

Mk 16:1-8 Resurrection of Jesus

Tim Anderson 21/4/2019

Have you ever been listening to the radio,  
when they have a competition?  
And they call up the person who's won the competition,  
and they tell them they've won,  
and the person squeals and does a war dance,  
and says something ridiculous,  
like 'nothing this good has ever happened to me'.  
That ought to be the way we respond  
to the news in our Bible reading today.  
Jesus is risen and it changes absolutely everything.  
Now I understand why we don't respond that way.  
For many of us,  
this is old news.  
We've known it for a very long time.  
So whilst we still think it's the best news,  
we don't get quite as hyped up about it now as we once would have.  
But this is great news.  
The resurrection of Jesus shows us  
that the power of sin and death is broken.  
It shows us that we can trust God's promises to renew creation  
and build a new world where all of the brokenness of this world is gone.  
The resurrection of Jesus is what tells us that we will see our loved ones  
who have died trusting in Jesus again.  
The resurrection of Jesus tells us that God's love for us  
is the love that will win.  
Sometimes there is tragic love.  
The love of Romeo and Juliet where despite their love,  
they can't save one another.  
But God's love is victorious love.  
He loves us and nothing can snatch us from his embrace.  
That's the wonder and glory of the resurrection.

Now when we hear of particularly good news,  
sometimes we describe it as unbelievable.  
It was so good that I have trouble believing it.  
I'm scared that if I believe it and it turns out not to be true,  
that I will feel crushed.  
It's unbelievable.

Well the resurrection of Jesus is unbelievably good.  
And it's extra unbelievable because it's scientifically impossible.  
And many people today feel a bit like Alice in Wonderland  
when we tell them about the resurrection.  
Remember this conversation between Alice and the Queen of Hearts?  
**Alice** laughed: "There's no use trying," she said;  
"one can't **believe impossible things**."  
"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen.  
"When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day.  
Why, sometimes I've believed  
as many as six **impossible things** before breakfast.

And the church hasn't helped matters when it's said to people,  
that they just need to have faith.  
As if faith meant the ability to believe in impossible things.  
But in fact there are three very good reasons  
to believe in the resurrection.  
And you can find each of them in today's passage.

Reason number 1.  
The empty tomb.  
This is verses 1-4.  
There's no doubt that the women who followed Jesus  
had more courage than the men.  
When Jesus was arrested in the garden of Gethsemane,  
the eleven male disciples fled.  
But the women watched him die from a distance.  
They watched Joseph of Arimathea bury him.

And at the first available opportunity,  
they went to anoint his body with spices.  
They were good Jews,  
so they wouldn't touch a dead body on the Sabbath.  
But at the crack of dawn as soon as the Sabbath was over,  
they went to the tomb.

Now that tells us some very interesting things.  
First of all, it tells us that this is a true historical account.  
There's no way that someone would have made up this story.  
Why not?  
Because if you were making up a story  
to try to convince a first century audience that Jesus had risen,  
then you wouldn't have written women in as your witnesses.  
In the first century, a woman's testimony was not admissible in court.  
Women were not considered reliable witnesses.  
Now of course today men and women's evidence is equally valued.  
But Mark was writing with the audience of his own era in mind.  
The women bearing witness to the resurrection  
undermined his story.  
So why did he write the women in as witnesses to the empty tomb?  
Well there's only one reason.  
Because the women were the witnesses to the empty tomb.  
There's no doubt about it.  
They saw Jesus die.  
They saw where he was buried.  
And when they went there,  
the stone was rolled away.  
The tomb was empty.

Now of course an empty tomb doesn't prove a resurrection.  
But it's a piece of evidence that needs to be explained.  
And over the years,  
many people sceptical of the resurrection  
have tried to explain it in various ways.

In 1930, quite famously, Frank Morison,  
decided to write a book disproving the resurrection.  
But as he examined the evidence,  
he became convinced that the resurrection was true.  
And his book, "Who moved the stone?"  
became a classic text to give to people who doubted the resurrection.  
Many people became Christians after reading it.

There was an empty tomb.  
How might we account for that?  
Maybe Jesus' disciples stole the body.  
But we know that they were dispirited  
and had gone into hiding for fear of their own arrest.  
We know that the tomb was guarded by armed soldiers.  
It seems implausible that a rag tag bunch of fishermen  
could take on a group of soldiers and win.  
And even if by some miracle they did,  
when they faced persecution,  
when they faced death for their faith in the resurrection,  
surely they would quietly recant.  
No one would willingly face death for something they knew to be a lie.

There was an empty tomb.  
How might we account for that?  
Maybe the Jewish authorities took Jesus' body  
and put it somewhere else  
just to be sure that his disciples couldn't steal it.  
Well that theory doesn't work,  
because when his disciples started claiming  
that Jesus had been raised from the dead,  
the Jewish authorities would have produced his body  
to prove the disciples were making it up.  
But they couldn't produce Jesus body  
because they didn't have it.

The best explanation for the empty tomb is that Jesus rose from the dead.

The empty tomb is the first reason to believe in the resurrection. The second reason to believe in the resurrection are the resurrection appearances.

They are pointed to in verse 7 of our passage.

The angel said to the women,

"Go and tell his disciples and Peter, he is going ahead of you into Galilee.

There you will see him, just as he told you."

So Mark doesn't actually give us a resurrection appearance of Jesus.

He just has the angel telling the women there will be some.

But we know from the other gospels that there were lots.

Matthew has the appearance to the eleven disciples in Galilee.

Luke has the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

John has the disciples in the upper room.

And the disciples fishing.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians

tells us about another resurrection appearance to 500 people at the same time.

Many of those people were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Cor, and he tells the Corinthians

they can question eye witnesses for themselves.

Acts tells us the disciples were there at Jesus' ascension into heaven.

Lots of resurrection appearances.

Resurrection appearance recorded by different authors who were unaware of each other's writings.

Lots of resurrection appearances over a 40 day period.

And they are important evidence to the resurrection.

Evidence that must be taken into account

by those who don't want to believe in the resurrection.

What do they say?

Well some say that the reason that Jesus made 'resurrection appearances' is because he never died.

That is in fact what Muslims say about Jesus' resurrection.

Bear in mind that Muhammad lived 600 AD

and had no more access to eyewitnesses than you or me.

But the theory that Jesus never died runs into some problems.

First of all the centurion made sure Jesus died

by thrusting his spear into Jesus' side.

The man was paid to know when someone was dead,

and he told Pilate unequivocally that Jesus was dead.

Secondly, the idea that a grievously wounded man,

who was so weak he was presumed dead by the people who buried him,

could roll away the grave stone that took two men to shift it,

and then overpower the guards standing watch over the tomb,

is surely farfetched.

Some say Jesus' resurrection appearances

were wish fulfilment or delusions on the part of the disciples.

Well delusions and wish fulfilment happen.

By psychologists tell us unequivocally

that they don't happen to lots of people all at the same time.

A group of people don't all get the same hallucination.

When Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room,

they thought it was a ghost and didn't think it was really him.

That doesn't sound like wish fulfilment.

They were brought to see the truth of his resurrection

kicking and screaming.

He actually had to eat a piece of boiled fish

to prove to them that he was not a ghost.

The best explanation of Jesus' resurrection appearances

is that Jesus actually rose from the dead.

No other explanation is really plausible,

despite the fact that a billion Muslims believe that he never died.

Ok there's a third piece of evidence for Jesus' resurrection.

You can find it in our reading in verse 8.

"Trembling and bewildered,

the women went out and fled from the tomb.

They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid."

And that's the end of Mark's gospel.

It's such a strange ending,

that over the centuries people have been scandalised by the ending,  
and have written their own endings.

If you have a very old translation of the Bible,

you might even find one of those endings printed

like it was meant to be there.

But what Mark wrote finished right here.

"Trembling and bewildered,

the women went out and fled from the tomb.

They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid."

The third piece of evidence for the resurrection

is the miraculous transformation of the disciples in the early church.

Did you know that Jesus was not the only person

who claimed to be the Jewish Messiah?

There were a bunch of people in the century either side of Jesus

who claimed to be the Messiah.

And the Romans put them to death,

not unlike they put Jesus to death.

In the case of those would be Messiahs,

the reason for their execution was perhaps a little more straight forward.

They tried to cobble together an army to kick the Romans out of Israel.

The Romans took exception to that and executed them.

But none of them had any followers after they died.

They died.

Their followers disbanded.

And they were forgotten about.

And in the ending of Mark's gospel,

we see that Jesus would have gone the same way.

The women are told of his resurrection.

And they get very scared and clam up.  
That doesn't sound like the sort of thing  
that would kick start the growth  
of the largest movement in the world today.  
How did we go from 2 trembling and bewildered women,  
to churches in every country on earth?  
How did we go from a group of disciples huddled in the upper room,  
doors locked for fear of the authorities,  
to men who fearlessly preached to gospel?  
To men who went willingly to their deaths  
to bear witness to their Lord?  
The only explanation of that is if the resurrection is true.

So there we have three reasons to believe  
that the resurrection is the best way to account for the evidence.

1. The empty tomb:

Plenty of people had a strong motivation to produce Jesus' body.  
But they couldn't do it because he had risen.

2. The resurrection appearances:

Over a 40 day period,

Jesus appeared to groups of his followers.

On one occasion 500 of them at once.

Those appearances were recorded at the time,  
and people could ask those who saw Jesus and talked with him.

3. The transformation of the disciples:

The disciples went from being trembling and bewildered,  
to fearless and courageous proclaimers of a risen Lord.

The resurrection is the best way to account for that historical fact.

Today I've focused my thinking about the resurrection  
to the question of demonstrating that it is reasonable to believe it.

Why?

Presumably most of you who came to church today  
are already convinced it is true.

Why would you turn up to church on Easter Sunday

if you didn't believe in the resurrection?  
Isn't this the ultimate in preaching to the choir?  
Well I'm hoping to achieve two things.  
First of all, I'm hoping that there are people here today,  
for whom believing the resurrection is a struggle.  
The challenge has gone out to our church members  
to bring a friend on Easter Sunday.  
So I'm hoping there are people here today  
who have never heard that there are rational, reasonable reasons  
why a thinking person would believe in the resurrection.  
I'm hoping that if you are someone  
who hasn't considered the truth of the resurrection before,  
that you will go away and mull it over.  
Because I know that at times,  
Christian people have said very unhelpful things.  
Things like, "You can't think about it too much,  
you've just got to have faith."  
As if faith and reason were opposites.  
Whereas faith is actually trust in a person  
who has given us every reason to believe that he is trustworthy.  
You might have heard "You've just got to have faith"  
and concluded sadly that your mind doesn't work that way.  
Your mind needs reasons to believe.  
If you need reasons to believe,  
I'm with you.  
I do to.  
And God has provided us with plenty of reasons to believe.

Secondly, you might be a person  
who comes along to church regularly here.  
And you might have believed in the resurrection for decades.  
But if someone asked you why you believe it,  
you might struggle to say something compelling.  
Lots of us believe the resurrection because the Bible tells us,  
and we believe the Bible is God's Word,

so we believe in the resurrection.

But I'm sure you can see that for many other people,  
that's not compelling.

They won't believe the Bible is God's Word  
unless they become a Christian.

And they might need to be convinced of the resurrection  
in order to become a Christian.

So you might not need a long explanation  
of why it's reasonable to believe the resurrection.

And you might not even retain the details.

You might not retain those three solid pieces of evidence  
that I've spoken of this morning.

You might think,

"I already believe it.

I don't need to remember all the details."

Fair enough.

Even if you don't remember all the details,

I hope that if someone asks you why you believe the resurrection,  
that you don't tell them,

"I was brought up to believe it."

That doesn't help them if they weren't brought up to believe it.

I hope you don't tell them,

"I just have faith

because I want to believe that there's hope for me when I die."

That just sounds like wishful thinking.

I hope you tell them something like this,

"I know that there are good sound reasons to believe the resurrection.

Reasons that don't require you to first of all believe  
the Bible is God's Word.

I can't remember all the details myself

because it's not a question I struggle with.

Why don't you have a chat with the minister of my church?"

And having spent all my time

trying to show it's reasonable to believe that it's true,

let me leave you with the really good news of Easter.

Jesus is risen.

That's not just about him then.

It's about all God's people now and always.

Jesus is risen.

That's the guarantee and down payment of your resurrection and mine.

Christ is risen!