Jesus, He has the power to bring us back to God in reconciled relationship—our sinfulness will be forgiven and cleansed so that we can be in right relationship with this Holy God.
- In Jesus, He has the power to help us go through life's pain and difficulties (though not always avoid them or be spared from them), and make a comeback from the "dead-end" situations in life.

To receive the blessings of these promises, we need to come to Jesus with openness and faith. Now, what does this mean to come to Jesus with openness and faith? First, it means we come to Jesus with openness and faith even without knowing all the answers. Also, it means ...

III. We come to Jesus with openness and faith believing that His forgiveness is greater than our mistakes.

The instruction given by the angel to the women was to go and tell the disciples and Peter to meet Jesus in Galilee (16:7). But where were these disciples and Peter?

- They were now a pitiful lot—they were scattering, they were running away, they were hiding, they were afraid.
- Jesus had been crucified; as far as the disciples and Peter were concerned, Jesus had been defeated, and so all the hopes they had pinned on Him seemed to be one big waste.
- Some of them even returned to their former occupation—i.e. fishing.
- And surprise! Surprise! These were the very people whom Jesus wanted to meet after He had risen—people who had deserted Him when He was arrested; people who did not shout for Him when Pilate asked the crowd, "Who do you want me to release—Jesus or Barabbas?" (Mark 15:6-15).
- When Jesus had enough courage to go all the way to the Cross, His own disciples all ran away in the other direction—they deserted Him, they denied Him, they betrayed Him, and they failed Him.

- Yet, Jesus wanted to meet them after He had risen—you can say His forgiveness and acceptance of them was much greater than their mistakes committed against Him.

What about you and me today?

- Can we forgive or accept someone who has run away from us at our most helpless and needful hour?
- Peter and the other disciples could rightly lament that they had been unfaithful to Jesus; that they were not good enough to be loved by Jesus. But Jesus still wanted to see them again; to forgive, accept, and use them again to do His work.

You and I may think that we are not good enough for Jesus because of all our failures, weaknesses, and shortcomings in life.

- We may think that we are not good enough for Jesus because we are a born-loser of sorts.
 - We have flopped in our career.
 - We have flopped in our studies.
 - We have flopped in our marriage.
 - We have flopped in loving our parents/children.
 - We have flopped in our social relationships.
 - We have flopped in controlling our anger, lust, greed, etc.
- But the good news today is that Jesus' forgiveness and acceptance is much greater than our mistakes or failures in life.
- We may often not be able to undo a mistake, but there is always forgiveness and acceptance from Jesus such that that mistake will seem to be erased so completely that it is as if it has never been committed—Isa. 1:18 says, "Come now, let us settle the matter," says the LORD. "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool."
- The Bible reassures us that if we are to come to Jesus and believe in Him by faith, we will receive His forgiveness and acceptance in spite of our failures, sins, and shortcomings. And that's why in spite of all our human imperfections, we can make a comeback in life when we place our faith in Jesus, and receive His forgiveness, acceptance, and power to live a new life (as if born again, risen anew).

Conclusion

What have we heard and been reassured today?

- We have heard and been reassured that Jesus has risen.
- We have heard and been reassured that Jesus has made a comeback—He has given death a knockout blow.

If you not only heard, but also believe that Jesus is indeed risen today, you too can make a comeback in life

- You don't need to have all the answers in order to believe that—this is not a blind step into the unknown dark, but a faith step into God's greater light.
- You don't need to be all OK in your life in order to come to Jesus and believe Him in faith—Jesus' forgiveness is greater than your imperfections; in fact, you cannot be good enough to come to Jesus on your own merits.

Today is the time for us all to come and respond in faith to the Risen Christ.

- The problem with the disciples in our text today is that they “did not believe” when they first heard the news of the Risen Christ.
- Some of us are like the disciples then, lacking the faith to believe in the Risen Christ.
- And again, faith is not a leap into the dark, hoping for the best; faith is coming to Jesus in spite of our challenges in life so that we can experience the things of God for us in Him.
- Indeed, Jesus honours those who exercise faith in Him by enabling them to understand and experience more of Him in their situation as they take every step of faith towards Him.

For those who are Christians:

- Are you experiencing doubt, struggles, and guilt in your faith life?
- Today, the Lord is reassuring you that He is there in your situation even when sight and experience seem to suggest that He is so awfully silent and absent.
- Take some time to meditate on His presence in your life and situation, and renew your trust and obedience in Him, the Risen Christ.

For those who are not yet believers in Jesus Christ, if you wish to take a step of faith to come and believe in Him at this time, I invite you to repeat this simple prayer after me in your heart. And you say these words of faith and belief not to me or others here, but to the Risen Christ who is here and listening. You pray:

Jesus, I acknowledge that I am a sinner and you died on the Cross for my sin. I believe that you are now risen from the dead, and that you will give me life eternal with God the Heavenly Father. I ask you to forgive my sin, and I now place my belief and trust in you as my Saviour and Lord. Lead and help me to live in obedience to you as my Master from this day onwards. Amen!

The Lord Jesus Christ helps us all to live with faith and faithfulness in Him and in His power because He is risen! Amen!