

What a Difference a Day Makes!

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ

Scripture Reading — Mark 16:1-8 (KJV)

1 And when the sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had bought sweet spices, that they might come and anoint him. 2 And very early in the morning the first day of the week, they came unto the sepulchre at the rising of the sun. 3 And they said among themselves, Who shall roll us away the stone from the door of the sepulchre? 4 And when they looked, they saw that the stone was rolled away: for it was very great. 5 And entering into the sepulchre, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment; and they were affrighted. 6 And he saith unto them, Be not affrighted: Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him. 7 But go your way, tell his disciples and Peter that he goeth before you into Galilee: there shall ye see him, as he said unto you. 8 And they went out quickly, and fled from the sepulchre; for they trembled and were amazed: neither said they any thing to any man; for they were afraid.

Sermon

For centuries, many of the world's distinguished philosophers have assailed Christianity as irrational, superstitious, and absurd. I dare not think of the impact upon the entire human race, dead, alive, and yet to be born, had Mary Magdalene found the tomb not empty on that Sunday morning. It would have meant that an innocent person died a needless death, and His blood would be on our hands too. We would have continued to live in sin, with death staring at us, all hope of forgiveness, redemption, and salvation vanished. It would also have meant a Heaven that remained empty, and God busy creating additional space in hell to accommodate us all. Or, if you wish to agree with other religious beliefs, be prepared to be reborn as a worm in a mango, a pig in a sty, or a mosquito, or some such thing.

Change is the only constant of life. I have always been amazed at how fast life can change. Things are one way one day, and the next day they are entirely different. One day someone you have known is here; the next day, they are gone. One day you think you are well; the next day, you discover you are gravely ill. One day it appears there is no hope for your situation; the next day, your problem has been solved. Many changes can indeed occur over the course of a single day, and that is the theme I wish to pursue today.

What a difference a day makes! That was never truer than on the day Jesus rose from the dead. When the body of Jesus was placed in the tomb, on the day He was crucified, that was a dark and terrible day. As the sun went down that night, so did the hopes and dreams of all His disciples and followers. Mark's is the only Gospel that speaks of that lifeless Sabbath that passed between the day Jesus died and the day He rose in resurrection. It was, I am sure, a long and miserable Saturday for all who had placed their hopes in Jesus. But Mark moves us beyond that tragic Saturday to a glorious Sunday, when the world changed forever.

The three women mentioned in our reading observed that long, sad Sabbath day, with the events of the previous day still vivid in their minds. They had witnessed the inexpressible sufferings Jesus went through, ending in His horrendous death on the cross. They watched as His body was placed in a tomb, and a great stone was rolled over the entrance to seal it inside (Mark 15:46-47). With that, their hope of redemption and of a life of glory in the Kingdom of God seemed sealed away as well. The sealing of the tomb spoke a statement of finality. That stone seemed to cry out: "It is all over! Hope is gone! There is no future! There is no salvation! There is no kingdom! Jesus is dead! It is all over!"

I have no hesitation in hazarding a guess at what must have gone through their minds on that Saturday. Where was the Kingdom Jesus had so often spoken of? For that matter, where was the King Himself? All the hopes and aspirations they had harboured in their hearts now lay shattered. Fear gripped their minds as they reflected on the events that had begun after the Last Supper. These women, along with all the followers of the Lord, had placed all their faith in Him. In a confused and uncertain way, they had believed He was the One who would fulfil all the ancient prophecies; that He would be the King of Israel; that He would establish God's kingdom on earth. All their hopes for this life and for eternity had been bound up in what they believed about Jesus. But all of that had crumbled to the ground, and their faith had turned to grief, and their grief to utter hopelessness.

And yet, life had to go on, though not in the way they had hoped. Some of them, like Peter, may already have begun to consider how they would put a plan B into operation. I sympathise with them; we all do the same. When things go wrong, or turn out differently than we hoped, do we not all think in such terms? We think we can take control of the situation, and when that too fails and we come up against a wall, some of us sink into depression, and some alienate ourselves from Jesus.

When the Sabbath ended, on the Saturday at sunset, they emerged from their homes, went into town, and purchased sweet spices to anoint the body of Jesus, as a final act of love and reverence for their departed Master. Their intention was to go to the tomb early on Sunday morning to perform this last act of love; for them, it was a way of finding closure over His death. Broken-hearted, they made the two-mile journey from Bethany to the tomb just outside the city of Jerusalem.

As they walked, they kept talking about the stone over the entrance to the tomb. It must have dawned on them that they might have trouble reaching the body of the Lord; these women could never have moved that stone by themselves, and they knew it. Their fear was compounded further by the fact that the tomb was not merely sealed, but that Roman guards had been posted at the site. Amid their confused feelings of desperation, hopelessness, fear, doubt, and wavering faith, do you know what their real problem was? Their problem was that they were trapped in Saturday.

And that is where so many of us are today. We are still living in Saturday, without even realising that Sunday has already gone past. People move through this world enslaved to their sins (Ephesians 2:1-3); they move through it unmindful of the God who lives to save them (Romans 1:18-21); they move through it without joy, without peace, without hope, entombed in their sins and headed towards hell. The problem with the majority of people is that they are trapped in Saturday. They live in the darkness of their depravity, unaware that glory and joy unspeakable could be theirs, if only they knew that the tomb was empty, that Jesus is risen, and that they could be delivered from the bondage and darkness of their sins.

When these women arrived at the tomb, their fear turned to amazement. When they lifted their downcast eyes, they saw that the massive stone had been rolled away from the door, and that the way into the tomb stood wide open. But even this did not cheer them, for they feared the worst: that the Lord's enemies had taken His body away. So they ran the rest of the way to investigate. There, an angel began to speak to them, with a message meant to help them stop living in Saturday, and to help them experience the power of Sunday in their lives: "Be not affrighted: ye seek Jesus of Nazareth, which was crucified: he is risen; he is not here: behold the place where they laid him" (Mark 16:6). Things were not as they had appeared on the surface; they never are. Nothing is ever as bad as our own minds, our hearts, and Satan would tell us it is.

The angel wanted them to know that our Lord's cry of "It is finished!" upon the cross did not mean that He Himself was finished. The joyous cry of that Sunday is, "He is risen!" The angel wanted them to know that the power of death had been conquered by the far greater power of life, and that the empty tomb of the Lord is not a place of despair and defeat, but a place of glory, power, and hope. Jesus is alive, just as the angel had said. That was the message those women needed to hear that Sunday morning, and it is the message you and I need to hear once again today.

They would have seen the strips of cloth that had been wrapped around His body, still lying there undisturbed, as though the body had simply passed straight through them; they would have seen the napkin folded and laid aside. They would have looked upon a scene of absolute tranquillity and order, quite unlike the scene they would have witnessed had someone taken or moved the body. For two thousand years, cynics have tried to prove that the resurrection did not take place; they have invented every kind of theory imaginable to account for the empty tomb, and every such theory has been dashed to pieces by the testimony of that empty grave. If the Jewish authorities had had the body, they would have produced it the moment the disciples began preaching the resurrection. If the disciples had taken the body themselves, they would hardly have died for what they knew to be a lie. That missing body has always been impossible for the critics to account for. His body was missing because He was alive. Jesus walked out of that tomb that morning in eternal victory over Satan, sin, and death.

Scientists and theologians have long been at odds with one another. Science, by its nature, can only examine events that are reproducible again and again, and even then runs the risk of being set aside if it cannot be explained by existing theories. The resurrection of Jesus, therefore, cannot properly be weighed by scientific method, for it has never claimed to be a reproducible event. Jesus is unique, the Man who is also God, and His resurrection will not be repeated until the end of history.

Some scientists suggest that the origin of the universe can be traced to a single, extraordinarily dense point that suddenly expanded outward. If that is indeed how God went about His work of creation, so be it, for the sake of argument; and if we extend that same thinking further, we might say that all God needed to do was take the crucified, dead, and buried body of Jesus Christ, and cause it, too, to be raised into the resurrected Lord. We shall leave it there for today.

The angel then sent the women away from the tomb to carry this message to the disciples of the Lord, who were themselves filled with fear and in hiding (John 20:19); but God wanted them to know that Jesus was alive. There was no need to fear; there was joy, there was hope. Even Peter, who had so recently denied the Lord, was singled out by name; the Lord wanted Peter to know that he, too, was loved. What an amazing turn of events. The three women had come to that tomb that morning worried about rolling away a single stone; they did not know it, but God was about to use them to roll countless stones away from the hearts of millions.

What they had seen and heard at the empty tomb was almost more than they could comprehend; it changed their lives forever, and replaced their sorrow with an overwhelming sense of the power of God. They knew they were now part of a great miracle, and they ran to tell others of their risen Lord.

This news reached the other disciples too, and many of them ran to the tomb. We are told that John looked in, saw the evidence, and was the first to believe. When the Lord's resurrection is embraced by faith, it brings about a change in the life of the one who receives this truth. When the death and resurrection of Jesus, which is the Gospel, are embraced by faith, a new birth takes place: a sinner becomes a saint, a child of the devil becomes a child of God, a new creature is born (John 3:3; 2 Corinthians 5:17). That new life may not be perfect, but it is a life that Christ lives through us: a life that strives to know God and the power of the resurrected Christ, and a life that cannot keep the good news to itself, because it longs for others to have what it has itself received.

That empty tomb is still preaching to us today. My friends, if we remain trapped in the deadness and darkness of our own Saturday, let me tell you that we have no reason to stay there. The risen, living Lord Jesus can deliver us and bring us into the glorious Sunday of His new life. The message of the empty tomb rolled the stone away from the hearts of those sad, sorrowful, grief-stricken women; it can do the same for you and me. Hear that message, and heed it today. Let the Lord roll the stone away from our hearts also.

Death stands at the end of the pathway of every human life — firm, inevitable, and final. Rich and poor, sick and healthy, all alike must face it one day. For most people, death strikes fear and terror; how many are prepared to speak casually of their own death, in the way we speak of our birthdays or wedding anniversaries? But for those who believe in Jesus Christ, there is a sharp difference: they need not fear death, because they have put their trust in the One who is the Resurrection and the Life. The religions of the world try to help people come to terms with their mortality, but in the end they can offer virtually nothing; every one of their founders lies dead and buried to this day. How different Christianity is. In the face of the great fact of death, it proclaims an even greater fact of life: Jesus Christ is the living God, and because He lives, we too shall live.

Yes, that message still rings true today. I heard it once myself, and I believed it, and I was carried out of a dead, terrible, dark Saturday into a wonderful, glorious Sunday. I have seen others delivered in just the same way. The Lord is able to roll away the stone from our hearts. If He is standing outside our own tombs today, calling us, let us go to Him now. Let us leave Saturday behind, and find out what Sunday is truly about.

Amen.