

Mark 15:33-16:8

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[0 : 00] You might like to take up the Bible to Mark that was read for us and turn to page 853. We're surrounded by death.

I don't just mean in the news feeds that come in incessantly. I don't just mean those of you who are with us on Good Friday as we read the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion.

Death comes again and again and again with the enemies hell-bent on murdering Jesus. But this week, two friends have died in the congregation, dear Lynette Hindley and Cindy Wilding's mother, who were with us last Sunday and are not with us now.

And we have come this morning to hear the great good news of the resurrection of Jesus. And we want to know what it does for us now.

We want to know how it affects us. What does it do practically for us? And we've been looking forward to this last section and even the last chapter of Mark, chapter 16.

[1 : 16] But on first sight, it was read for us. You might feel like that is a bit of an anticlimax. Anyone feel that?

Be honest. It's even a disappointment. You might be saying, come on, Mark. Mark, I know you've been so restrained and reserved throughout the gospel.

But now when it comes to the resurrection, can't we have a bit of, just a little bit of pizzazz? We could even do with some emotional manipulation here. But here in Mark, we don't get any resurrection appearances of Jesus.

There's no resurrected Jesus saying, I'm not a ghost. Touch my hand. Give me some fish. There's no earthquake. There's no doubting Thomas who needs to be convinced.

What do we get? How does it end? Look at verse 8, please, of chapter 16. Speaking about the women, Mark says, That is no way to end the gospel, Mark.

[2 : 40] And there are so many people who feel that Mark got this wrong that they've added their own endings. And you'll see them from verse 9 onwards. And there's a footnote, convoluted footnote, explaining how they're not all original.

The gospel finishes at verse 8. And if all we had of Mark's gospel was chapter 16, verses 1 to 8, it would be a disappointment.

But have we not learned over the past months, as we've journeyed through Mark, just how skilled and deliberate he is? And this chapter 16 feels a lot like the beginning of chapter 1, doesn't it?

It's disorienting. It's bewildering. And thoroughly revealing and can be transforming. We expect chapter 16 to be about Jesus.

But it's not so much about Jesus. It's more about how Jesus' death and resurrection affects people close to him and how it affects us today.

[3 : 45] And the very last word of the gospel, that word afraid, for those who have not been with us, that is a key word in Mark's gospel. It opens a very big window.

I know it's just translated afraid, but that doesn't come close to it. It doesn't mean normal fear like snakes and spiders and other things that you have in Australia. In Mark's gospel, it is almost always the human response of awe and wonder when God breaks through and defeats death.

When Jesus shows the power and presence and love of God and overcomes death. So right from the beginning in chapter 1, when the Son of God appears, he begins a battle with death and with evil.

And his authority and his kindness are quite shocking and confounding. And no sooner does he start healing people, everyone brings their closest loved ones for him to heal people.

Other people start to want him dead. And every person who comes to Jesus in need of the gospel is living under the shadow of death, from the man with leprosy to the woman who has been bleeding

uncontrollably for 12 years.

[5 : 03] And every miracle that Jesus performs shows him dealing with death in all its ugly forms. Every person who comes to Jesus is beyond human help and living under the shadow of death, just as you are, just as I am.

And every time Jesus reveals his divine power and his authority and his sheer overflowing love and kindness and grace, as he triumphs over death and drives death back again and again and again in little ways and big ways in the lives of other people.

One of the best illustrations of this comes early on in chapter 4. You remember Jesus is on the boat in the middle of the night with the 12 disciples, most of whom are seasoned fishermen.

And a storm blows up and it's a fatal sort of storm. It's the middle of the night, the waves are washing over, the wind, and they know their danger.

Things look grim. They're bailing out as fast as they can, but it looks like it's the end for them. And they are terrified that they're going to go down with the ship.

[6 : 13] And Jesus is lying down at the front of the ship, sound asleep on a cushion. And they wake him up with a screech, start bailing Jesus, and they scream at him over the wind and the waves, don't you care if we die?

Which is our suspicion of God. Don't you care if we die? And Jesus stands and he commands the wind and he commands the waves to stop and be still, and they do.

Listen, the response of the disciples, I read, and they were filled with, and it's exactly the same word as chapter 16, verse 8. They were filled with great fear and said to one another, who then is this who even the wind and the sea obeys him?

They are confronting a power greater than death itself, greater than nature itself, Jesus Christ. And this is the same word for fear, as I say in the last verse.

It's not an ordinary fear. This is awe and astonishment and worship. This is something that breaks out of the limits of human possibilities. And as they stand before Jesus and there's no more wind and no more waves, eternity yawns open in front of them, not the eternity of the storm, but the person of Jesus who's just rescued them from death, who in his power and his kindness is stronger than death itself.

[7 : 47] That's why it's such a perfect word for Mark to choose at the end of the gospel. That Jesus is greater than death and evil, who gave himself over to death in chapter 15, to take our death on himself, has now defeated death.

And now the women hear from the angel that he has been raised from the dead. And this is where Mark has been going all along throughout the book. He's trying to lead us to a sense of worship and awe, that his authority and love are not just a performance, that he conquers death for us and opens a death for us, a door of death to us.

So I want to just, with our remaining time, look at the last two scenes in the book, in the end of chapter 15 and 16, where we see the effect of this great power and love of Jesus on some disciples.

Firstly, we see the courage of Joseph of Arimathea. And secondly, we see the awe of the women at the empty tomb. So first, at the end of chapter 15, the last paragraph of chapter 15, the courage of Joseph of Arimathea.

We pick up the story in verse 42. It's the night of Good Friday. It's the day Jesus was crucified. He's died, but he's still hanging on the cross. And unless a member of his family or one of his disciples comes to claim the body, it's going to be thrown in a common grave on Sunday.

[9 : 22] And it's getting dark, and you're not allowed to touch bodies on the Sabbath, the next day, Saturday. So there is some quick work needed. And in verse 43, we meet for the first time Joseph of Arimathea.

Arimathea. And Mark tells us he's a respected member of the council. The council. The very group that managed to have Jesus brutally executed.

But something's going on. Something has changed in Joseph. He has heard Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God. Perhaps he's seen his miracles. He certainly understands how much his fellow council members hate Jesus.

And Mark tells us in verse 43 that Joseph is looking for the kingdom of God. That God has set a fire in his heart about Jesus, and he has come to believe that Jesus is the real king.

Despite that obscene title over the cross saying king of the Jews, Joseph has hope in God, that God is now going to act in some way, shape, or form. So he does something that takes an enormous amount of courage and bravery.

[10:31] He takes his courage in his hands, and he goes to Pilate, and he asks for the body of Jesus so that he can give Jesus a decent burial as a kind of a last act of devotion to Jesus.

Why is this important? I mean, we're all busy people, right? I think it's important because Joseph makes a decision. You remember Pilate who refused to make a decision about Jesus despite the evidence of his innocence?

He was frightened about how he appeared to others. And like everyone who fails to make a decision on Jesus, ultimately the decision is taken away from him. But Joseph has no more evidence about Jesus than Pilate had, and he decides he knows enough to pin his colours to the mast, and he is persuaded he can trust Jesus as God's king.

And so he takes this huge risk to go to Pilate. It's an incredible risk. It's a personal, it's a political risk, it's a social risk. By asking for the body of Jesus, he's turning his back on the council, which has been such a big part of his life.

He's turning his face toward Jesus, and his whole life from now on is going to be swimming against the tide because he believes that this dead man holds the key to the future.

[11:50] And he dares to go to Pilate and ask for Jesus' body. And Pilate is a bit surprised that Jesus has already died. I mean, it's only been a day.

And he needs proof. So he calls the one man in charge of the death squad, the most qualified and experienced killer he has, the centurion, guy in charge of 100 soldiers.

He is exactly the right man for the job. He's not just a practised purveyor of death. He's had a front row seat to this entire trial and death of Jesus.

He was there during the Roman trial. He was there while the troops bashed Jesus. Did he take part in that? I don't know. He ensured Jesus and the other two criminals were properly crucified.

He saw the darkness over the land. He heard Jesus cry, My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? He heard Jesus breathe his last. We don't know whether he saw the curtain temple tear from top to bottom.

[12:57] But what Pilate does not know is that when Jesus breathed his last, the centurion who was standing there, we read in 1539, facing Jesus, says, truly, this man was the Son of God.

And he becomes the first human being in Mark's gospel to confess Jesus as the Son of God. He sees what no other disciple has seen, that this one who died in front of him is God's only Son.

He sees that this cross, this instrument of terror and brutality, is the throne, that this is where Jesus rules, that this king shows his kingship by giving and by grace and by serving and by dying, ransoming us from death.

And I don't know how much he understood, probably not a lot, but he sees something in the death of Jesus, the means by which his sins can be forgiven and coming back to God, and the centurion is the first fruits.

And his job is easy. Pilate says, is he dead? Yes, sir. It's easy to confirm or deny that Jesus has truly died. And Mark wants to emphasise this.

[14:14] You see verse 44, already died, already dead. Verse 45, was dead. The corpse, he was dead. So Joseph and the centurion are both there before Pilate, and Pilate sends them off, and they take the body of Jesus down from the cross.

The bloodied, broken body, rigor mortis, has set in, and Joseph takes him and lays him in a tomb and puts a stone across the entrance. No words, no ceremony, but by his decision, Joseph becomes the second one after the centurion to choose Jesus as his own, and so races into the kingdom.

And then we come to the awe of the women at the tomb, verses, in chapter 16, verses 1 to 8.

Actually, we meet the women back in 1540, and we're told that a group of women had come with Jesus from Galilee, some of whom are named, and Mark tells us in verse 40 that they are watching from a distance, which is not the best way to follow Jesus, as we've seen, but at least they haven't run away like the men have.

So many of us watch Jesus from a distance, feeling as though we're unsure whether we can follow him, or how to follow him, or whether he will welcome us, or whether his teaching is true, or whether we can rely on him.

And like these women, we are slow to believe. And in the last verse of chapter 15, they see exactly where Jesus is laid. And in chapter 16, at first light on Sunday morning, they bring spices with them to anoint the corpse of Jesus.

[16:14] This is the last act of devotion that someone would do to honour someone who had died. It's an act of caring. As decomposition sets in, you honour your relative by anointing the body.

They are completely unprepared for Jesus to rise from the dead. It's the furthest thing from their minds. Otherwise, they wouldn't bring spices with them. And years ago, preaching on this passage, I think someone called it Spice Girls.

It was a terrible title. And then the year after that, we went with a tomb with a view, which was even worse. If we've been reading this gospel, though, we know that Jesus has three times at least said that the day, three days after he dies, he will rise from the dead, but none of the disciples believed it.

And the women, they're wonderfully sympathetic characters, aren't they? And the way Mark writes this is so clever that we come close to them and we go with them to the empty tomb because we're drawn into their experience and their feelings.

And they move through three stages. They go from nervous anxiety to alarm and terror to the awe and worship at the end of the passage.

[17:41] Just look at those with me. So they begin in nerves and anxiety in verse three. As they walk, we're told, they look at their feet and they're saying in the original over and over and over to each other, who will roll the stone away?

Who will roll the stone away? Who will roll the stone away? Who's going to come and roll the stone away? And when they get to the tomb, something's not right. The stone has already rolled aside and when they move into the tomb, their anxiety turns to terror and alarm because they see a young man sitting on the shelf where the body of Jesus is supposed to be.

Tombs in and around Jerusalem were carved into a rock, side of a rock, and there was a little shelf, usually on the right-hand side, where the body was laid. After the body had decomposed, you'd put the bones in a little ossuary and then the shelf would become available for the next member of the family.

The young man is an angel. He's wearing white clothing from heaven and their reaction is alarm and the word here is agitation of terror.

It's distress. It's the same word used of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. It's deep turmoil and anguish and fear. It's the bad kind of fear. They had gone to the tomb for closure.

[19:01] They thought this will be the final visit, our final act to Jesus, but it's not the end. It's the beginning of something very new. And what they really need is someone to explain to them what's going on.

We need heaven's explanation of this. And so the angel explains to them. And at the centre of his explanation is the very simple truth that the Jesus who was crucified has been raised from the dead.

Just look down at chapter 16, verses 6 and 7. Look at what the angel says. Do not be alarmed.

That's never worked for me when someone's alarmed, but anyway.

He says, do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. See the place where they laid him, but go.

Tell his disciples and Peter that he's going before you to Galilee. There you'll see him just as he told you. So the angel just wants to emphasise three things.

[20:05] Firstly, Jesus is alive. For the first time in history, the angel says, death has been broken open from the inside. I know you've seen through the gospel Jesus is more powerful than death, but by breaking it open from the inside, he has demoted death from being the all-terrifying master to be his servant.

No longer is death the great unknown, no longer is death the ultimate goodbye for human relationships. Faith in Jesus now gives us a new life and a new relationship with God, with each other, with death itself, a new relationship that death cannot steal away.

Which is why we as a church mourn for those who die, but we mourn with hope and we rest our dead in the hands of the risen Jesus.

And this means that all the things that Jesus has said through the gospel about death and resurrection and the kingdom of God and the next life, they're real and they're relevant for us. That's

the first thing he says. Jesus is alive.

The second thing he does is he assures them of the forgiveness of sins. Tell his disciples and Peter. Peter. It was very good news for Peter. The angel singles him out because of his great failure.

[21 : 27] Remember, he denied Jesus. The resurrection means that God is willing to forgive his sins, restore Peter to fellowship, include him in the group, give him a new life even after such a public collapse.

And that's exactly what the resurrection means for us today. I mean, you may feel like you have failed Christ miserably and perhaps you have.

And you may feel there is no way back for you, that your opportunities to come back to him, they've all gone, they've all dried up. And the resurrection just demolishes that way of thinking.

It allows the overflowing power and grace of Christ to flood through all the things we have done, bringing complete forgiveness, restoration, and new life.

Jesus is risen, sins are forgiven. And thirdly, the angel reminds them that the purposes of God are going to continue now. He says, Jesus told you he's going to meet you in Galilee.

[22 : 31] He said it at the Last Supper. And that's the place where the mission started. Now he says, go back there, which means all the darkness and evil that we've seen in the crucifixion, the purpose and plan of God have not just turned aside, but they've been realised through the darkness and through the suffering.

This is a great help to us. And the new mission of the risen Jesus to all the world is now going to be led by exactly those who fail Jesus so often, so frequently, so publicly, which I find strangely comforting.

No wonder the women race away in trembling astonishment, in awe and wonder. Their anxiety, which turned to terror and alarm, now turns to the true fear of God, the awe and reverence of the love of God that breaks through and overcomes every barrier.

And this is where we are this morning. This is why we're here. The death and the resurrection of Jesus is an invasion that completely disrupts and dislocates our world as we know it.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is a contradiction to the traditional way Canadians think. It's radical and disruptive. And I know it's my birthday, but it's a great day to have a spiritual birthday, I think.

[23 : 55] You know, don't stand at a distance watching. Don't be passive. Don't let anything hold you back. The power of God and the presence and love of God are here bringing new life and hope.

And there is nothing beyond his power. There is no one beyond his reach. There is no one beyond his reach. And we are here today to take the risk of following him.

Have the courage to act on what you know. Turn your face away from the power and approval of those around you and turn to him who died for you and rose for you giving fresh life, a new start and a new hope today and forever.

Amen.