March 27, 2016

“What We Have to Work From”

Mark 16:1-8

**FCF**: The struggle to trust the NT record of the resurrection

**PROPOSITION**: (magnet) God has given us a solid account of the Resurrection –

(anchor) one which we can trust and need to believe.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

It is not uncommon during the days leading up to Easter for the major media outlets to run stories on the historicity of the New Testament Gospels. New books hit the shelves. Cover stories appear on magazines. Special guests appear on the talk shows. And the message goes something like this, “*The Resurrection didn’t actually happen. The message sprung up out of the hopes of Jesus’ followers. But it can still be inspiring for us today. Happy Easter*.”

Happy Easter? That’s nuts. You’re expecting us to put our hope in a lie, in a fabricated story. I don’t know about you, but I’m not interested in basing my present life and eternal future on a myth, even a winsome one. But here’s the thing. We don’t have to. For it really happened.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Mark 16:1-8

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

As we consider the New Testament accounts of what happened that first Easter Sunday, what is it that we have? What is their value, their worth, their weight? What do we have?

We’re near the end of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War. Some of you may know of the problems the Confederate States faced near the end of the “War Between the States” in terms of the value of their currency. At the start of the war, Confederate notes had high purchasing power. But as things dragged on and the outcome became increasingly bleak, the money became increasingly worthless. I’ve read that it was said in Richmond that at the start, you could go into town with a dollar and come home with a basket of bread. But by the end, you would go into town with a basket of dollars and do well to come home with even one loaf of bread. If there’s really nothing backing the currency, it’s really little more than fancy paper worth very little.

Is there anything backing the New Testament accounts of that first Easter? Is it true? Did the Resurrection really happen? Over the last few days, I’ve been asking myself a question, “*Where do we go from here?*” The answer to that question depends on what we have to work with. When you look closely, what you find is this. God has given us a solid account of the Resurrection – one which we need to believe and which we can trust. Now why do I say that?

Let’s look at three things – the beliefs, the identity, and the behavior of the witnesses.

1. **THE BELIEFS OF THE WITNESSES**

For starters, consider the beliefs of the witnesses, their assumptions going into this.

1. *Regarding a Resurrection*

What did the people of that time think regarding the idea of a bodily resurrection?

1. Greek beliefs

In the Greek mind, the spiritual was seen as good whereas the physical was weak and corrupt. Salvation was then thought of the liberation from the body and not the resurrection of the body.

1. Jewish beliefs

Now in the Jewish mind, both the spiritual and the physical were seen as good. Death was a tragedy and there was indeed the hope of resurrection. But this was deemed to be a resurrection that would come at the end of time, not something for but one person in the middle of history.

The point being that the Resurrection of Jesus just didn’t fit the worldviews of the day.

1. *Regarding the Nature of God*

Then there is the Jewish perspective on the nature of God – who He is, what He is like.

1. Established Monotheism

For centuries, monotheism, the belief in one God, had been a pillar in Jewish understanding.

1. Modified Monotheism

The idea then of worshipping a man would have been blasphemy. The idea of three persons in one God – a modified monotheism – was unheard of. But that is what the early church taught.

So, here’s the question. How do you explain it? Where did all this come from?

*Application:*

A very reasonable question to ask any skeptic of Christianity is, “*How do you account for the growth of the church?*” For human beings simply do not die for what they know to be a lie.

But there’s another question worth asking, “*How do you account for the birth of the church?*” It’s not enough to say, “*The Resurrection couldn’t happen*.” You need to offer an alternative to what then did happen. This is what they believed. Well, there is an explanation. It is coherent and plausible because it’s real. (READ Mark 16:6) Jesus is not dead. He is risen.

This message with all its implications has its roots firmly planted in the soil of history.

1. **THE IDENTITY OF THE WITNESSES**

We see it reflected just with the beliefs of the witnesses. And then in their identity.

1. *The Absence of the Men*

Who was there? It’s telling that the men were absent (READ Mark 16:6-7).

1. The mention of Peter

Only Peter is mentioned and that is likely because of his betrayal, denying Jesus three times.

1. The stature of Peter

But think with me here. Peter was the most revered and significant leader in the early church. No one would have highlighted such a terrible failure unless it happened, unless it was true.

1. *The Presence of the Women*

So the men were absent. But the women were not (READ Mark 16:1).

1. Their names

We have their names. Three times in the last nine verses, Mark lists names. Why? Likely because they were alive. It’s like a documenting footnote, something of a challenge given to the 1st century reader. Mark is saying, “*If you want to check this out, go ahead. Ask them*.”

1. Their gender

Now, that said, the fact that the first witnesses to the Resurrection were women was a challenge of another sort, a challenge to the credibility of the message. In 1st century Judaism, a woman’s testimony was worthless, inadmissible in a court of law. So to have these women at the tomb would have been a liability. Celsus, a 2nd century Greek philosopher, wrote works attacking Christianity and argued that it couldn’t be true because the written accounts of the Resurrection were based on the testimony of women. So, this played right into the hands of the critics.

If the Resurrection is a fabrication you’re trying to sell, why sell it this way? The Gospel writers would never have written it like this. Unless, of course, it happened like this.

*Application:*

The fact of the matter is, if this is all a lie, then the early church was made up of some lousy liars. When it comes to crafting a story, there are certain rules you need to keep in mind. You only tell lies that benefit you. You never want to be too specific. You need be aware of fact-checkers. And you need to find a credible source. The disciples failed on all counts.

What then does this tell us? Where does the evidence point? Could it be that Mark and the others weren’t lousy liars but rather were simply telling the truth as it happened and were unwilling to try and clean things up to make things easier for their audience to believe? The assumptions and the identity of the witnesses would indicate just that. Again, God has given us a solid account of the Resurrection – one which we need to believe and in which we can trust.

1. **THE BEHAVIOR OF THE WITNESSES**

Which takes us to the account and the behavior of those there (READ Mark 16:1-8).

1. *The Expectations of the Women*

On that first Easter morning, what were the expectations of the first witnesses?

1. An errand to a tomb

What were they intending to see? They were going to a tomb. They were looking for a body.

1. The preparations of a body

In fact, they brought with them spices so as to nullify the smell and oil so as to anoint it.

There is no indication at all they were anticipating the Resurrection – that which proved to be the cornerstone of the message. Again, if you’re making this up, why write it this way?

1. *The Responses of the Women*

Moving from the expectations of the witnesses, their responses are quite telling as well.

1. An abrupt ending

Which takes us to the abrupt ending of Mark’s Gospel. It’s here we need to acknowledge the reality of the other manuscripts. You see that noted in the footnotes in your Bible. The earliest and most reliable of the manuscripts stop at v.8. Other later and less reliable manuscripts pick up from there and add some other material. Why? Likely because this is such a jarring way for Mark to end. And it may have been felt by some that the original ending had been lost.

A quick aside here. The presence of the footnotes should not trouble you. It should encourage you. The editors are laying all their cards on the table. They have nothing to hide.

1. A candid account

Back to the text itself. If this whole thing was being made up, what would you expect? The witnesses to expect more. And to respond with courage and readiness to act. But that’s hardly what we have here. Which points us to the real mystery and the awe-fulness of the Resurrection. It had to have been soul shaking. It defies all categories. It shakes and transforms everything.

But again, we have to say, if you’re making it all up, why do it this way?

*Application:*

The fact is that this fits the flow of Mark’s Gospel. Throughout his account, the disciples have been slow to understand and quick to be confused. And one other thing. This abrupt ending serves to force a decision upon us. “*Now it’s your turn. How will you respond to this?*”

**CONCLUSION:**

God has given us a solid account of the Resurrection – one which we need to believe and in which we can trust. We can and should be assured of what we have. It is firm and will hold.

This foundation is rock solid. It will not shift or sway. Let me illustrate this. Some of you may be familiar with the problems that come if your house is built on land with shrink-swell problems. Here’s how that works. As the soil water increases, the soil swells and heaves. As the soil water decreases, the soil shrinks, and the ground recedes and then begins to pull away from the foundations. Which can crack the foundation of the structure. And that’s a problem.

Here’s the thing. We’re all building on something. And then we will live out of what we build on. Our lives will be shaped by it. And Jesus tells us that our eternity will be as well. What are we building upon? What sort of soil is it? Will our foundation hold? Are you sure?

As an historical, verifiable event, the Resurrection points to inescapable conclusions. Jesus really is who He said He is – the King. And Jesus really did what He said He would do – not just to teach and to heal but to live and to die in our place so that we would not really die and might really live. And He has assured us that He will return yet again to reclaim, recover, restore, and renew this world. In the meantime, He has called us to follow Him with all we are.

All of which begs a question. What’s standing in the way? What’s preventing you from following Him? I understand you might have intellectual concerns, things you need to process. Perhaps some of that has been addressed this morning. And, if not, let’s talk. There are resources we can steer you towards that can help you think through your questions and concerns.

That said, let’s be honest. Intellectual concerns are not the only thing that stand in the way. There may well be heart issues. Let me try and speak to those. You may have hurts from the past, people who called themselves Christians that have wounded you. And, no matter how good all this may sound, you still associate that with them. But think with me. Will you let the foolishness and callousness of others stand in your way of laying hold of the greatest of news?

For others, the obstacle has less to do with the past and more with the present – your life now and the ways you know Jesus would call you to change. Look, I know those paths have a pull and their siren songs are sweet. But think with me. Are those passing pleasures really worth ignoring the hope of Christ, the assurance of forgiveness and freedom from the power of sin?

For others of you, the obstacle isn’t the past or the present so much as your fear of the future. You’re not sure where all this could take you. You feel the trembling of these women. But think with me. If Jesus would love you enough to die for you, can you not see He is committed to only your very best? If He was powerful enough to come back from the dead, can you not trust Him with the whole of your life? Do such worries really need stand in the way?

Jesus is alive. We can talk to Him about all this. Let’s go to Him together in prayer.

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