

04/04/2021 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8 Easter Sunday

Pastor Fraser Pearce

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Today we are celebrating what is at the very heart of our life of faith:

The victory of Christ Jesus over death and the grave.

This is more important for us as individuals, as a community

Than anything that we have done or could do.

As a church we do not primarily proclaim good advice but *Good News*.

The *Good News* that in the resurrection of Christ

Is hope for us in the face of death;

Is strength for us in a new way of living;

Is peace such as the world cannot give.

Let's upfront hear again what St Paul says in today's reading from 1 Corinthians:

For I handed on to you *as of first importance* what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

Of first importance: what needs to be said above all else:

Christ died, as Scripture proclaims, *for our sins*:

To pay our debt, to wash us clean,

To give us freedom live with God as dearly loved children.

It's of first importance that Christ's was entombed:

That he truly suffered death as we all must.

And it's of first importance that on the third day, again as Scripture proclaims,

He was raised, the first in the great procession of the resurrection.

This is what St Paul confessed; this is what the early church confessed

And this is what we confess today.

And with this confession in mind, let's listen to the account of the first Easter
From the Gospel according to St Mark.

From this Gospel I will proclaim that we even now encounter the risen Christ

As he comes to us where he promises to be

According to his word.

Let's listen to how the account begins:

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and 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.

This is teaching about Christ rising *on the third day*.

The Sabbath goes from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.

We understand that Jesus had been entombed on Friday before sunset.

What's three days from Friday?

For us, it would be Saturday, Sunday, Monday.

But there's Scriptural evidence that they counted inclusively

Friday, Saturday Sunday: so today is the Lord's day.

The day of Christ's resurrection.

The women had evidently not expected Jesus to be killed:

They were certainly not prepared to attend to him in burial,

So, as soon as they were able, after sunset on Saturday,

They bought the spices to anoint his corpse

Likewise, as soon as they were able,

They went to the tomb.

They went to the tomb expecting to encounter what we would expect: death.

They were not anticipating the resurrection from the dead

They were thinking only what can be done in the face of death

By human strength: this is underlined be the question they had been asking:

They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'

They were cut off by death from the living Christ

And they were cut off even from his corpse by the stone.

We, like the women, know about the power of death.

How it cuts us off from the people we love,

And how even the demands of the world, and of everyday life

Hinder us, in our grief, from attending with piety

To the memory of those who have died.

It's into this reality that God intervenes:

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

This is the first sign that God is acting before human beings can act:

That he is already at work while death seems to be triumphing.

Where we come expecting death; when we are grieving, God acts.

So while the women come expecting to encounter the tomb
And the stone covering over the tragic power of death
What they see is the beginning of God *rolling back death by the resurrection*.
This is how the text goes on:

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.

What do they see? An *empty* tomb, an *absent* body.

The place where Jesus *had been laid*.

They do not yet see the risen Christ.

Let's pause here and think about this.

There are different understandings floating around

About the resurrection of Christ.

There's what you could call the progressive outlook: that is:

Jesus really was dead and then his body in fact decayed in the grave.

But *in our hearts* Jesus lives, and *that's* the resurrection that counts.

That's not the witness of Scripture.

When you read the Gospel the *empty tomb* is clearly proclaimed.

And anybody, even those without faith,

Could have (and in some cases did) see it:

The soldiers who guarded the tomb

Pilate; Herod; the chief priests and the pharisees.

You could also say that the empty tomb is in principle

Open to historical investigation:

Regardless of one's confession of faith one can ask the question:

Where then is the body of Jesus?

And from a Scriptural point of view, to produce the dead body of Jesus

Would be to falsify the proclamation of the resurrection.

Jesus is not only alive in our hearts,

His tomb is empty, *there is no body in the place where he was laid*.

But then there's what you could call

The fundamentalist take on the resurrection: that is:

Jesus rose from the tomb into new life,

And that anybody could have seen him: That his resurrection

Is open to investigation in the same way as the empty tomb.

The Gospels, it seems to me, present a more nuanced picture.
Think about the resurrection accounts:
For a start, the risen Christ *only appears to people of faith*.
And when they do encounter him, they do not at first recognise him.
Think of Mary Magdalene, who had to first be *called by name*.
Or the disciples on the road to Emmaus,
Who knew him in the breaking of the bread.
Or the disciples in John's Gospel, who rejoice when they see his hands and side.

The women do not yet see the body of Jesus
But they are given a message, by what we understand is an angel
(and the word 'angel' means 'messenger'):
**But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee;
there you will see him, just as he told you.'**

The women are told to go to the disciples
(and Peter, who denied Jesus three times, is singled out)
And to tell them that Jesus is going to meet them
Where he gave his word that he would be,
And that there they will see him.

But listen to how our text ends,
Which is evidently, the last words of original manuscript of Mark's Gospel:
**So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had
seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.**
What the women were initially too afraid to proclaim,
The church, by the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaims:
The tomb of Christ is empty, and we encounter Jesus even today
As we come to him where he promises
To meet us according to his word.

Today, in this service, we will hear Jesus give us his word:
This is my body given for you, this is my blood shed for you
For the forgiveness of sins.
We will come to the altar, and we will together
Eat and drink the body and blood of Christ
The true sacrificial victim who has taken away our sin
And who lives to reconcile us to the Father, and to each other.
We will experience that the power of Jesus' resurrection is seen
As we receive the peace that comes from the forgiveness of sins

The hope that comes from trusting in the resurrection of our own bodies,
And the love that grows as we receive each other as brothers and sisters
Of the one family of God.

May God always put this power at work among us

So that as we love each other, all will know

That we are disciples of the risen Christ.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!