

So Surprised!

Mark 16:1-8

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Bethany Church

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Do you know what Easter is about? It is about truth. It is about getting a grip on your life. There are consequences when Easter is forgotten or not believed. Without the grip or grasp of Easter, we can be driven by fear, which creates a life of misery and missed opportunity, or we can wander all about looking for meaning and fulfillment. A friend shared how her life moved from thing to thing in her pursuit of respect, pleasure, affirmation, love, success and significance. Her lifestyle became a payment for what she sought. She jeopardized her marriage as she sought those things, but her faith in the Christ of Easter changed her and the outcome. Her husband wandered down a different path. He risked his job and children for the solace of a bottle. The Christ of Easter gave him back his sanity. These were not irreligious people. They just did not fully understand or believe what God gave them in Easter.

Easter is about truth that when understood and believed, changes your perspective and your heart. In a moment, we'll consider how that happens. However, it is important to remember that Easter really is about truth.

The Apostle Paul violently opposed the message of Easter. He was the Jewish Rabbi Saul. He believed that the disciples made up the story we just read. He was part of the Jewish community that rejected the witness of their brothers and sisters. He thought Christians were preaching fantasy. When people put their faith in fantasy, they fall. He believed he was doing God's will by suppressing the message of Easter and oppressing its messengers. As an insider

and leader of the resistance to Easter; his conversion took the wind out of the opposition.

Although the resistance did not go away, the truth of Easter was boldly proclaimed. Paul wrote:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8, NIV)

Paul declared that the most important truth is that Jesus has risen from the dead just as the Jewish Scriptures foretold. God has now acted to change humanity and human destiny. This was so important that Paul declared:

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins... If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. Why do we endanger ourselves every hour? I die every day -- I mean that, brothers -- just as surely as I glory over you in Christ Jesus our Lord. If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." (1 Corinthians 15:17-19, 30-32; NIV)

Do you see how pivotal the resurrection is? Why sacrifice anything if it didn't occur? Why not just indulge yourself until you die? The Easter event changed everything this Jewish Rabbi thought and did. Of course, at first he wasn't believing it or looking for a new life. Before he encountered the risen Lord on his trip to Damascus in a blinding light and startling voice, Paul was satisfied with his mission and with his relationship with God; however, God was not. In mercy God showed Paul. Maybe you wish God would show you himself in such dramatic fashion. I think he is. I think he is showing you himself, and sparing you the pain that Paul experienced. Are you looking?

Look at Mark 16. Verses one through eight appear in the most ancient manuscripts we have of the gospel, and they do not work for 1st and 2nd Century people. In those centuries

women were treated as property rather than as equals in creation. The testimony of a woman carried little weight. No writer of that time inventing a resurrection event would have Mary Magdalene, Salome and Mary the mother of James be the first witnesses. The longer ending that appeared in later manuscripts of Mark shows that the first person to actually encounter the resurrected Jesus is Mary Magdalene. A story like that would not help the cause. Its only explanation is that it happened that way. Of course, some Greek thinkers later became fanciful in their imaginings and supplied Dan Brown with material for his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. However, the story of women witnesses wouldn't advance the message. When the Apostle Paul explains the veracity of Easter, as we quoted him earlier, he says that Jesus appeared to Peter, the Twelve and more than 500 of the brothers at one time. Paul's writing that not because he wants to offend every woman of the 21st Century. Indeed, he writes elsewhere that there is "***neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for we are all one in Christ Jesus***" (Galatians 3:28, NIV). He really isn't commenting on the status of women; instead, he's simply telling first century men that Jesus was seen alive after his crucifixion by a lot of their brothers, some who they could talk with even then. Easter is no invented story.

Is God showing you something right now? During spring break, our family visited the Minnesota Science Museum and watched *Cosmic Voyage* in the Omni Theatre. It's a fascinating movie. I recommend it. The movie offers perspective on our universe, and it postulates that the universe started with a big bang 15 billion years ago. That is conventional thinking. However, much of my college education was in mathematics, and I could follow the computation of mathematicians when they ran the numbers. Even if the big bang produced a one-cell organism, and every particle in the universe mutated at the fastest possible rate, just to have a single chance at a trillion-cell organism like a human being from a one-cell organism by random mutation

would require a universe a trillion quadrillion quadrillion quadrillion quadrillion quadrillion quadrillion quadrillion quadrillion quadrillion quadrillion times older than 15 billion years. The only reason people don't believe in God, the only reason, is that they don't want to. Similarly, the only reason people reject Easter and its meaning is that they don't want to believe.

Having said that, those women in Mark 11 were so surprised! *They discovered that a good God conquers all evil.* Whatever you're facing, you need not fear. Jesus overcomes even the judgment and power of death. You need not fear disease, injury, plague or death. When you hang with Jesus, even death must serve you. Do you believe?

The women discovered that *belief in Jesus pays off.* When you put your faith in Jesus, *your future* – though it may be difficult – *is secure.* Through Jesus God's love for you prevails. It will empty your grave. It will even surprise you in dark moments. Do you believe?

Those women discovered that *God was working among them and with them;* and they didn't know it. Things looked bad on Friday. They looked no better on Saturday. There was no sign of hope; yet God was active in their hopelessness. God was working his plan in their midst. They found out on Sunday. Do you believe?

From then on, *they knew they were missionaries* to the human family. They didn't need to wonder about their *purpose.* It was obvious. They were witnesses being formed into apprentice-learners of Jesus, disciples of Jesus; and their relationships and location were not mistakes. They were divine appointments. Do you believe?

There is one more thing, not obvious in Mark 11. These women ran from the tomb. They were trembling, confused and too frightened to talk. However, fifty days later when the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead descended on them, they ran again, perhaps trembling and confused, but this time unafraid and talking up a storm. It was praise God or bust! You will be

changed by Easter as you understand and believe; but you will be transformed as the Spirit that raised Jesus invades you. Will you welcome him, so that he directs your life? That Spirit transformed my friends. They are having fun and making an impact. How about you?

The verse that describes the power of Easter for me is found in Galatians 2:20. It is my life verse. It describes me and comforts me. It helps me do what is difficult. Its truth is bringing great changes in my life. Let's read it together.

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20-21, NIV)

As countless others and I have surrendered to Jesus, we have power to live an entirely new life each and every day. Easter is about you grasping truth, and the truth grasping you. When it does, everyone is so surprised!