

He Has Risen! He Is Going Before You!

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's Gospel lesson is a reading from the Good News of the Gospel According to Mark, chapter 16, verses 1 through 8, as printed in your liturgy.

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.

Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb, and they asked each other, Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?

But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

[1 : 20] 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.

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. Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.

They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid. This is the gospel of the Lord. Praise to you, O Christ. Happy Easter, Christ Church.

It's very good to see you today, and we want to just begin with this question. What actually happened that first Easter Sunday?

And since Christmastime, we've been exploring one of the four gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. And Mark's gospel is the earliest of those four.

[2 : 18] It was written about 65 A.D., and it's the shortest of those four. You can read it in about 65 minutes or so. And Mark opens his work, presenting his thesis in the opening line, where he says this is the beginning of the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God.

And we've been exploring these past months, over 16 chapters, the way that Mark gives compelling evidence to support his thesis statement that Jesus is God's King and God's Son.

And so now we come to Mark 16, which is his closing argument and his climactic evidence. And he says that on Easter Sunday morning, these female followers of Jesus saw that his tomb was empty, and they heard this promise of reunion with Jesus.

Two pieces of historical evidence. First of all, that Jesus' body was no longer in his tomb. And secondly, that Jesus would go and appear to his disciples, and that they would have eyewitness encounters with the resurrected and living Jesus.

Now, it's important to state the obvious up front today that people in Jesus' time and place, they knew what we know, which is that our bodies, once they die, they stay dead.

[3 : 41] That when our time is up, either through age or sickness or accident or crucifixion, we do not live again.

And all of our relationships, all of our projects come to an end. And that truth was not discovered 300 years ago in the age of the Enlightenment. It's been known since time immemorial.

In the first century, both pagans and Jews were sober-minded that death was the end. And yet, these first Christians, these first eyewitnesses to the resurrection, they affirmed two things.

They affirmed that on the one hand, we live in a world where the dead stay dead. And yet, on the other hand, paradoxically, they affirmed that one human being has broken through death and gone out the other side into a new life and has launched a new creation and a new age.

And so I just want to acknowledge up front, this is extremely odd. Right? This is an outlandish event. It's unimagined and unheard of. In fact, it's so unlikely and so improbable that it's astonishing this story was ever even told in the first place.

[4 : 56] It's that one person in the middle of history, in the middle of the night, walked out of his grave alive with this transphysical, indestructible body that can never die again.

That's nuts. That's just bananas. That's crazy. But what if it's true? What if this revolutionary, nonconformist vision of the world and way of living in the world, in this tired old world where the dead stay dead, what if this is true?

And I want to just explore this for a moment, talking through this text about truth to the women, grace to Peter, and mission to the world.

Truth to the women, grace to Peter, and mission to the world. First of all, truth to the women. Look at verse 1 of our text. It says that when the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, bought spices so that they might go anoint Jesus' body.

On the one hand, we know for certain that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. It's one of the most secure facts in the history of the world. And yet, on the other hand, we know that literally thousands of Jews were crucified within 50 years on either side of Jesus.

[6 : 14] And on this very day, two others had been crucified right beside Jesus. So what is it that made Jesus special? Why do people all over the world tell the story of his death rather than the story of any of these others?

There were dozens of messianic movements in the years before and after Jesus' death. But in all of those cases, where people claimed to be the Messiah, the leader would be killed, the movement would collapse, everybody would go home because that's just game over.

But not this time. This movement, it didn't collapse. It, in fact, exploded. And it transcended cultures and it transformed the Roman Empire.

So we want to ask the question, what made the difference? Well, the New Testament says that the difference was the tomb was empty and Jesus appeared to many people. The skeptics look at that and they say, well, that's just fantasy.

That's a legend. We actually don't know that history. We can't really get back to those original events. And so I want to just respond to that by pointing out a few strange details in our narrative.

[7 : 26] And I want you to notice, first of all, that no one was expecting Jesus' resurrection. No one was expecting this. Look at verse 2. It says that very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, who will roll the stone away from the entrance to the tomb?

Now this is extremely odd because Jesus has told them three times. We looked at this in the past few weeks. It's in Mark chapter 8, Mark chapter 9, and Mark chapter 10.

Jesus told them, I'm going to be killed and then after three days, I'm going to rise again. After three days, I'm going to rise again. After three days, I'm going to rise again.

Well, it's the third day. And there are no male disciples here. And the female disciples, what have they gone to do? They've gone to anoint a corpse.

And the question that they're asking themselves is not who's excited to witness a resurrection today. The question they're asking is who is going to roll away the stone?

[8 : 31] They're not prepared. They're not expecting to find what they found. Why doesn't at least one disciple say, hey, isn't it the third day? Didn't Jesus say something to us about, I mean, shouldn't we at least go check and see?

If Mark is writing a legend, if he's making this story up, he would have surely depicted pious disciples saying, ah, yes, it's all unfolding exactly as Jesus told us three times at least that it was going to unfold.

But no, no one, none of these Jews are expecting a resurrection of one person in the middle of history. It's just inconceivable to them. That's strange.

Another strange detail are the names of these witnesses in verse one. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Why does Mark give us the detail of these names?

And again, he does it three times. In chapter 15, verse 40 at the crucifixion, he does it again in chapter 15, verse 47 at the burial, and he does it again here on Easter morning in chapter 16, verse one.

[9 : 38] Three times, the names of these women. Now, you're probably aware that in the first century, people gave very little credibility to a woman's testimony in a court of law.

In fact, a woman's testimony was ranked at the level of slaves and criminals. And I'm sorry, ladies, I didn't make that up. That's just how it was back in the day. So if you're writing a legend, and you're making this story up, why wouldn't you include witnesses that people thought were credible?

But the reason is, because of the norms of ancient historiography, people valued the oral histories of still-living eyewitnesses, so that when you would go and sit down and record your written history with their oral testimony, you would cite their names, like we do in footnotes today.

You would cite their names so that people, your first readers, could go and cross-examine and corroborate your message. And the reason that Mark has given us the names not of men, but of these women, is because they were, in fact, the first ones inside the empty tomb.

They were the first ones to hear the message. They were the first ones to actually see Jesus and touch his body. And Mark is telling his first readers, go talk to these women. Go validate with them whether or not it's true.

[10 : 58] Now, I don't know about you, but for me, I'm very grateful to be part of a movement that elevates women. Has anybody in the history of the world done more to humanize and dignify and empower women than Jesus Christ?

Where are the men in this story? They're cowering in fear. They're afraid that somebody's gonna find out they're followers of Jesus and they might be the next to be crucified. But here are these fearless women and they go to the tomb and they ask this question, who is gonna roll the stone away?

And then in verse four, it says, but when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. And as they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side and they were alarmed.

Now, again, if Mark is making up this story, shouldn't these women be dancing? Shouldn't they be singing and clapping and shouting and doing something way more positive than what it is he tells us they're doing?

How does he describe them? He says, they're terrified. These women are doing what everybody else in the Bible does when they realize that they're in the presence of the living God.

[12 : 15] It says that they're deeply alarmed and that their distress is profound and intense. And Jesus, knowing that this would be the case, he gave them a message through his messenger.

And what does he say to them in verse six? Do not be alarmed. Do not 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, but go. Tell his disciples and Peter, he's going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him just as he told you.

What a moment. They're realizing as their minds are kind of being blown, like Jesus, in Jesus, death has somehow been reversed.

that somehow death has just been undone, that death is now working backwards on itself, that Jesus somehow, inexplicably, went through death and he went out into a newly embodied life, out beyond death, where death can never touch you again.

[13 : 28] One of the stories I've been following this year with great interest is the story of Molly Worthen, who's a journalist and a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

She did her studies at Yale and is now a teacher at UNC. Over this past decade, she's pursued this career researching the religious and intellectual history of North America.

You may have read her. She's a regular contributor to the New York Times, the Atlantic, the New Yorker. But Molly's story took a really interesting turn over the past couple years.

Having described herself as an agnostic for most of her life, she says that she was a vaguely unhappy but lazy agnostic. In 2022, she converted to Christianity.

And the way it happened was she was researching an article about a pastor and his church and became friends with the pastor and started asking questions. And she said, she said, why should we take any of these resurrection accounts seriously?

[14 : 34] And she was surprised to get these long, detailed, well-resourced, footnoted responses from this pastor who was taking every question that she asked with extreme seriousness and giving her homework.

And so she went and read Richard Baucom's Jesus and the Eyewitnesses. And then she went and read N.T. Wright's The Resurrection of the Son of God, a really 800-page romp, you know, just a tome.

She read Craig Blomberg's The Historical Reliability of the New Testament. And in one of her interviews about her conversion, she just masterfully summarizes the argument of N.T. Wright's book.

And then she says this in this interview. She says, he, Wright, who's a historian, a New Testament scholar, he persuaded me that attempts by post-Enlightenment scholars to mythologize these resurrection stories, to read them as later Christian beliefs imposed on the past, to say that the witnesses and the gospels engaged in wish fulfillment based on dreams or special feelings they had about their experiences of Jesus, all of this is what C.S. Lewis called chronological snobbery.

It doesn't take seriously the sophisticated way in which first century Jewish people navigated their world and their worldviews. I felt personally indicted as a historian.

[16 : 00] I had always thought of myself as very committed to taking historical subjects seriously. This is the whole reason I do this for a living. She said, but reading N.T. Wright made me realize I'd been engaging in a kind of chronological snobbery.

And she says, also she says, it turns out that there's a lot more interesting, provocative, and compelling historical evidence around that set of events than I had ever realized before. And so from there she began to open-mindedly and rigorously investigate the evidence and just follow where it led and let it challenge her worldview.

And she says, eventually, I took that crucial step of being vulnerable, of putting myself at risk and I entered into a relationship with the resurrected and living Jesus.

And now, what's amazing to me is that this historian is adding her witness to those original eyewitnesses, those beloved women on that first Easter Sunday morning.

And so I would just encourage you to take a little time to look Molly up on Google, Molly Worthen, her conversion story, especially if you describe yourself as a vaguely unhappy but lazy agnostic like she was, but who may also be curious and maybe even serious about these historical questions.

[17 : 27] And I just want to provoke you today to think about the truth that was given to these women of all people. Truth to the women. But I also want to talk about grace to Peter.

Grace to Peter. And I want to, I'll get to Peter but I need to first clarify something. If you look at verse 6, it's translated, he has risen, but the Greek, the original Greek text actually doesn't say that.

It's a little bit of an inaccurate translation because the verb is in the passive form and it doesn't say, it's not he has risen but he has been raised.

He has been raised. Now why does that matter? Well, number one, he has risen suggests that Jesus entered into this new life of resurrection on his own and this was kind of like the ultimate do-it-yourself project and Jesus kind of pulled himself up by his own metaphysical bootstraps as it were.

But the biblical testimony is not that the human corpse of Jesus was able just to individualistically defeat the power of death and come out of the tomb.

[18 : 37] but rather the Bible teaches that Jesus has been raised. That Jesus was raised by God the Father through the agency of God the Holy Spirit who's the giver of life.

And the reason this is important is that the Apostle Paul uses the same verb form in his great epistle to the heart of the empire, his epistle to the Romans, where he says in Romans 4.25, he, Jesus, was delivered over to death for our sins and he was raised to life for our justification.

He was delivered over to death for our sins and he was raised to life for our justification. What does it mean to be that Jesus was raised to life for our justification?

Well, I want us to think a little bit more about this in verse 7 where the message is this, 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. And it's interesting of all four of Mark's Gospels or of all four of the Gospels, Mark's Gospel is the only one that adds these words and Peter.

[19 : 52] So if Peter's hearing this message that Jesus wants to see all of you disciples, what's Peter thinking in this moment? He's probably thinking to himself, well, yeah, Jesus can't possibly include me.

Right? Maybe all the other disciples but not me, especially after all that I've done. Backstabbing, coward, and failure that I so obviously was. But what's the message of the resurrection of Jesus to Peter?

He says, tell my disciples, particularly Peter, that I look forward to be reunited with him. Back at ground zero, back at the Sea of Galilee, back at that fishing spot where I first called him to come follow me.

Go tell Peter that I want to see him. The resurrected Jesus is inviting Peter especially, moral failure that he is, spiritual failure that he is, to come and experience the grace of forgiveness.

And that's what the Apostle Paul means when he says, Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and he was raised to life for our justification. That the resurrected Jesus has infinite grace to take the worst sinners like Peter and make them into the greatest saints.

[21 : 11] And I want you to consider the impact that this had on Peter's life. We know that Mark, the author of this gospel, became the secretary and the translator of Peter.

One ancient source tells us that Mark wrote accurately all that Peter remembered, which means that in this gospel we basically have the memoirs of Peter. And you can imagine Mark interviewing Peter as his core and primary witness.

And you can imagine Peter responding back and recalling the story of how all the disciples had been faithless to Jesus, had been disloyal to Jesus, how all the disciples had abandoned Jesus in his hour of greatest need.

And then Peter gets to that climactic moment and he reveals his own horrible failure. He said, I not only denied Jesus one time, I don't only denied him two times, I denied Jesus three times.

And again, if this is a legend and you're making this story up, why would you write that the leader of this new movement is a colossal failure? Peter. But Peter shares with Mark and he shares with us and he shares with the whole world his terrible guilt and his most shameful moment.

[22 : 30] Now what is it that got Peter to that point? What got Peter to the point where he no longer had anything to fear? He had nothing to hide, he had nothing to lose.

It was that Peter realized Jesus was raised to life for my justification. Think about that. After all of his failures, how could Peter know that he had been made right with God?

How could Peter know that his grievous sins had been forgiven? How could Peter ever approach God in prayer again with confidence? And how could Peter face death without fear?

And how could he think about the coming judgment without a sense of despair and alarm? It's because the resurrection of Jesus is the proclamation that God the Father has been fully and completely satisfied with the work that his son did on his cross.

That the son of God bore the full punishment for Peter's sins. He bore the full punishment for our sins and his atoning work there was effective and God the Father was so fully satisfied with Jesus that he raised Jesus.

[23 : 48] He has been raised for our justification. It's not only that God vindicated the innocence of his son by removing the power of death over him, but he also vindicated us.

He also caused us to be forgiven. He caused us to be put right. He caused us to be justified. Friends, do you know that your greatest failures, the worst things you've ever done, that you'd be horrified for anybody in this room to know, your greatest guilt, your most shameful moments were carried on the shoulders of Jesus and they were nailed to his cross and there it was all paid in full.

That is what the apostle means when he says he was delivered over to death for our sins yet he was raised to life for our justification. And that's why Peter hears these words, but go, tell the disciples and Peter, I'm going ahead of you and I can't wait to see you again.

Truth to the women, grace to Peter. And I want to end just talking a little bit about mission to the world. The mission to the world.

Notice how the story ends. My youngest son read this story this morning and he's like, really, is that how it ends? Verse 8, trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb.

[25 : 29] They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. That is the most downbeat, anticlimactic, literary ending ever. And I wish that I had time to explain to you why that's the case and if you come to coffee I'll explain it to you if you're interested.

But it took these women just a minute to kind of get over their shock and get their bearings and let this message sink in. But the rest of the New Testament tells us that they did in fact go deliver these words.

And that the disciples and Peter did see him both in Jerusalem and in Galilee over the period of the next 40 days. And this answers for us some critical historical questions.

Like why did Christianity begin in the first place? And why did it take the shape that it did? Why did Christianity emerge so rapidly and with such power and with the explosion of a full-blown worldview literally overnight and out of nowhere?

By far the best explanation for those questions is that the tomb was empty. And that the disciples and Peter went and saw Jesus and they heard Jesus and they touched the body of Jesus and they knew that Jesus was alive.

[26 : 48] And these encounters with Jesus changed them profoundly. They went from being fearful men and women locked behind closed doors afraid that they would be the next to be crucified to in a very short time boldly claiming that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead.

And when they went and they saw Jesus who had gone ahead of them into Galilee can you imagine what those conversations were like? I think Jesus was basically reminding them of everything he had taught them prior to that moment.

And I'm sure that he took them back to these great words in Mark chapter 13 which he's already spoken to them. I'm sure he spoke them again. It says in Mark chapter 13 verse 9 he tells his disciples on account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them and this gospel must be proclaimed to all the nations.

They probably needed to hear that again when they met the risen Jesus. On account of me you're going to stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them and this gospel must be proclaimed to all the nations.

This is the foundational mission of the church. The primary task and the primary focus of the church is this exact statement of Jesus that we are to proclaim his good news to all the nations.

[28 : 21] That our job is to bear witness to Jesus to his person and his work to his incarnation his crucifixion his resurrection and they got that loud and clear because Peter in a very short time was totally transformed and he goes out on the day of Pentecost where he preaches the first Christian sermon and he says in Acts chapter 2 God to this crowd of unbelieving people he says God raised Jesus from the dead freeing him from the agony of death because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Messiah repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Apostle Paul who had his own dramatic encounter with the resurrected Jesus he writes this in his letter to the heart of the empire in Romans 10:9 he says if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved.

when I think about the permanently changed lives of these eyewitnesses when I think about the provocative passion with which they went on to continue and extend the mission of Jesus when I think about the ways that they embraced poverty and prison and painful death in order to proclaim the gospel would they really have died for a lie?

Would they really have given their lives for a legend? The French mathematician and philosopher Pascal he said I believe those witnesses that get their throats cut the only reason that you would call all the nations of the world to repent and be baptized the only reason you would go out and you would tell people at the heart of the empire that they needed to confess and to believe is if your message is worth dying for and therefore very much worth living for and so if you're here today and you say yes I'm one of those people I would have never thought that I'd be one of those people who confesses with my mouth that Jesus is Lord and who believes in my heart that God raised him from the dead but here I am somehow I don't know how what am I supposed to do now?

[30 : 51] Well I just want to I just want to encourage you we need to get on with the mission that Jesus gave us and the mission he gave us is very clear these are his exact words the gospel must be proclaimed to all the nations and friends that's not something that we go out and we do on our own with our own effort and our own resources it's a mission that's to be done with the presence and the power of the resurrected and living Lord that just as Jesus goes ahead of his disciples into Galilee that's been his pattern with his church throughout the ages he goes before his people so that wherever we go we actually find that Jesus has already been there before us he got there ahead of us somehow Jesus doesn't follow the mission of the church Jesus leads the mission of the church and so my question for you today is do you trust do we trust that Jesus has gone ahead of us into 2024 and beyond do we trust and believe that Jesus is out there in Berkeley and Oakland and the San Francisco

Bay Area ahead of us and are we willing to follow him and do what he said which is to proclaim his gospel to all the nations Christ Church Jesus Christ has been bodily raised from the dead he came to launch the new creation where all can be forgiven all can be reborn and all will in fact be remade and so I want to say to you let's join in that resurrection project let's be a resurrection people let's be a joyful people of life for a world that's still in death let's be a worshipping people that celebrate God's victory over sin and death and let's be a forgiven people let's be a missionary people who are sent out to proclaim the gospel for the nations for whom Jesus bled and for whom he died to save is that what we want this Easter Sunday may God give us the grace to do it in the name of the

Father Son and Holy Spirit Amen Amen